

Discussion: Art of Radical Mentorship

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Lauren Sandler

The art of radical mentorship amplifies stories in clay to highlight voices that are marginalized in institutional spaces. This collaborative effort dismantles hierarchies, disrupts the distribution of dominant mythologies as truth, and facilitates the movement of ideas and actions to achieve equity in transformative power and practice. Can the art of radical mentorship envision a Claytopia in NCECA and beyond? Utopia stems from Greek ou-topos, “no place” or eutopos, “good place.” Which utopia do we invoke in Minneapolis, an appropriated construct of the Dakota word “mni” for water and Greek “polis” for city? Radical mentorship disrupts the mechanism of ruling ideologies as objective fact, transcending classrooms and canons. We ask: who is not in the room? Who tells the story and what stories are not told? We look for cultural context to understand content, and examine the imposition of narratives through power.

Student debt, access to healthcare, and legal status can dictate student decisions; 36% of college students suffer from food and housing insecurity, and 10% of college students are homeless. Of the 5,000 college graduates polled for the Strada-Gallup Alumni survey, 47% of alumni of color said they had a faculty mentor, compared with 72% of white graduates. We want to create academic spaces where curriculum, methodology, and environment reflect and engage students’ lived experiences. Our current climate defunds public education, strengthens corporate universities, and maintains a system of 73% contingent faculty with no job security and few protections for academic freedom. We are training students for unavailable positions. Instead, radical mentorship addresses the foundations of the university in settler-colonialism and genocide, slavery, labor exploitation, and corporate imperialism. Consider the structure of the AP Art History curriculum: it is based on an image set that is dominated by Western art (65% of the set), with less representation from the rest of the world (35%). This clearly misrepresents the expanse of global art. This distorted codification must change.

If a life in the arts means working within systems of wealth for the few at the expense of resources for the many, we can create structures of care through mentorship where the movement centers the slowest and quietest among us. Radical mentorship is the site of resilience and resistance, criticism and commentary. It is a conduit between students and teachers, with a permeable membrane for understanding multiple systems of knowledge. Through this fluidity, interdependent communities support, inform, and create empowering change.

Sana Musasama

Mentoring by using Hands and Hearts

I read a story about sex-trafficking in Cambodia that broke my heart. It was the story of Somaly Mam, a survivor herself. She invited me simply by saying in an email: “come to Cambodia.” After my first experience in Cambodia, I knew that I had to go back to help these girls reclaim their lives. I went back with some of the dolls that I created with felony defenders I worked with. The doll project is both healing and proactive because the participants are creating while also reinventing themselves. I told my students about the girls in Cambodia and they created twenty dolls that I took as gifts of friendship. I witnessed about eighty girls with light in their eyes guiding me into their lives and hearts. I sought to cre-



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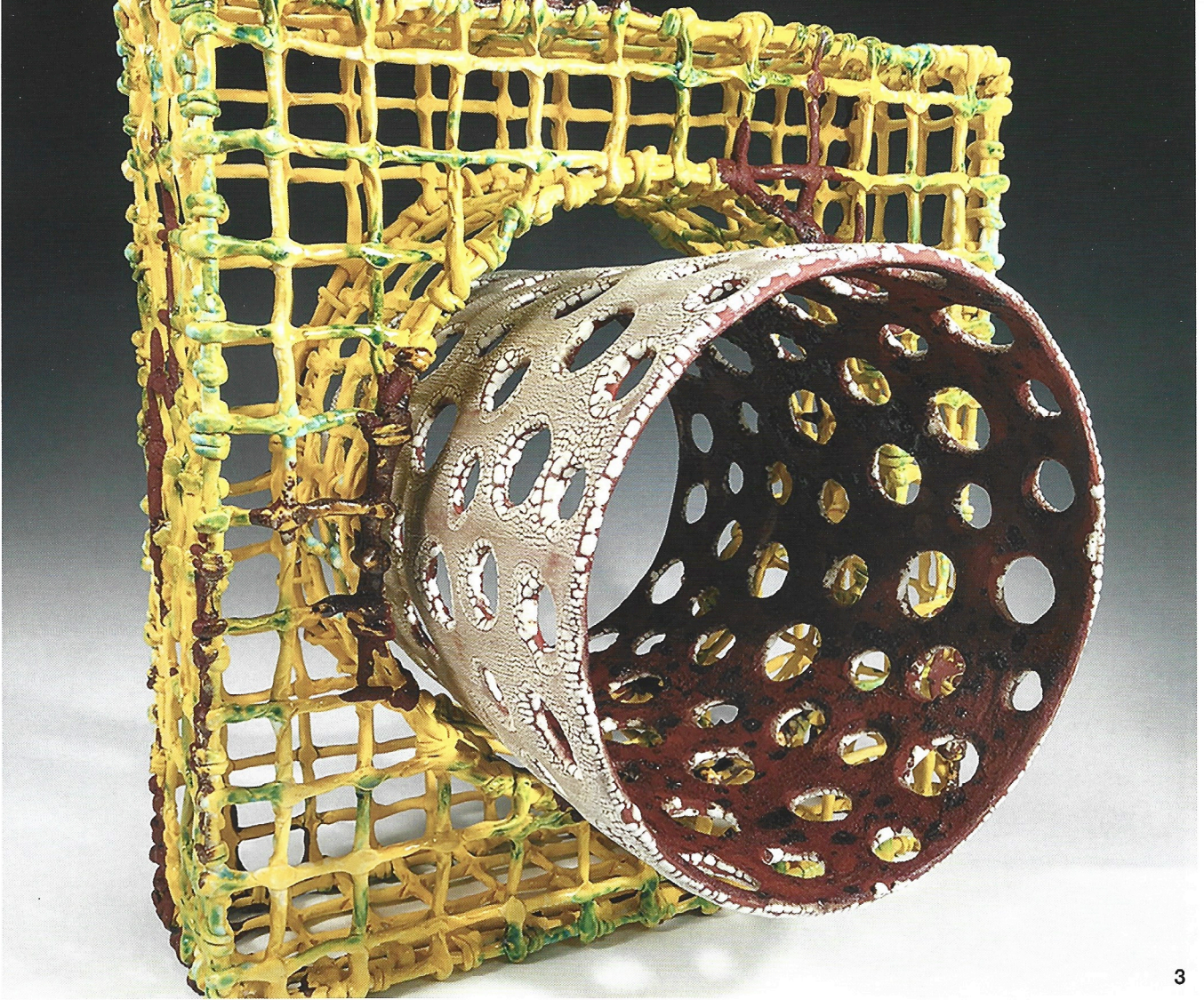
LAUREN SANDLER 1 *Centuripe Series: Salt* (16”T x 11”W x 11”) earthenware with glaze, underglaze terra sigillata, and gold luster, 2018 SANA MUSASAMA 2 *I See Me* (7” x 3.5” x 2.5”) ceramic/mixed media, 2018 COURTNEY LEONARD 3 *SUBSISTENCE (Yellow Sea)* & *ARTIFICE* (15.5”x15.5”x4.5” 9.5”x4.5”x11.25”) ceramic, 2018 PAUL BRIGGS 4 *Cell Persona* (9”x6”x5”) stoneware, 2018

ate a project for the older girls, who might fall back into sex-trafficking due to a lack of formal education.

This idea evolved into *The Apron Project*. Aprons became a metaphor for two reasons: when I travel to Cambodia every winter, it reminds me of my mother who passed away during this season. On the anniversary of her death I stop and speak to her spirit; I thank her for being a role model and mentor. My mother was a domestic worker who made her own aprons and pinafores. In celebration of her, I created *The Apron Project*. *The Project* became a way of becoming independent.

My hope for *The Apron Project* is that it gives birth to many other projects and ideas. I am always encouraging women to invent products that their culture needs and that can be produced by their own hands. My hope is that *The Apron Project* becomes self-sustainable. It must live on beyond me, like the art pieces I have created that provide commentary on life and being a woman.

I never thought of myself as a mentor. Growing up with four sisters, I learned about being human around my dining room table. We belong to the human family; no movement in history has ever been won without allies. I go to Cambodia in the spirit of friendship, adventure and love of little girls all over the world, who have taken me by the hand, into their cultures, taught and mentored me, and I mentor back.



Courtney M. Leonard

“If you are always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be.”

Maya Angelou

What are the practicalities of being both radical and a mentor? At what point in one’s practice does one engage with an intention within the parameters of the definition of radical, to innovate, change, progress, and/or advocate? How do we balance experience, guidance, and education as mentorship while still allowing for equitable space to remain as both mentor and mentee? Without designating an authoritative role, can we still maintain guidance within institutional spaces? Does the move to absolve authority ignite a radical approach?

Radical mentorship is a simple act. Radical mentorship is the power of presence and the will to engage in even the smallest ways. Radical mentorship is also the ability to step back and away from those positions. These moments start with acknowledgment, continue with a willingness to listen, and maintain a commitment to humbleness.

Not everyone needs to speak. Knowing when and how is key. A radical mentorship is inclusive of the ability to empower the when, where, how and why of claiming space. A radical mentorship bridges failure, success, and the in-between moments of discovery that neither failure nor success are differentiated from one another. The principles of radical mentorship are akin to the foundation of the principles of art and design: observation. Without observation

we would have no guidance on when to advocate, how to innovate, why to change, and/or where to progress. Without observation existing as an act of self-reflection, we would have no way to center ourselves as both the educator and educated. We would have no ability to relinquish authority. And if we fail to do so, we remove all potential to advocate for those who may never claim the same space of authority comfortably held by a few, as these roles should be equitably held by all. For if radical mentorship is to hold any place in conversations about community engagement, the community as a whole must be empowered, the community as a whole must be uplifted, and the community as a whole must be acknowledged with the same authority to uphold their roles as active participants.

Jigna Desai

Radical Mentoring for Disruption

Knowledge that emerges vis-a-vis institutional transformation is often tossed into the dustbin of service by that very institution. Moreover, this type of intellectual and emotional labor has been consistently devalued precisely because it is feminized and racialized labor within institutions. Certain people think theoretically. When others of us think, it is care or service.

Mentor was a friend of Odysseus who was left “in charge” of Odysseus’ son Telemachus upon Odysseus’ departure. During Odysseus’ long absence, Athena cross-dressed and assumed Mentor’s identity in order to urge Telemachus to oppose his mother

Penelope's suitors and go search for his father. The word "mentor" has been adopted to refer to someone who imparts wisdom.

Mentorship has typically been translated into several different dominant capitalist models: star-making, mimetic, supplicant, and sacrificial mother. We need to imagine alternative formations that are not nestled within sexualized, familial, or celebrity star networks that reproduce formations of power and access to privilege. I think instead we should consider mentorship as that which disrupts the status quo. Radical mentorship means disrupting for those you know and those you don't. Disruption can occur by challenging color-blind and gender-blind policies, calling out sexual harassment, resigning because of institutional non-response, or by kicking open institutional doors. Radical mentoring must also disrupt the violence of the university's standard operating procedures as they differentially harm the precarious and vulnerable.

Hence radical mentoring is not about imparting wisdom or passing down static knowledge, but is an active process of engagement and collaboration. It is an act of deploying one's privilege with the aim of creating access to institutions, their resources and the means of knowledge production. Furthermore, mentoring is a process of collaboration. It involves sharing journeys and working together to build a field conversation-by-conversation, course-by-course, hire-by-hire, project-by-project, person-by-person. Third, it seems that it is about inciting Telemachus' ability to know differently, to become engaged, to create transformation, to right an injustice, to kick some butt.

Radical mentorship as a goal fosters subjugated knowledges, subjugated affects, praxis, and inhabitations within the institution. Mentoring is both affective and intellectual labor. We must also recognize that care, labor, and mentorship are located within institutional economies that incur costs for those who are vulnerable, those with privilege, and those who are both.

Paul S. Briggs

Ceramicists are questioned for their need to make objects that are sites of social resistance to such issues as implicit bias and discrimination. There is a true aesthetic concern, though naïve, to keep the purity of the ceramic form. After all, Phillip Rawson never describes the images on classical forms as participating, like all representation, in the usual depictions of the myth of whiteness and patriarchy. Ezra Shales, in *O Pioneers*, illustrates how the field of ceramics is not exempt from the historical underrepresentation of women artists from Augusta Savage and Carol Janeway to Toshiko Takaezu. Shales points out that American art schools did not begin to encourage female students to work on the potter's wheel until the 1920s, correlating this to the fact that women gained the right to vote that decade. But black women were not included in this victory, and struggled for nearly fifty more years to participate in democracy. Recent Instagram activity illustrates that sexual misconduct is possible in every field, and demonstrates the power of social media to bring out implicit bias under virtual anonymity.

David Freedberg clarified *the power of images* in an exhaustive study in his book of the same title. Though Freedberg focuses on religious icons, he holds that the ancient understanding of images should be applied to our contemporary response to all images. This, alongside Rawson's explanation of the memories awakened within us by ceramic forms, shows how pots with depictions are powerful socialization sites.

While ceramic images and forms can maintain the status quo, images and forms have the power to transform society. Radical mentorship understands that all locations must be sites of resistance if society is to become safe for all its inhabitants. Students of ceramics require an understanding of the history of ceramics as biased with regards to socialization. This fact necessitates that



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more objects be confrontational, that many pieces be subversive, and that ceramics classrooms show intellectual courage. Otherwise, ceramics risk being complicit in a time of cultural crisis.

Lauren Sandler examines cultural narratives of power and perspective through allegoric vessels and mundane assemblages. She exhibits nationally, presents lectures, conducts workshops, and publishes writing. Lauren holds an MFA in Ceramics from Penn State University, makes a home in upstate New York, and currently teaches at SUNY New Paltz.

Sana Musasama combines studio work, teaching, and a commitment to social justice. She received her BA from CUNY and her MFA from Alfred University. Musasama teaches at Hunter College, John Jay College, and Jamaica Center for the Arts in NY, with adjudicated youth, and girls once in the sex industry.

Paul Briggs is an assistant professor of Art and Art History at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota. He teaches ceramics, art making as spiritual practice, and art education. He completed his PhD at the Pennsylvania State University and his MFA at the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston.

Courtney M. Leonard is an artist and filmmaker, who has contributed to the Offshore Art movement. Leonard's current work embodies the multiple definitions of "breach", an exploration and documentation of historical ties to water, whale and material sustainability.

Jigna Desai is Professor in the Department of Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies and the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Minnesota. Her research interests include Asian American, disability, postcolonial, queer, and diasporic cultural studies.