JACK EARL – (1934 - )

The book jacket of Lee Nordness's *Jack Earl: The Genesis and Triumphant Survival of an Underground Ohio Artist*, states: “Here is an art book…that is simultaneously the story of the survival of a boondocks artist possessing more talent and heart and humor than he even today knows what to do with.”¹ A “storyteller in clay,” Earl has stayed close to his rural Ohio roots, living and working for most of his life in the area of northwestern Ohio where he was born. The figures that populate his clay kingdom also arise from this world but they are not just representations of everyday people. Earl’s people are Middle America combined with otherworldly, a blur between what is “real” and what is imagined, and always with humor, whimsy, and irony mixed in. Hand-built, usually finished with paint rather than glaze, Earl takes us into a world where the ordinary is just a bit extraordinary, where animals may take on human qualities and humans may sprout vegetables for limbs and all bask in the affection of the man who created them. As viewers, we do the same as we suspend our disbelief and just enjoy the ride.


**ARTIST’S STATEMENT – JACK EARL**

“I like things that when you look at them you know they were made by people, living somewhere in some kind of environment and having personal thoughts, personal lives, families, maybe friends.”¹

1. “Artist’s Statement.” Quoted in: Luce Foundation Center for American Art. [http://americanart.si.edu/luce/artist.cfm?key=344&artistmedia=0&object=614&subkey=1381](http://americanart.si.edu/luce/artist.cfm?key=344&artistmedia=0&object=614&subkey=1381)

**RESUME – JACK EARL**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1934</td>
<td>Born, Uniopolis, OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1956</td>
<td>B.A., Art Education, Bluffton College, OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957-1963</td>
<td>Public school teaching, New Bremen, OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964</td>
<td>M.A., Ohio State University, Columbus, OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1964-1972</td>
<td>Instructor, Toledo Museum of Art, School of Design, Toledo, OH</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1972-1978</td>
<td>Associate Professor, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Faculty Research Grant, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**BIOGRAPHY – JACK EARL**

Ohio artist Jack Earl has rarely strayed from the area where he was born and which forms the inspiration for much of his art. He was born in Uniopolis, OH, a small village in northwestern Ohio, and received his B.A. degree in Art Education from nearby Bluffton College (also the alma mater of ceramic artist Paul Soldner) where he worked under Russian sculptor John Klassen. Regarding his choice of clay as his medium Earl said, “Looking back on it, when I first started doing it, it was just what I did. I didn’t even think much about it.”

Following his graduation he taught in the public schools of New Bremen, OH for several years before continuing his education at Ohio State University where he earned an M.A. degree. At Ohio State he worked under Paul Bogatay whose interest in Japanese aesthetic influenced Earl’s work. However, visits from such artists as Harvey Littleton, Toshiko Takaezu and particularly Peter Voulkos opened his eyes to a much wider world of ceramic art, and Bogatay encouraged his student to find his own voice. Upon completing his degree, Earl returned to academic life, teaching art education and ceramics at the Toledo Museum School of Design; during his years in Toledo, he became interested in figurative ceramics, in particular the Meissen painted porcelain figures from the 18th and 19th centuries. These figures inspired him to create his own porcelain figures, but unlike the aristocratic images of the Meissen ware, Earl’s figures were the people he knew from growing up in rural Ohio and others who populated his imagination. When his figures were exhibited in the *Objects U.S.A.* exhibition at the Smithsonian in 1969, he came to the attention of the national art world.

Earl left Ohio for a few years to accept a position as Associate Professor of Art at Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA. It was during this time that the Kohler Company of Kohler, WI, invited Earl and fellow ceramist Tom LaDousa to spend a month working at their manufacturing facilities with the assistance of some of their employees. Their session in August, 1974, was the inaugural one for what would become the prestigious Art-in-Industry program. La Dousa and Earl used leather-hard finished plumbing ware as the basis for creating ceramic sculpture; the pieces were featured in an exhibition at the end of the session. Earl returned twice more, in 1976 and 1979. Both Kohler and the artists who have participated in this program have benefited enormously from the interaction. “Everyone related to this project has been changed by it,” said Earl. “This experience has changed our whole attitude toward ceramics…Education…is the most important thing I got out of it; what can be happening at the university level. Generally speaking, university ceramic departments are just sick or dead compared to the life of the factory. And that’s just the basic change educationally that I can see.
that needs to be made.” Subsequently, Earl returned to Ohio and established himself as a studio artist, engaging in a busy schedule of exhibitions and gallery shows.

Earl’s early work was inspired by Japanese pottery, primarily porcelain functional ware. While at the Toledo Museum School of Design he worked with plaster and porcelain, still making vessels but sculptural work as well. His exposure to figurative work changed his direction and it is his figurative sculptures and scenes that are considered his definitive work. His initial pieces were double-sided relief sculptures showing scenes of everyday life. These sculptures were hand-built low-fire white ware with cast parts added and finished with china paint (later oil paints) rather than glaze. His work evolved to “in the round” pieces, groupings that are small vignettes of life; later his nostalgia for old fictional icons produced a series of figures such as Daisy May and L’il Abner. In recent years he expanded his world to include subject matter from literature and the Bible. But it is his Middle America figures that draw the most attention. Earl has been called “a storyteller in clay” by numerous writers in homage to such recurring characters as Bill, with his red cap and devoted dog, said to be based on his father-in-law but which may also have some of Earl himself in its genesis. These “ordinary” figures are anything but, as humor and whimsy are a part of the composition. “What makes my work different is that there’s a lot of humor in it. That’s a reflection of ordinary life. Ordinary people’s lives have a lot of humor in them. And people respond to it.” Some body parts may be replaced with vegetables, dogs become anthropomorphic, and the line between reality and fantasy is frequently crossed and crossed again. Back-to-back sculptures often feature seemingly unrelated scenes whose connection is very subtle. The total body of work is a reminder that what the viewer considers “real” is many-layered and full of mystery.

Jack Earl has been the recipient of a number of awards over his long career, including three Artist-in-Industry Grants from the Kohler Company; a National Endowment for the Arts Award; four Ohio Council on the Arts Grants; Honorary member of the National Council on the Education of Ceramic Arts; and Fellow of the American Craft Council. Among the public and private collections which hold his work are the National Museum of American Art, Smithsonian Institute, Washington, DC; the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, NY; the American Crafts Museum, NY; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.


SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY – JACK EARL

Books and Catalogs


*Contemporary Clay: Master Teachers/Master Students.* Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University, Fine Arts Center Galleries, 1999.


Held, Peter, ed. *Innovation and Change.* Tempe, AZ: Arizona State University Art Museum, 2009


**Periodicals**


Buchanan, Bill. “[Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC; Exhibit.]” *Ceramics Monthly* 32 (May 1984): 31-33.


Cullum, Jerry. “[ArtSpace, Atlanta; Exhibit.]” *American Ceramics* 9 no. 4 (1991): 49.


Henry, Gerrit. “[Theo Portnoy Gallery, NY; Exhibit.]” *ARTnews* 84 (September 1985): 140-141.


**Video and Other Media**
“Clay Figures, Animals and Landscapes.” American Craft Museum, n.d. VHS
“Clayworks.” American Craft Museum. n.d. VHS

**GALLERY REPRESENTATION – JACK EARL**

Mobilia Gallery, 358 Huron Avenue, Cambridge, MA 02138

Nancy Margolis Gallery, 523 W. 25th Street, New York, NY 10001

Perimeter Gallery, 210 W. Superior Street, Chicago, IL 60610

Sherrie Gallerie, 694 North High Street, Columbus, OH 43215

**WEB SITES – JACK EARL**

http://americanart.si.edu/luce/artist.cfm?key=344&artistmedia=0&object=614&subkey=1381
Web site of Luce Foundation Center for American Art. Brief biography of Earl with link to Dear Fay… in the collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

http://www.samfa.org/ncc-08-invited-artist.htm
San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts; biography of Jack Earl

Sherrie Gallerie site for Jack Earl with resume

Jack Earl pages on Perimeter Gallery web site

http://nancymargolisgallery.com/?tag=jack-earl
Resume, images for Jack Earl on Nancy Margolis Gallery web site

Jack Earl page on Mobilia Gallery web site

http://www.ramart.org/ram/Jack-Earl.html
Racine Art Museum article on Jack Earl

http://www.bluffton.edu/witmarsum/pdf/oct212005.pdf
Article on Earl in Bluffton College newsletter (page 5)

February 2010