

Remote Revival

In a rural Maine town, Shanna Wheelock found space to create.

STORY BY Janet Wallace

PHOTOGRAPHY BY Leslie Bowman



PRESSING DOWN ON A ROTATING lump of clay, Shanna Wheelock exhales and says, “letting go.” As the vessel takes shape, she says, “opening to love.”

This is not how most potters work. But Wheelock’s approach to centering clay reflects how she lives. In a remote home studio by the Maine coast, the self-described “easternmost potter in the United States” uses her art to express grief, vent political outrage, engage her community, and find peace.

She came to this place in 2001 in a leap of faith. For years, Wheelock had dreamed of a home in the woods where she could create art, teach, and “help others grow along their own journeys.” When her husband’s grandfather mentioned his vacant house – “perfect for an artist and a writer” such as Wheelock and her husband – the couple took just 24 hours to decide to leave jobs, friends, and life in Tennessee. Three weeks later, they arrived in Lubec, Maine, at a dilapidated old farmhouse,

inhabited by raccoons and without running water.

Transitioning to life in the fishing town was difficult. A one-time capital of sardine canning, Lubec lost its last plant that year. Then September 11 arrived. United States troops entered Afghanistan and later Iraq.

Wheelock, a long-time social activist, felt isolated and frustrated – but she soon found a solution in her art. In addition to making more conventional cups, bowls, and vases, Wheelock pours her political passion into ceramic sculpture. She creates chalices adorned with large spikes, totems that echo missiles. She sculpts grenades melded with pomegranates, the fertility symbol after which the weapon is named.

The sculptures are technically challenging. Wheelock, whose BFA is in ceramics, has struggled to find ways to attach delicate carved clay fuses to her grenades. Sometimes, rather than risk losing an intricate piece in a glaze firing, she works the

surface with acrylic paint or encaustics. The violence-tinged work leaves her disquieted. “I don’t want to stay in that space for too long,” she says. “But after I make the sculpture, I feel great. It’s cathartic.”

Wheelock also weaves, and her tapestries are more peaceful. After her grandmother’s death in 2007, she created one using strips of her grandmother’s favorite clothing as her weft. Now, through her business Cobscook Pottery and Fiber Arts, she helps others create similar “transformation tapestries,” coaching clients through the healing process and assisting with the weaving.

“[My husband and I] have flourished more as artists here, in this hidden little corner of the world,” Wheelock says. “We get a lot of still time. We really need this as artists.”

Outside the studio, Wheelock teaches art to children and young adults at the town’s public school, and is pursuing an MFA at Heartwood College

of Art in Kennebunk, Maine. In both teaching and making art, she hopes “to prompt people to think, to question, to do better.” She doesn’t mind when people are troubled by her war pieces, for example, but is most satisfied when they take time to reflect, to find shades of gray.

In 2009, Wheelock and Natasha Mayers, another Maine artist, founded Lubec Arts Alive to help revitalize the town. The first event drew 13 artists; in the now-annual summer affair, as many as 75 artists paint murals, draw locals’ portraits, and create public sculpture – encouraging the community to join in.

“If everyone held a little clay in their hands, there would be no war,” Wheelock says. “It’s a material that is soothing, forgiving. As soon as you hold it in your hands, you begin to feel relaxed.”

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Left:
Factory, 2011
 ceramic, wood, paper,
 acrylic paint
 22 x 12 x 48 in.

«Opposite
 Top left:
Peacekeeper, 2011
 ceramic, paper, acrylic
 paint, metal, encaustics
 39 x 24 in. dia.

Top middle:
The Machine:
Fully Automatic, 2007
 stoneware
 12.5 x 8.5 in. dia.

Top right:
U.S. Totem, 2010
 ceramic, acrylic paint
 21 x 13 x 6 in.

Bottom:
Pomegrenade, 2010
 ceramic, acrylic paint,
 encaustics, metal, wood
 11 x 70 x 9.5 in.