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BRIDGET CHÉRIE HARPER'S VISUAL DIARIES

by Paul Lewing

An artist satisfies a love of painting and sculpture using a porcelain canvas



In this image, Harper has just begun the painting process on the front of the sculpture.



After an initial firing to Cones 019–017, she begins to lay the figs and leaves behind the central image.

Sometimes you just have to have an octopus, or a violin, or maybe a fig tree. If your work is about both painting and form, as Bridget Chérie Harper's is, you need a model. Harper's latest china-painted porcelain sculpture, "Natural Selection," features an octopus sensuously wrapping around a female torso to reach a ripe fig, so she bought a whole octopus and took pictures of fig trees.

Despite majoring in art in college, Harper resisted the path of an artist, hoping for a more stable career. Her mother, a talented professional artist, taught her how to see, but provided an example of the difficulties of raising children on an artist's income. When she was sixteen, she came to Arizona from Tennessee for an exhibition of her mother's work. The desert landscape intrigued Harper, and



The front of the finished sculpture, "Natural Selection," 20 in. (51 cm) in height, 2006.

she decided to attend Arizona State University, where she initially majored in business. She met Kurt Weiser, regents professor of ceramics, who became her mentor and ally. In 1996, Weiser even arranged an internship for her in a pottery in Thailand.

Harper worked as a detail artist on a team creating sculptures for cruise ships, and served as a consultant for a public art memorial to



GETTING STARTED

After modeling a satisfactory figure, Harper makes a mold and casts it in porcelain. She has found that slip-cast figures survive multiple china-paint firings better than handbuilt forms. This also allows her to produce works in series. She bisque fires the figures to Cone 9, buried up to the waist in sand to prevent slumping. She then sprays on a coat of clear glaze and fires the pieces to Cone 5. Then the real work begins.



THE LOW-DOWN ON CHINA PAINTS

China paint is essentially the lowest-firing form of glaze possible. It is almost always applied over a previously fired glaze and fired in oxidation to a temperature between Cones 019–014. China paint is usually supplied as a dry powder and mixed with a sticky medium for painting. Traditionally, the medium has been oil-based, usually some combination of turpentine (or its byproducts), the oils of lavender and clove, and a resin called balsam of copaiba. Today, china painters frequently turn to a water-soluble medium, usually glycerin, alcohol, sugar, or some form of gum or glycol.

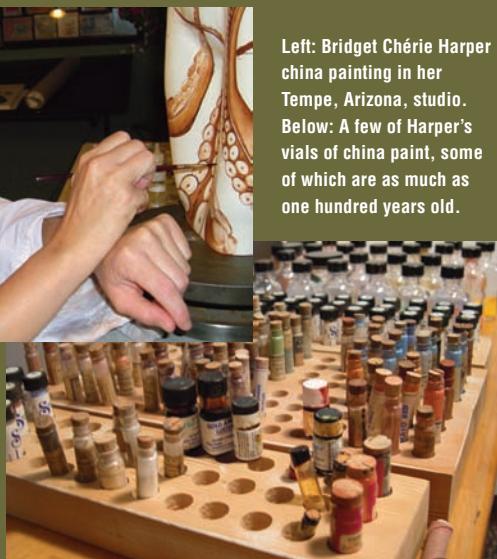
Bridget Chérie Harper still has a supply of old colors from her initial purchase at the antique store, plus old paints given to her by friends. Since most ceramic suppliers do not carry china paints, she supplements these with colors imported from Dresden, Germany, by the Rynne China Company (www.rynnecchina.com).

There are now china paints that are labeled "lead-free," but most china paints still contain lead, and, therefore, are not for surfaces that come into contact with food. However, several factors make them much less hazardous to use than lead glazes: The quantities used are tiny; there is no dust once the colors are mixed; and they do not volatilize in firing.

In contrast to painting with glazes or underglazes, china paint imagery is often built up slowly in successive firings. Often, decisions about color and texture are deferred until the painter sees the fired results of the last layer. The ability to wipe off and manipulate unfired paints opens a wide range of decorative possibilities.

For more information on china paint, including suppliers, books, teachers and an online discussion group, see Porcelain Painters International Online www.ppio.com.

Left: Bridget Chérie Harper china painting in her Tempe, Arizona, studio. Below: A few of Harper's vials of china paint, some of which are as much as one hundred years old.



Frank Lloyd Wright. These jobs were her introduction to figurative sculpture. Since 1998, she has been building Tempe's Cultural Services ceramics program and teaching evening ceramics classes.

In 2002, she did not intend to be either a figurative sculptor or a china painter. She had been throwing and carving porcelain forms since her student days, but felt she needed a new path. Her admiration for classical sculpture led her to the idea of the torso with missing appendages, but this confronted her with the dilemma of what to do with the surface. At this point, she recalled a basket filled with vials of china paint that she'd bought for fifty cents at an antique mall years before. She was familiar with china paint from Weiser's vessel forms, and her work progressed very quickly from that point. She never had any lessons in china painting. She just picked up a brush and began painting. China paint provided the perfect medium for her realistic and evocative imagery in rich, lush colors.

"The porcelain figure became a canvas and the surface a visual diary," Harper says. "My surrealistic paintings on the classical forms are a byproduct of my life. They come from dreams, relationships and everyday encounters." In the past, Harper kept written diaries, but since the inception of these pieces, although she may make notes in her sketchbook, sculpture has taken their place in her life.

Each piece begins as a handbuilt form, from which she makes a mold. Slip-cast forms survive multiple china-paint firings better than handbuilt ones, and the mold allows her to produce both a consistent series and replacements for pieces lost along the way. Harper usually casts two or three pieces from each mold. She bisques her figures to Cone 9, buried up to the waist in sand to prevent slumping. She then sprays on a coat of clear glaze, and fires the piece to Cone 5.

She gathers her imagery sources, sketches a bit, and begins painting, moving around the figure. The challenge is to wrap the imagery around the form in a spontaneous and effective way. "When people look at my pieces, I want them to notice the elegance of the sculptural form and the complex relationship between the form and the painting," Harper explains. "The challenge is to make it look believable." The painting may take several weeks, and the work will be fired three or four times to a temperature range of Cone 019–017.

Harper likes to complete as much of the painting in a single firing as she can, but often deepens colors and adds highlights in later firings. She tends to apply the paint heavily at first, in broad impressionistic strokes, then blend colors on the piece. For this, she mixes her colors with a traditional "open" (non-drying) oil-based medium.

Bridget Chérie Harper sees her work as both painting and sculpture, bound together by ceramics. She has had to conquer all the problems of handbuilding, slipcasting, glazing and china painting. While her china painting materials are very traditional, her integration of form and decoration is not. Whether it's an image as sinuous as an octopus or as geometric as a violin, the painting wraps around the torso in perfect harmony with the form.

To see more of Bridget Chérie Harper's work, see www.bridgetcherie.com.

the author Paul Lewing is a tile artist and frequent workshop teacher from Seattle, Washington, and the author of *China Paint & Overglaze*, published by the American Ceramic Society (see "New Books," p. 72).