

## Casey Whittier

Humble and powerful are the words ceramicist Casey Whittier uses to describe the origins of her craft. The same could be said of her work.

Often inspired by the daily objects we are surrounded with – a backpack, a hand towel, a hammer – Whittier transforms the idea of the utility of the object: a hammer that can't withstand being struck, a fragile drape of interwoven rings that invites our touch, a bag unable to carry anything of substance.

If we question it, the artist will be pleased. If we are amused, all the better. The best reaction? If a viewer turns to someone and wants to talk about what they are seeing, to use her work as a starting point for conversation. Connections are essential to appreciating her work – the touch of her hands to the clay, the contact the shapes of clay have with each other, and ultimately the words shared between people.

Her artistic process starts by going for a walk; through physical movement she experiences the everyday objects around her. Even before an image makes its impact, words or even a title, are revealed to her. Time passes; sometimes months. An idea blooms.

In her studio practice, she hand mixes her clay and often uses reclaimed material that is cast off from her students' work. Each ring is hand-formed and starts as a coil; it must be handled enough to give it its shape, but not too much or its integrity will be compromised by the firing process.

Whittier's work itself vacillates between what she calls the “sinister and the sweet” or “meditation versus art prison.” In *My Promise* delicate flowers on a white background form a heart and trim the embroidered edge of what could be a hanky saved from a lover. It suggests an old-fashioned, open-ended affection.

*My Prison*, in contrast, features flowers that are almost shapeless and bleed in to each other. Gone is the tenderness and tidiness from *My Promise*; instead the forms give way to muddled disorder. In both companion pieces Whittier uses the interlocking rings that form a chainmail. This technique evokes the protective quality of armor with the flexible fluidity of fabric.

*Hand Towels* clearly demonstrates the connections the artist seeks to make with her audience. The delicate interconnected rings form a strangely familiar object and the viewer is tempted to question the towel by touch.

The beautiful realization of Whittier's images is balanced by the grueling and tedious physical effort required. Contradictions embody much of her work – the pliability yet solidness of the clay, the qualities of fragility and permanence of

ceramics, familiar objects that are re-created without the ability to perform their original purpose.

Whittier invites her audience to have an experience and to use the feelings that are brought up by her pieces to dive into self-reflection. What the viewer reflects on isn't especially important to her, nor is what drove her creation of the particular piece. What does interest her is what is sparked in the viewer. Do they remember a story that they want to share? Do they desire to touch her work? Will they connect with her or another person because of what the piece evokes?

Nothing would please her more.

Molly Krause