

RUSSELL BILES | SUBVERSIVE NATURE

DISTRICT CLAY GALLERY | Oct 19-Dec 14, 2019





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The exhibition Subversive Nature is my attempt to make a positive social contribution through art. The work exhibited reflects my subversive nature as well as my affinity with the natural world. By combining these elements, it is my hope to raise social political awareness by motivating the audience to do a good thing like vote, give blood or just think.

My satirical sculpture is a combination of content, imagery, attitude, and humor. These elements are expressed through a visual narrative. This visual narrative allows me to convey ideas to a broad audience on different levels. My desire to reach a broad audience reflects my belief that my audience is made of individuals with individual perspectives, each one as relevant as the other. Their interpretation is only limited by their willingness to open their minds and overcome the obstacles I confront them with. These obstacles are manifested in content, imagery, attitude and humor.

Content represents the most significant aspect of my work. I strive to develop truthful content based on first-hand knowledge or well-researched material. With frequency I will pit these truths against preconceived beliefs. Religion and politics are favorite subjects which are often polarizing areas for people of conviction.

Another area of polarization is imagery. Imagery is the first punch thrown by a piece of visual art. The first reaction from the audience will come from that initial eye contact. The viewer may walk away or stay as the result of this first contact. I try to confront the audience right off and although my concept is to

reach everyone, I relish the times when some individuals walk away. At this point my attitude reins in.

My emotional attitude permeates every aspect of my work. I feel for all I do and I enjoy siding with the underdog. Experience dictates this methodology may hinder commercial success but I personally believe my "heart-over-head" mentality creates richer art.

One element that allows me to make my bitter subjects palatable is satirical humor. Humor breaks down barriers and allows viewers to confront ideas that may arouse unsettling emotions. Satire works to manipulate the viewer's perspective through misdirection by drawing attention to the obvious, thus allowing the underlying meaning, when discovered, to hopefully be more thought provoking.

Basically this is the gist of my satirical sculpture. But there is one other important element not yet mentioned. This element also plays a role in reaching a broad audience by immediately connecting with the viewer. It's craftsmanship and craftsmanship is a finite quality of my work. Historically craftsmanship is appreciated in all cultures and in my opinion is an element of humanity lacking in a lot of contemporary art.

RESUME

1977-1981 U.S. Navy

1984 Associate Degree, Fine Arts, Central Piedmont Community College, Charlotte, NC

1986 B.S. Visual Arts Sculpture, Winthrop College, Rock Hill, SC

1994 Juror's Choice Award, "The Red Clay Survey," Huntsville Museum of Art, Huntsville, AL

2000 South Carolina Arts Commission's Visual Art Fellowship

Present Studio Artist, Greenville, SC





Final Showdown • 29 x 26 x 7", hand-built porcelain with slipcast figures



About *Final Showdown*

Biles references *Bonanza*, a western television series from the 1960s that ran for 14 seasons. In Biles' rendition, the Cartwrights have become both greedy imperialists as they confront Hop Sing, their once affable cook, over a map of the world on fire.

Biles turns the superior White Man/American motif on its head: the arrogant Cartwrights fail to notice the AK47 nestled on Hop Sing's lap or the army of Chinese soldiers that have surrounded them from the rear.

The world map spread across the red-checked tablecloth plays on the show's opening, which features a match turning a map of their vast Ponderosa ranch aflame.

While dated today, during its day, *Bonanza* was credited with exploring social issues often not seen on television, including substance abuse, domestic violence, illegitimacy and discrimination against Jews, Native Americans, African Americans and the disabled.



Under the Influence • 16 x 10.5 x 16.5", hand-built porcelain



About *Under the Influence*

Biles has had a lifelong fascination with turtles, innocuous creatures that are long lived and seem content to go about their business. They have quietly inhabited the earth for more than 15 million years, which is 14 million more than man and his ancestors.

In this piece, Biles references his granddaughter, Eva, whom he hopes to influence to be a better caretaker of the land around him than his generation has been. The pattern on the turtle shell and Eva's face is taken from what Biles describes as the "most spectacular box turtle I have ever seen."



The Trouble with Mexicans • 25 x 32 x 14" hand-built and slipcast porcelain



About *The Trouble with Mexicans*

The Trouble with Tribbles was one of the original Star Trek's most beloved episodes. It revolves around the increasing presence of a sweet trilling creature – a tribble – whose numbers grow so large that the crew of Enterprise takes drastic steps to eradicate them.

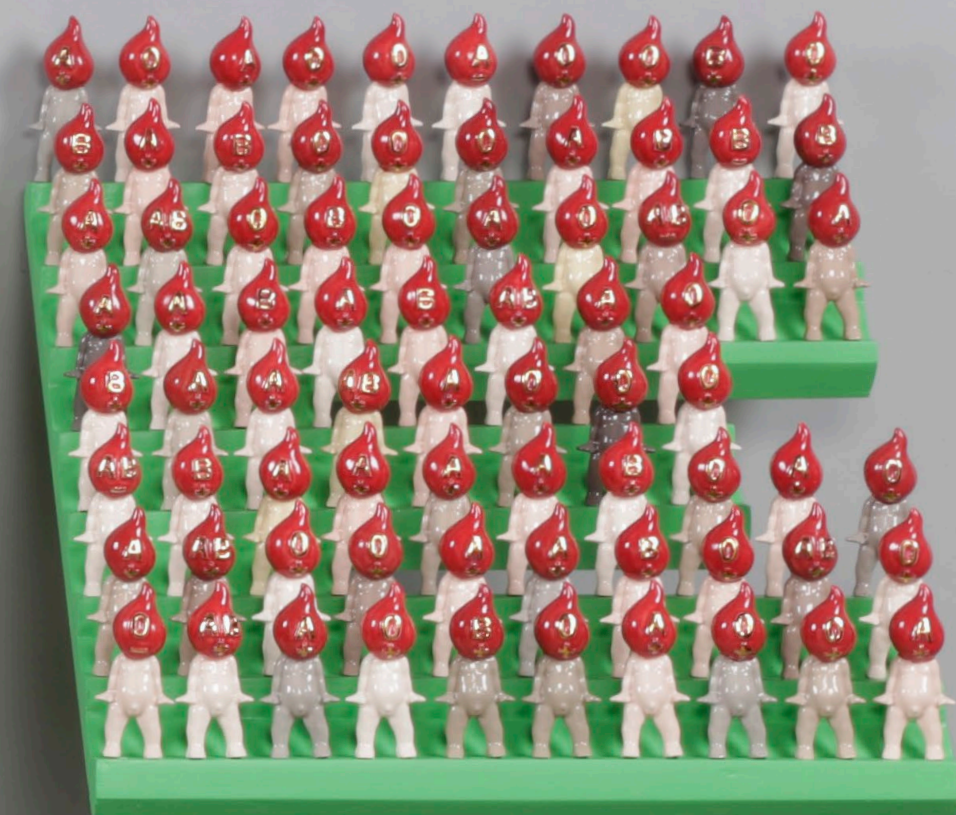
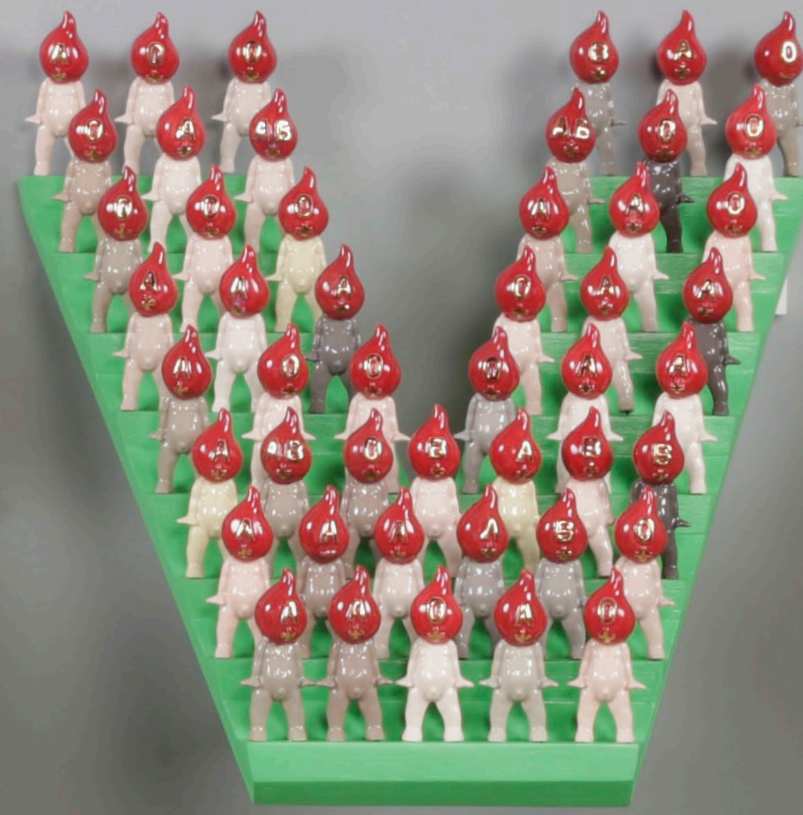
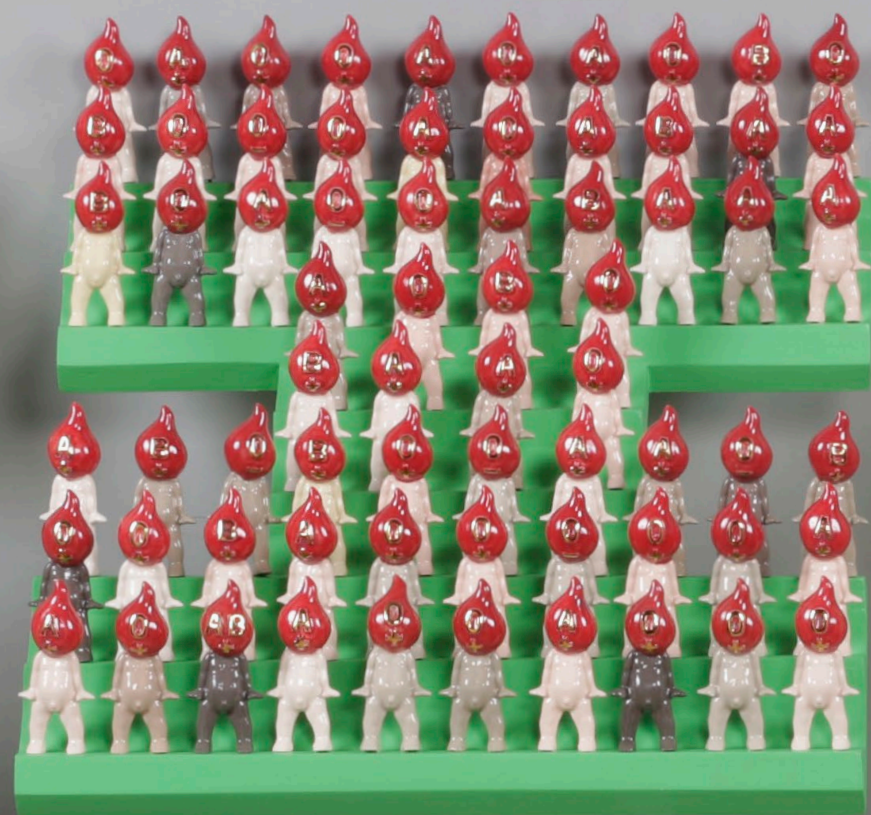
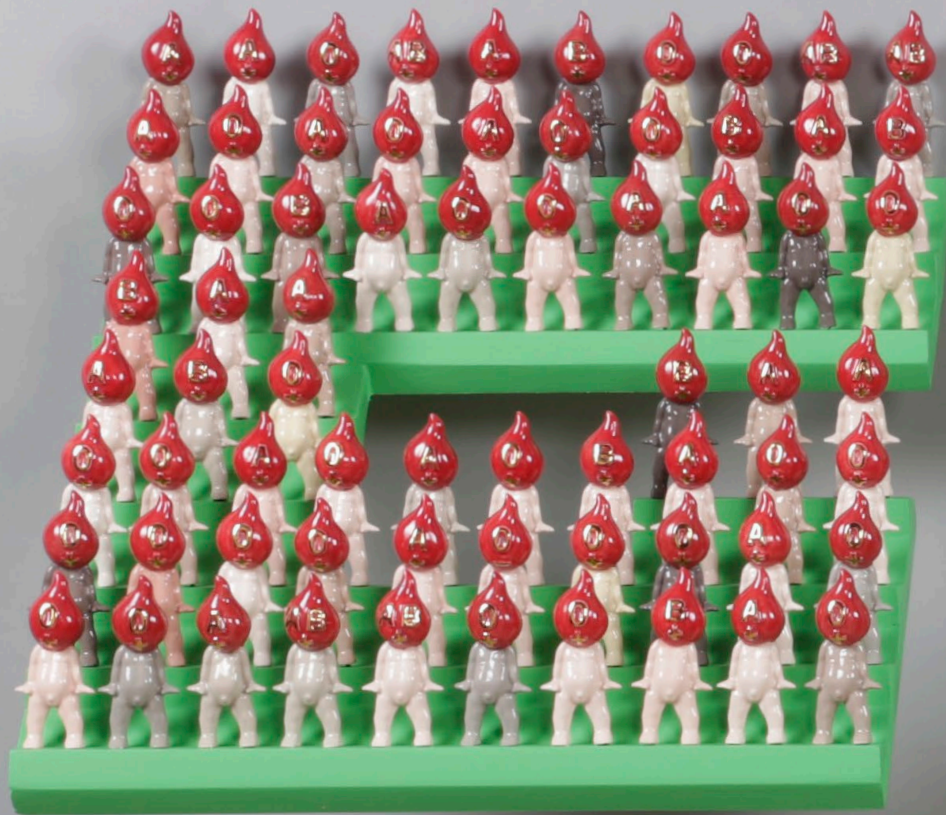
Biles has flipped this scenario into a commentary on our changing attitudes towards Mexican immigrants. Initially, the crew of the Enterprise welcomes (and exploits them) but when their numbers grow too large, they turn their phasers on them.

Biles ingenious approach also details the costs of exploitation both to the exploiters (the crew) and to the exploited (the Mexicans.)

- Dr. McCoy shows traces of cocaine addiction (blue lips) while clutching his Mexican lad who carries a satchel of drugs.
- Engineer Scott is getting drunk while his Mexican is doing his spade work.
- Uhura has abandoned care for her infant child to that of her own Mexican mammy.
- Kirk is fondling the Mexican goddess of love – Xochiquetzal – who may be about to exact her own revenge on his lascivious ways.
- Spock is about deliver a Vulcan neck pinch to his assistant who is equipped with a tricorder belt.
- Sulu, the martial arts expert, has his own Mexican soldier boy to play with.

Biles has fashioned his wall of Mexicans using images from South of the Border, an enormous themed rest area between South and North Carolina erected in the 1950s that features Pedro the sleepy Mexican bandito and other Mexican stereotypes.

It is still in existence today.





About *GIVE* (New work)

"I remember my parents always doing two important simple things, giving blood and voting."

Biles' *GIVE* piece visually makes the point that by coming together, we can all make a difference.

His African American, Asian, Hispanic, Native American and White figurines show the remarkable diversity of American life today while also demonstrating that there are still ways we can rally as a community to support one another.

Using rainbow figures, Biles highlights the LGBTQ population, which is still barred by the FDA from giving blood because of outdated fears of HIV transmission. Since the creation of more precise testing procedures, the risk of contamination is almost non-existent (1 in 1.5 million: LA Times, 7/5/2018). An estimated 200,000 units of blood are not collected annually because of this ban. The American Red Cross, among others, has petitioned the government to change its rules.

On November 27th, District Clay Center held a blood drive in honor of Biles' parents, Harry and Geraldine Biles, with each donor receiving one of Biles' figurines.

GIVE • 3" slipcast porcelain with hand-applied glazes





About VOTE

“My ideal of what it means to be an American developed during my childhood. I remember my Parents always doing two important simple things, giving blood and voting. Due to the political climate and lack of voter participation, I felt the VOTE piece time appropriate.”

In support of Russell’s District Clay is donating 25% of the purchase price of each VOTE figurine to one of the following political action groups (the purchaser chooses the group):

Type:

- Local/Community Support
- Environment/Climate
- Immigration Rights
- LGBTQ+
- Racial Justice
- Reproductive Rights

Group:

- Capital Area Food Bank
- National Resources Defense Council
- Chesapeake Bay Foundation
- Turtle Survival Alliance
- Refugee & Immigrant Center for Education & Legal Services (RAICES)
- Human Rights Campaign
- NAACP
- Planned Parenthood

Data on VOTE

Voter apathy on the Democratic side resulted in a narrow Trump win when three normally Democratic counties in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin went over to Trump by a margin of 78,000 votes (out of 133 million votes cast).

Clinton lost the race while winning the popular vote by over 3 million votes.

Registered voter turnout in 2016 declined by 2% or by nearly 6 million votes. In addition, third party candidates garnered another 6 million votes while winning no electoral votes.

Contrast with 2018:

A total of 50% percent of eligible voters voted in 2018, compared to a turnout of just 37% in 2014. The 2018 elections had highest turnout of any mid-term since 1914.

The results were a landslide for Democrats. The House of Representatives flipped to Democratic control, while 7 governorships, 350 and 37 chambers went blue. A record number of women and minorities ran for and won seats.

VOTING MATTERS!



About *Captain America Calling* (New work)

Russell explains: In this time when one's patriotism is being questioned, I can think of no one more loyal and important to America's future than RBG. With two Trump appointees on the Supreme Court, she must stay healthy to prevent our Judicial Branch from becoming irreversibly slanted to the right.

If she falters, Trump would practically control our three branches of government. This would give the far right the power of a fascist state and no chance of a Trump impeachment.

Having cared for my ailing parents, I grasp the struggle she has faced and still battles. This great woman is doing what she has to do. Something we as American's should all do. She needs our help. She needs us to be active.

While working on this piece the song "Catch Me Now I'm Falling" by the Kinks filled my studio. The lyric "Captain America Calling" is spot on.

Captain America Calling • 14 x 8.5 x 15", hand-built porcelain



About *The Eagle Has Landed: 400 Years of Occupation* (New work)

In this striking piece, Biles casts a scathing eye on two hallowed anniversaries: the 50th anniversary of the conquest of the moon and the 400th anniversary of the landing of the Mayflower.

In the piece, an American eagle has landed on a Carolina box turtle, digging its claws deep into its shell. Biles has transformed the national symbol of the US into a bringer of death to the very land it needs to survive. The eagle's death's head is vulture-like with a forked tongue that belies its pretense of being a civilizing force.

Under its wings are bloody crosses that speak of horrors it will inflict through small pox and war on Native peoples. The turtle's eyes, wounded by eagle's talons, reflect the Hopi symbol for death.

Bloody scenes from Mount Rushmore have been carved into its shell, speaking to the casual torture that has been inflicted on these peaceful creatures.

As a climate catastrophe beckons, this powerful piece asks us to reflect on the price of unthinking mastery and domination.

The Eagle Has Landed: 400 Years of Occupation • 11 x 12 x 17.5", hand-built porcelain



Baby, Baby, It's a White World • 6 x 7 x 8", hand-built porcelain



About *Baby, Baby It's a White World*

This is a part of series of scenes from Russell's childhood. This particular scene springs from first grade when Carolyn Rounds became the first and only black child in Russell's first grade class.

Biles underscores that Carolyn is entering a completely white world using all white furnishings and the first-grade book – Sally, Dick and Jane – on her desk.



About *Big Boys*

Biles uses the iconic Bob's Big Boy (in South Carolina, it was a Shoney's Big Boy), the chubby slightly moronic burger boy with a pompadour, to poke at Trump's adolescent fascination with tyrants, sex models as well as racist meme's. In some cases, Trump is the burger being served up; in others he is the boisterous boy touting his most recent outrage.

Titles (from left to right)

- Lightweight
- FU
- The Boy
- Choice
- Rocketman
- Stormy
- Opposition
- Keeping Us Safe



About *The Great Divide*

Biles' division of Obama into white and black halves references the split nature of his Presidency. Heralded as the first African-American president, tracking polls show that Americans actually felt race relations deteriorated during his Presidency.

And while Democratic voters sharply increased their concern over racial discrimination (64%), Republican voter concern actually declined (14%) (Pew Research).

Biles is also visually pointing out that Obama is actually bi-racial: half black (father's side), half white (mother's side). He implicitly notes that there does not seem to be a place yet in American politics for such nuance.

About *Predator*

Biles points out that even beloved Presidents sometimes go wrong. Under Obama, the U.S. launched ten times as many Predator drone strikes as President Bush.

Eager to get ground troops out of the Middle East and Afghanistan, Obama's expansive drone program conducted over 500 strikes in seven countries.

It sanitized what was a bloody and sometimes error ridden campaign that killed many of its targets but also hundreds of innocent civilians.



Watch Out for Cars Too • 19 x 13.5 x 10", hand-built porcelain



About Watch Out for Cars Too

This stately and serene wood turtle is in danger of being run over – you can see the reflection of headlights in its eyes.

Biles is not only being literal about the everyday man-made dangers these creatures face, but creating a metaphor as well. Life moves so fast that deadly threats may be upon us before we have time to react. The rapidly shrinking timeline to stop catastrophic climate change – which threatens turtles as well as everything else – is a prime example.



About *State of the Union*

Using the barrel of a rifle as the flag mast and a base decorated with skulls, this somber flag, pierced by bullet holes and fluttering at half mast, captures the poignancy and pathos of never-ending gun violence in America.



"I'm an artist that's a born and bred Southerner with close family ties," Russell Biles has stated.¹ His mother taught special education and his father, in addition to being a businessman, was a Boy Scout Leader. The family also includes a sister, now a successful journalist and writer, and his grandmother, whom he calls his best friend.

Some of Russell Biles' earliest memories were of making things with clay so it is probably not surprising that he eventually found his way back and made ceramic art his career. Once he started school, however, art was put aside as it was not offered as part of the curriculum. His interest returned when, following service in the U.S. Navy, he enrolled in college, planning to study architecture. As part of his studies he signed up for a class in painting, making paintings of sculpture. Classes in clay followed and, in a return to those first animals and monsters made as a child, he created a suspended two-headed flying dragon – an incredibly complex piece for a beginning ceramist. In a nod to the traditional approach to learning ceramics he followed up that sculpture with six cups but that was the extent of his work in functional pottery. "My artist direction began when I was in my mid-twenties and started attending art classes," said Biles.

"I had three primary art teachers that were very talented women. Their philosophy was the same as I received growing up which was to be an individual and do your best."² From that time forward he concentrated on ceramic sculpture producing work that includes large totems inspired by Northwestern Indian pieces and his better known work that uses commercial icons and celebrities in often biting, frequently dark social and political critiques.

Working in porcelain Biles' carefully crafted, colorful figures take on religion, politics, and social issues in a satiric but unmistakably pointed way. Osama bin Laden sits sheltered on Mother Teresa's lap; Jesus pulls Terry Schiavo to heaven in a wagon; JonBenet Ramsey is shown in full cowgirl regalia holding pistols; even the Cartwrights and the Cleavers appear but in wildly different roles. His work has been called "subversive," disturbing, but there is no avoiding confronting the issue. He directly challenges the direction in which society is moving and the viewer must address it, however uncomfortable it might be.

In an interview with Kevin T. Hogan, Biles was asked if he saw himself as a craftsman or a sculptor. Biles did not answer the question directly but in his response seems to see himself as a blend of both. "...Craft gives the work integrity... [and] holds the viewer. It's like the backbone...the work is as finished on the inside as it is on the outside. [That's] important to me. I want people to see the quality of the work involved. But there has to be more to it than that."³ He further states that he had to work very hard to reach the point where he was taken seriously as an artist, particularly with slip-cast ceramics, but he appreciates that he can make editions of his work, thus keeping them affordable, while retaining his position as a noted artist. He has taken the affordability concept a step further in his gumball series, gumball machines which hold tiny sculptures in a case. For only a few coins, an original Russell Biles could be had, a popular idea for the young future collectors who already understood the idea that this piece is a work of art.

Biles works as a studio artist in Greenville, SC. Working from his home gave him the opportunity to be a stay-at-home dad for his three children, an experience, he notes, that "...generated a wealth of material for my art."⁴ "For the past 19 years my three children have been my world," Biles stated. "They are my greatest source of pride and the glue that holds me together."⁵

He received the Juror's Choice Award in The Red Clay Survey, Huntsville Museum of Art in 1994 and a Visual Art Fellowship from the South Carolina Arts Commission in 2000.

1. Russell Biles. "Biographical Statement." Courtesy of the artist.
2. Ibid.
3. Kevin T. Hogan. "Ten-cent Art (and Other Oddities.)" www.mountainx.com/ae/1998/1007biles.php
4. Biles. "Biographical Statement."
5. Ibid.

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Collections

Russell Biles' work has been featured in a number of exhibitions and is included in the collections of the Museum of Art and Design, NY; the Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, NC; the Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe, AZ; Caldwell Arts Council, Caldwell County, NC; the Greenville County Museum of Art, Greenville, NC; the Racine Art Museum, Racine, WI; and Winthrop University, Rockhill, SC; as well as private collections.

The District Clay Gallery produces six shows a year showcasing work by local, regional, and national artists.

RECENT EXHIBITS

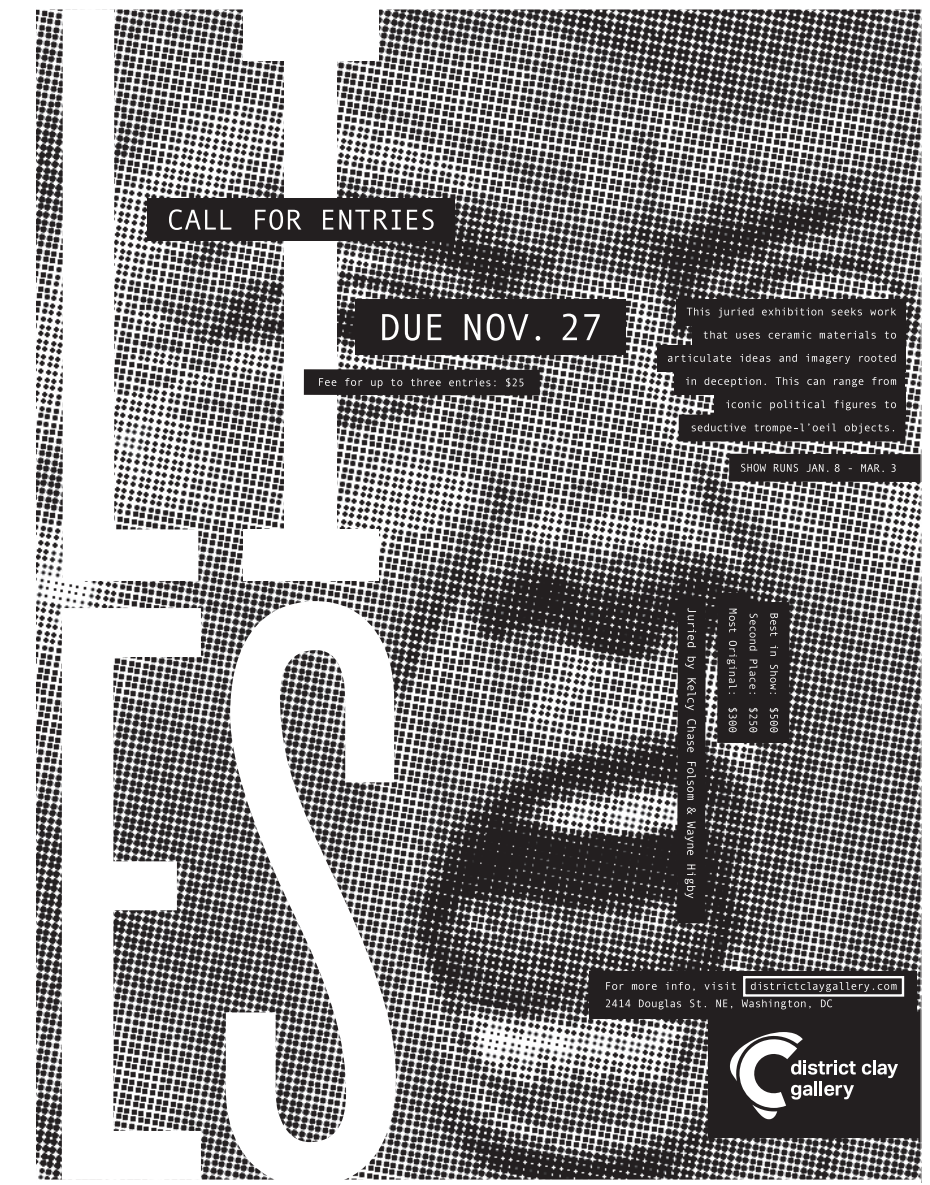
- Vital Breath (Resident Artist Show by Vicki Lynn Wilson)
- The Space Between / An Exploration of Clay, Fire and Time (Kevin Crowe, Noah Hughey-Commers, Vicky Hansen and Adam Mcneil)
- Past Tense (Resident Artist Show by David DaSilva)
- Blush (Resident Artist Show by Sam Briegel)
- Alleviating Quiet (Adero Willard)
- Fusion (Joe Hicks)
- LIES (curated by Wayne Higby and Kelsy Chase Folsom)
- VEILED (curated by Kelsy Chase Folsom)
- Floating Islands: Ceramic Ikebana Vessels (curated by Akira Satake)
- Totemic Raku (Thien Nguyen)

COLLECTORS PROGRAM

The District Clay Collectors Program allows you to pay for pieces over time with no interest charged.

For any item or items over \$500, the purchasers pays 25% down and then we create a payment schedule with you for the remainder.

More info at districtclaygallery.com





Washington DC, while rich in many arts and crafts, has lacked a single dedicated ceramic center, until now. Unlike many cities of its size (such as our neighbors, Philadelphia and Baltimore) there has been no institution that provides the full spectrum of ceramic offerings. In November 2016, the new District Clay Center more than tripled in size to include a ceramic gallery, cultural outreach and education, community and low-income classes, private studio space, regular Master Class workshops, guest resident artists and the largest array of ceramic equipment in the Washington area.

WHAT WE OFFER

Classes for kids & adults for all ranges of ceramics. We now also offer private classes, corporate events and birthday parties.

Free after school classes to underserved kids in DC.

Friday & Saturday night lectures, presentations, visiting artists and academics.

An Artist in Residence Program that brings three emerging ceramics artists to District Clay for one year periods of time.

Dedicated private and semi private studio space for over 45 local ceramic artists who wish to take the next step up in their ceramic careers.

A 500 square foot gallery with six yearly exhibitions.

Multiple workshops each year by nationally known ceramic artists. New state of the art ceramic equipment.

More info at districtclaycenter.com

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