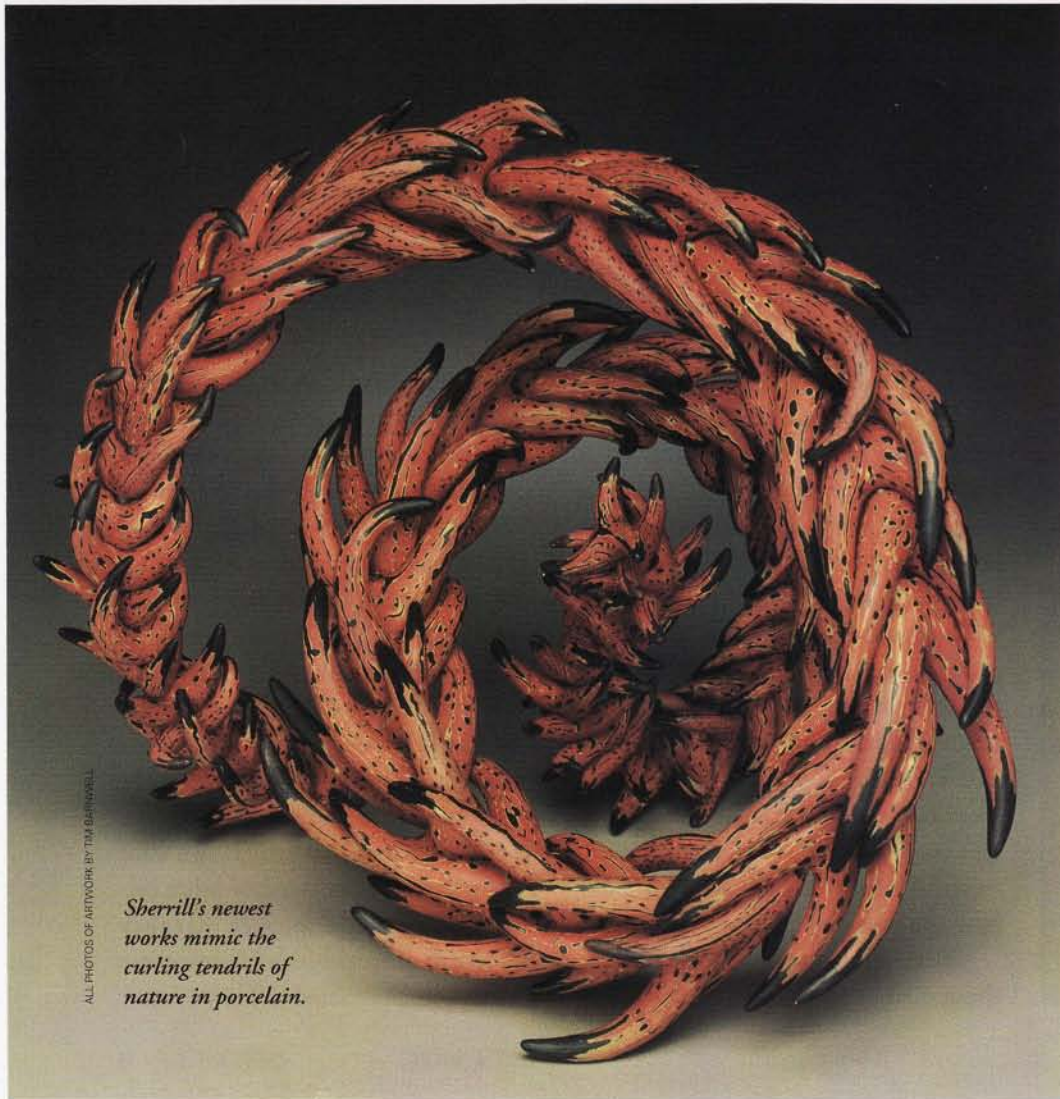


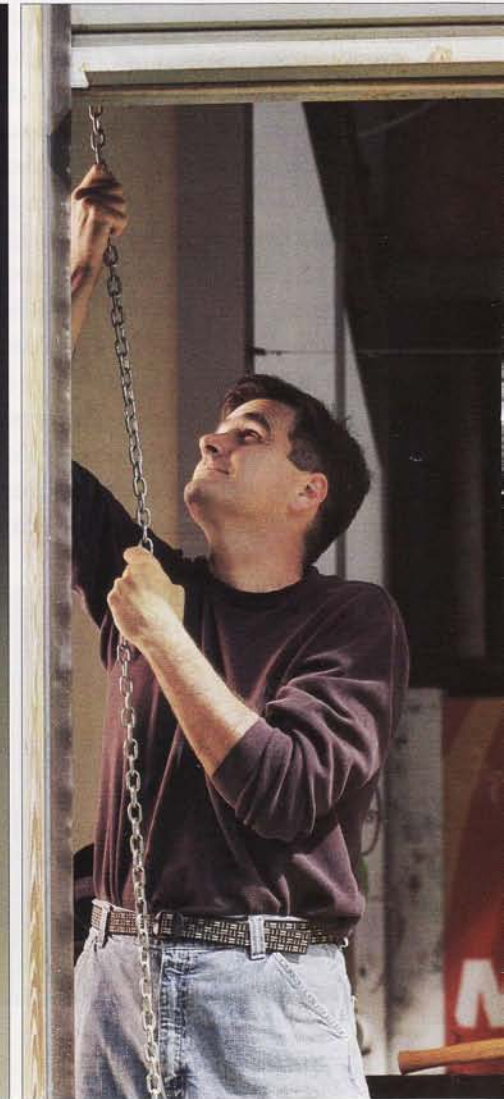


# IN TIME TO THE



ALL PHOTOS OF ARTWORK BY TIM SHERRILL

*Sherrill's newest works mimic the curling tendrils of nature in porcelain.*





*Sherrill's barn-like studio sits in the midst of North Carolina's rolling mountain country.*

# MUSIC

By Lynda McDaniel

Photography by John Warner and Pat Connell

## Michael Sherrill muses on the dance between artists and galleries, and between galleries and collectors

Every morning, weather permitting, Michael Sherrill raises the industrial-size door to his studio by pulling, hand over hand, a hefty chain. It's not surprising it's such a large door. That's the way Sherrill thinks—big. Over the past three decades, he has built a career from “nothing”—a young man in 1974, newly married, setting up a simple studio in the mountains of North Carolina to make functional saltware—into one that last year saw four major museums acquire his work: the Renwick Gallery of the National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C.; the Mint Museum of Craft + Design in Charlotte, N.C.; the Wustum Museum of Fine Arts in Racine, Wisc.; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in Los Angeles, Calif.

But thinking big, when talking about Sherrill, means more than ambition or aspiration; it also refers to a natural generosity—with his time, his talent and his temperament. This quality has contributed to the lasting relationships he enjoys with collectors, gallery owners and museum curators, a complex interaction he refers to as a “dance.”

*Lynda McDaniel, a North Carolina resident for 15 years, first met Michael Sherrill in 1990 while working at the Folk Art Center in Asheville. She continues to enthusiastically follow his career.*



*By carefully observing the nuances of leaves and plants, Sherrill develops the velvety shades and smooth surfaces for his organic designs, right, and "Twirling Rhododendron," below right. Wife Margery and children Avery and Atticus, below, often join him in the studio.*



**“OVER THE YEARS, I REALIZED THAT IT WAS NOT BEING A POTTER THAT I WAS SO INTERESTED IN— IT WAS COMMUNICATING.”**

And the word fits. Dance is a mix of technique and artistry that can be both exhilarating and exhausting. It requires skill, flexibility and syncopation of effort, something Sherrill has found in partners, such as Leslie Ferrin (of the Ferrin Gallery, formerly of Northampton, Mass., now in New York) and John Cram (of Blue Spiral 1 in Asheville, N.C.). Together, they have moved in wider and wider circles, which has provided him a stronger economic base. This, in turn, has led to better working conditions, such as his new 5,000-square-foot studio near Hendersonville, N.C., which allows him to create work that draws greater acclaim.

“When I got into this studio, something started happening with me personally,” he says. “The natural world, the banks of rhododendron, they feed me. They moved me toward a more natural approach. Over the years, I realized that it was not being a potter that I was so interested in—it was communicating. Hopefully, these pieces stay transcendent enough to ‘talk’—not about themselves, not that they become a precious icon—but about ideas. That is the important language that we’re trying to express when we make visual things.”

This dance, this intermingling of talents, requires something different from each partner. As an artist, Sherrill is responsible for the photography, for meeting reasonable deadlines for shows and for doing his best work. He honors what gallery owners do for him and won’t go behind their backs. Even in gray areas, such as a client he personally developed, he keeps the galleries involved. He comes by this naturally, a mix of personal ethics and business experience, which includes having owned a gallery in Hendersonville in the 1980s.

For their part, gallery owners need to

work for their artists, developing contacts and making opportunities. They must look for artists who can generate enough work to pay for the space they are given. And they need to keep responsibilities clearly defined.

“Installations, for example,” he adds. “It’s not ‘I said you’d come by and help install,’ but rather ‘Could you go over and help out?’ It comes down to personal etiquette. Cooperation is very important over the long-term relationship. There has to be a sense of commitment. You’re providing the best work you possibly can, and they’re doing their best to sell it.”

Sometimes, economics may drive artists to overlook the exposure galleries provide in favor of selling work themselves. Sherrill has been there—he knows the temptation—but he also knows how wider audiences can reap greater rewards. “Recently, a collector I had developed myself came by and wanted to buy one of my new pieces,” he recalls. “I could have made an instant sale, but I said ‘I’m sorry, this work is promised for a show.’ I offered to make another one, and this person was very patient and got a piece at a later date. I understood how important that piece was—in fact, it has proven to be central to my new work. Had it just walked out, it would have had a shorter life; it would not have reverberated for me and for other people who saw it.”

Loyalty comes into play, too, when sales slow or work changes. For years, Leslie

Ferrin developed and maintained a strong market for Sherrill’s teapots. When sales leveled off, she stuck with him. “She offered new opportunities, such as SOFA, and every time she did, I tried to do my best,” Sherrill adds. “Slowly but surely, things have come full circle. My work is much more exciting and more sought after right now. That relationship played an important part. She had faith in me.”

And last year, when his work took a radical new direction, Sherrill’s long relationship with John Cram eased the transition. He admits he was worried when Cram came to the studio—work scattered about, nothing much completed—but it all came together in a successful exhibition in September 1999 titled “The

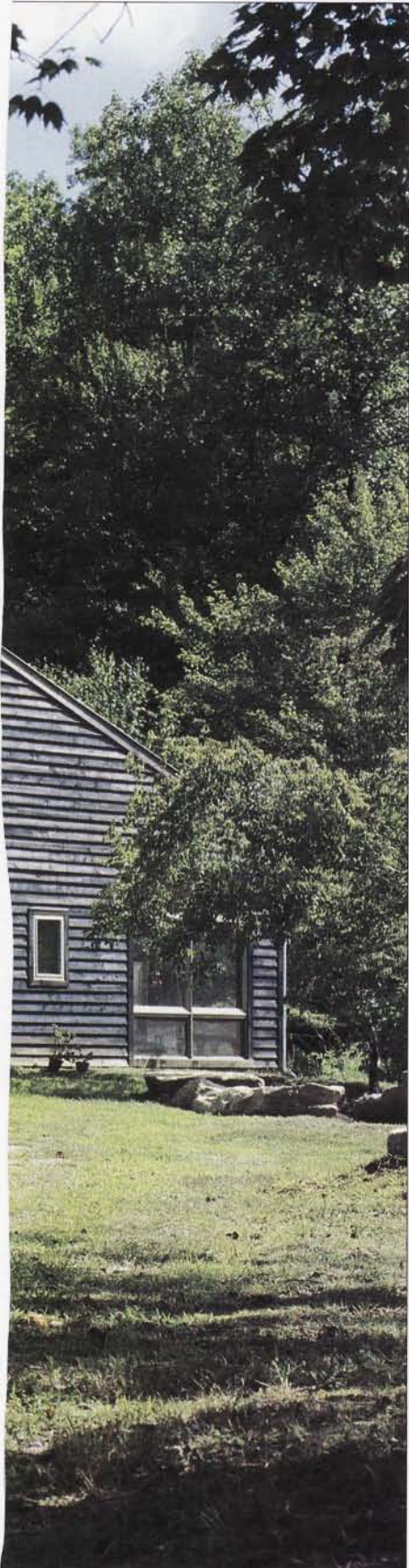


*Glaze upon glaze is layered to achieve the rich but subtle colors found in nature’s palette. Sherrill’s stylized porcelain forms touch a common thread and entice viewers to touch.*

Natural Response,” where a remarkable 36 of the 51 pieces sold.

That new work draws its inspiration from the lush North Carolina landscape of dogwood, buckeye, even spiraling tendrils of the lowly greenbrier or curling shapes of fallen leaves, just beyond his studio windows. It beckons him outside, where he picks up a poplar leaf—waxy yellow, orange bleeding from its veins, black dots of decay inspiring new life in the hands of an artist.

“Until I moved into this studio three years ago, I considered my work to be post-modern. I used beautiful barium glazes, but they were nothing like this,” he says



*Sherrill spends long days working in the studio, creating new forms and carving through layers of surfaces. He often tacks rows of leaves to the walls to serve as models for, among others, "Appalachian Love," above.*

studying the leaf. "I went on a hunt for this surface, and it moved me back to a higher kiln temperature, thinking of color in a different way. I'm taking the layers of material and working back through them, like carving clay, moving my material around. My glazes now are very much like photography; when fired, they develop and expose themselves. It's not like any other painting art—there's a serendipity that you hope will happen. This suits my temperament; it's the way I like to work."

Collectors have responded enthusiastically to his new work, and Sherrill is glad. It's part of the dance, he says, to move forward while maintaining a connection with your partners. "I want to take my audience along with me. I don't want to make the work to please them, but I want them to have access into this new work."

Of course, not all relationships have flowed this smoothly. Sometimes he has felt manipulated by gallery owners or been treated with disrespect. "But overall I see a brighter picture than that," he adds. "I see very decent people who really love this movement, people who are excited about supporting the artists through exhibiting and collecting and supporting the museums by endowing collections."

As commissions take on increasing importance in his career, Sherrill is faced with a new partner—the corporate art world. There, committees representing the image of an institution with responsibilities to shareholders take the lead. "I realized that I'm not sure how these committees make decisions," he explains. "I'm learning what they are looking for, what kind of reassurances they need before they can sign off. If they need drawings or maquettes, for example, I want to give them that. They are see-

*Sherrill first became known for his fanciful ribbed bottle shapes and teapots, which have evolved into large abstract sculptures, aligned in his workshop in various stages of completion. On the center worktable is his interpretation of fallen leaves shriveling inward, below as a finished piece.*



ing my work through a certain set of eyes, and I want to understand so that I don't create obstacles."

More than all the owners and collectors and committee members, though, the most important partners in Sherrill's life are his wife and children. His older children—ages 23, 21 and 19—grew up in the studio. His son Mica still works with him to supplement his budding career as singer/songwriter.

Michael and Margery, who married 10 years ago, have two children, three-and-a-half-year-old Avery and one-year-old Atticus. "They come down all the time," he adds, smiling. "Avery spends the whole day here. My youngest daughter, from the time she was quite little, spent every afternoon with me. I love that. Trying to be a dad, friend, husband—it's not easy being an artist, but it's lent a quality to my life that is important. I heard a great saying: Every healthy organism wants to reach out and be inclusive. I'd like to think that's the direction my life will continue to take."

His latest work conveys that message.

**"I'D LIKE TO BE UNLEASHED. I'D LIKE THE SCALE OF MY WORK TO GO FROM THE PERSONAL AND COLLECTIBLE TO INSTITUTIONAL."**

What, then, about the future for sales through the web, where touch is impossible? "I don't know how all that will shape up," Sherrill says. "The human side of the Internet is exciting—galleries interfacing with collectors, clients sending me e-mails about how they love the way the piece looks in their home and sending e-mails back—it offers a connection and integration that is central to my mission. But as to how to sell tactile, personal objects through a flat medium like the Internet, I don't know. I do know that once people

know your work, they can follow up on the Internet. In their mind, they understand the quality and what the physical piece is like."

At day's end, sometimes long after the sun has set and the mountain mist has begun to cover the valley for the night, that big door comes down again. Sherrill says he designed



The years of experience, the long hours of carving through layers of surfaces have led to fascinating patterns and textures. They emit a warmth that invites viewers to touch and to tap into something deep within themselves.

"That's what I'm trying to bring back into my work—what I call soul. That is the language I want to include, and I feel I am getting closer to it in my new work," he says. "There's a subtext, something beyond the visual surface. Tactile objects. That's something very important that our movement has to offer."

the tall door and lofty studio in order to capture the natural light, but you can't help but think he was also planning for the large commissions, the big dance, he seems destined for.

"I'd like to be unleashed. I'd like the scale of my work to go from the personal and collectible to institutional," he says. "I'd like to make a large statement and still have the work just as strong. I know people who feel frustrated that life is narrowing for them, but for me right now, things are widening. And I hope it stays that way until I am a doddering old man." ❧