

# Creativity through Curiosity

by Stanton Hunter



In my first pass on this subject, “The Poetics of Analysis: why it is important to be able to speak and write about your work” (*Ceramics Monthly*, January 2011), I explored writing and speaking as paths of discovery and deeper appreciation. One of the main points was that learning to look closely and to articulate why something interests you frees you from imitation. Not that you can’t learn or appreciate something through imitation (pottery is largely learned through imitation after all), but it keeps you on the surface, in the realm of someone else’s idea or aesthetic.

As I have thought about the subject over the intervening years, I have found that what it really boils down to is curiosity, and about not being superficial with yourself and your work. Your own sense of curiosity, which you are born with, is nothing other than your very own GPS device. Following it daily is like tracking a sailboat. Interests seem to morph and deepen, then disappear and reappear somewhere else. They seem to speak in code, through feelings and nuance and intuition and qualities. New ideas seem to emerge out of nowhere.

### Following Curiosity

Following curiosity is similar to paying attention to your dreams at night. If you remember dreams and write them down, the subconscious seems to get that you are listening, and will show you more. Likewise, the more you follow your curiosity, the more you discover, which leads to other doorways, ad infinitum. Just as in science there is no end to discovery, the same holds true in creative inquiry. Pay attention to what you are curious about and you’ll find yourself saying “wow!” more and more often, which will further guide you on where to look for inspiration.

In this way, looking closer is its own reward. Students don’t believe me on that one, until a critique or a journal entry comes along, or a certain threshold is hit when working on a project, and boom, you can see the lights turn on. Discovery, noticing more and seeing greater depth, is about the biggest high there is.

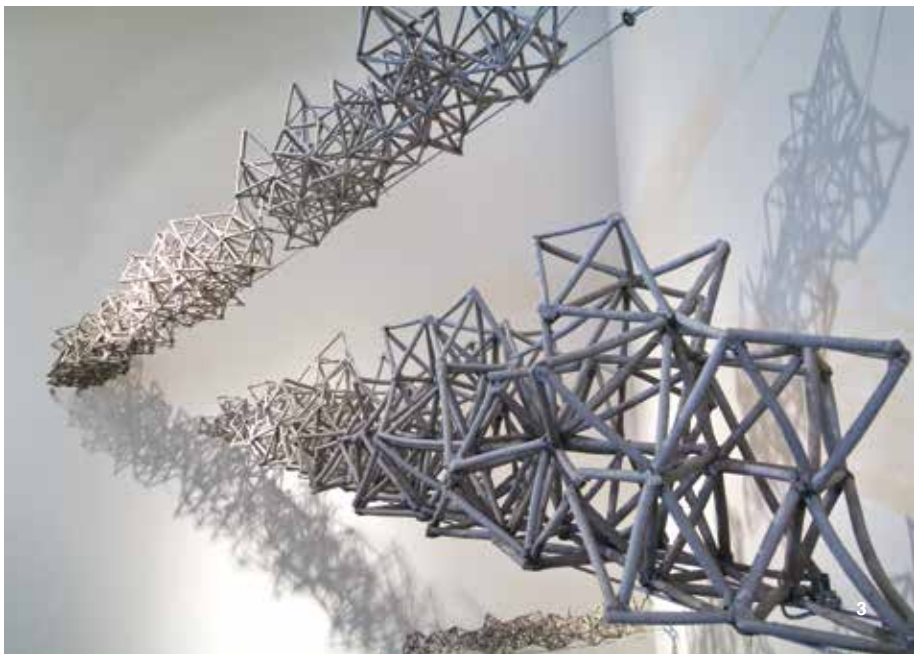
The intriguing part about all of this is that you can start anywhere and with anything. You can pay attention to what catches your eye, what jumps out to you as a little interesting, and then intentionally follow it like a treasure map—perhaps writing out specifically why it’s interesting (generalities will keep you superficial, guaranteed), which leads to deeper or further looking, not to mention making more creative work.

OR, spend some time looking at something totally familiar or mundane and try to find something

interesting there. You will find something, curiosity will get jogged, and you’re off and running. I know a teacher who recommends staring at a white wall for a few minutes, not normally a source for inspiration. It doesn’t take long for dots, light purples and greens, and mild spatial disorientations to appear, and you’ll be wondering what someone snuck into your lunch.

### The Wildness of Discoveries

A wild aspect of some discoveries is that they are not always static, like some kind of inventory of new items you now know. It is more



1 Bede Clarke’s *Salt of Worship*, 26 in. (66 cm) in height, earthenware, fired to cone 03.  
2, 3 Stanton Hunter’s *Migration Grid #26*, 11 ft. (3.4 m) in width, porcelainous stoneware, cables, cone 6, 2011. Photos 2, 3: Gene Ogami.



4



5

4, 5 Brian Benfer's *Untitled*, 44½ ft. (13.5 m) in length, kaolin, calcium carbonate, bone-ash, chalkboard paint, 2010. 6 Brad Evan Taylor's *Coencentric Rift*, porcelain, 2015. Photo: Chiow De-shing. 7 Charles Timm-Ballard's *Terra Incognita*, 17 in. (43 cm) in height, stoneware, cone 10, 2009. 8 Rachel Eng's *Stay on the Path* (detail), 8½ ft. (2.6 m) in diameter, unfired clay, video, 2013.

unhinged than that, like plugging into a dynamism that takes you somewhere—as a dream, a piece of music, alcohol, or a story can sweep you away. Maybe this is because our experience of the passing of time opens up; there is the lived sense of fluidity. The adage of never stepping into the same river twice applies here. Being curious and looking at things more closely can reveal flow and change where you hadn't seen it before. With time and attention, the seeming solidity or staleness of just about anything can thaw out. Qualities of dimension, light, color, reflection, and shadow emerge that are hard to find words for.

### Foreground and Background

Foreground and background are very important in two-dimensional art, not as important in three-dimensional art, but still there in subtler ways. As we leave the realm of two dimensions, illusory pictorial space isn't needed.



6

Objects—pots and sculptures—are only foreground, they seem to have an independent existence. Historical influences and the artist's intentions are a kind of mental background to the object, as is the physical context in which an object is seen or used (hence all the MFA hand wringing about the white cube, i.e. the gallery, a supposed neutral space devoid of history). The rise of site-specific work has introduced background to object making in an interesting and conscious way.

There is obviously foreground and background in our lives. What I'm concerned with now is foreground. A headache, getting hungry, what I'm reading, plans for the day, what's stressing me out—these are all obvious examples of foreground.

Becoming curious about the background is where things can get really interesting. For example, breathing, or the sensation of sitting, the quality of light in the room, the space around you are all in the background. At first these seem like overall, unchanging spaces or sensations. What happens when you focus on some of these, like the space 10 inches in front of your face, the space 4 feet behind your chest, or the ringing in your ears? Take that sensation of sitting, for example. Spend a little more time feeling, and you can't tell where your bottom ends and the chair begins. And further, it isn't a static sensation; it's tingling, carbonated.

I find something unusual every time I ask myself, "What else is going on?" and pay attention to elements considered background: the importance of things recalibrates by itself. What seemed to be in the foreground recedes, and a more alive and vivid sense of the entire field appears. It is kind of liberating and even profound when things lose their supposed importance, and the background becomes a player.

### Getting Kicked Out of the Garden

Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget states that somewhere between the ages of 7 and 10 we start substituting mental activity for actual sensory experience. That's actually a pretty succinct description of the loss of innocence we all experienced, of getting "kicked out of the garden." Magritte's painting, *The Treachery of Images* ("this is not a pipe") deals with this issue—that images and concepts are not the thing itself; the map is not the terrain. In short, if we think we know something, we stop looking. Thinking we know something is by definition an assumption, and assumptions weave together into an unquestioned and unimportant background. This could be said to be the enemy of art practice.

As an aside, I recently read an artist's statement that referred to the loss of innocence as a cliché. Maybe talking about it is, but the actual occurrence of it—of coming to live by static concepts rather than by fluid direct experience—seems more like some kind of weird developmental glitch hardwired into the species that we haven't successfully come to terms with.

### Turning It Around

The aspect of art and craft training that I am articulating—not shutting down our seeing, not taking what we see and experience for granted—turns this process around. We are relearning to substitute actual sensory experience for mental activity. Which is what I think attracted a lot of us to clay in the first place!



The practical result of diving deep into curiosity is that it leads to making work that might inspire a viewer or user of it to slow down, look closer, get curious, and appreciate. It is making something visible for others.

I will close by repeating: looking closer is its own reward.

**the author** Stanton Hunter is a ceramic artist and art professor at Chaffey College in Rancho Cucamonga, California. To learn more, visit [www.stantonhunter.com](http://www.stantonhunter.com).

Check out the Subscriber Extras section at <http://ceramicartsdaily.org/ceramics-monthly/subscriber-extras> for Stanton Hunter's article *The Poetics of Analysis: Why It Is Important to be Able to Speak and Write About Your Work* from the January 2011 issue of *Ceramics Monthly*.

