



Building a Career and a Community in the Bahamas

by Jessica Colebrooke

Ceramics Monthly: *What led you to work with clay and then set up your business, Jessica's Tileworks Studio, in Nassau, the Bahamas?*

Jessica Colebrooke: My interest in clay was initiated during the fall semester of my second year at The College of the Bahamas (COB) (now the University of the Bahamas), back in 1992. With no experience working with the medium, I found that I could execute endless creative ideas with the pliable and durable qualities of clay.

It was during my final year at COB that my art professor, Antonius Roberts, knowing that I was heading to pursue a bachelor's degree at The Rhode Island School of Design (RISD), in Providence, Rhode Island, encouraged me to pursue a career in ceramics as opposed to painting.

At RISD, I studied with Frank Bosco, Lawrence (Larry) Bush, Jan Holcomb, Judy Moonelis, Jacqueline Rice, and Farley Tobin. These amazing instructors were able to expand my interest and skill in ceramics and gave me the confidence that I had the capability to produce important work using clay as my medium.

Although I had a job offer to work in New York upon graduating from RISD in 1997, I decided to head back to the Bahamas. At that time, there were only four notable working ceramic artists in the country and the art community was saturated with professional and self-taught painters. I knew that I could make a significant contribution to the art community in the Bahamas and also put a spotlight on ceramics as an art form, as well as encourage and inspire others to pursue working in the medium. I started by teaching in

the government school sector as well as at COB, but I produced fine-art pieces as well to engage people in seeing that ceramics, with all its diversity, needed to be expanded and explored further in the country. My intent of creating a studio was to foster the thought of how art could be transformed into a business.

I developed Jessica's Tileworks Studio during my junior year at RISD, when I researched the artist Henry Chapman Mercer. He created the Moravian Pottery and Tile Works in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, in the early 1900s, and I fashioned my studio under the same precepts.

1. Creating a manufacturing company that met the needs of the community; developing and creating souvenir items, teaching and preparing students in pottery, and commission work.
2. Producing art tiles that were specific to Bahamian culture.
3. Producing fine-art ceramics that spoke of my interest as a professional artist.

I have relocated at least three times over the past 22 years. The first studio (1997 to 2001) was just a 10×20-foot wooden shed space. I had a manual Skutt kiln, a slab roller, an extruder, a sheet of plywood and four crates as a table, and a few shelves against the walls.

From 2001–2006 I lived and worked in one of my parent's one-bedroom apartments located on Arawak Avenue 8, which afforded me more space. The living room was the painting/glazing area; the dining room was the slip-casting, wheel-throwing, and handbuilding

station; the kitchen was the storage area; and the bedroom was my gallery or the showcase room. I slept on the floor on a blow-up bed.

Utilizing my living space in this way afforded me the opportunity to save more money and invest in the studio I am working in today, which is a two-story building with the gallery located on the upper level and the working area on the lower level, at the back of my home (in a residential area). The studio is equipped with four electric kilns, two raku kilns, and all the other basic amenities needed in a studio—a ball mill, a slab roller, a potter's wheel, and an extruder.

With each studio, I tried to use the space as effectively as possible. As my business expanded and the volume of work needed to meet the market's demands required more room, I had to find ways to adapt. I have outgrown the space I am in, and before the COVID-19 pandemic, I was about three months away from moving to another location; one that was in a commercial area with twice the square footage. Those plans have been placed on an extended hold for now.

I opened two retail stores over the years—in 2009 and then in 2015—but they only lasted about a year, due to the high cost in rent in commercial areas, as well as the utility and other overhead expenditures. I have found working directly out of my studio to be the most profitable (wholesale and retail) and overhead cost is definitely at a minimum. Locally, I have found that word of mouth has been the most effective way to advertise.

CM: *What are the ideas behind your different bodies of work, from functional ware to tile work to figurative sculpture?*

JC: When I returned from RISD, my heart was pretty much set on becoming a tile manufacturer. I knew I had an edge in this area because historically there has never been a female tile manufacturer in the Bahamas, so I figured this would help launch my career. It did, as I got several offers over a five-year period to manufacture tiles for public buildings and private homes, and I was fortunate to partner

with a local retail tile company called Nassau Tile Ltd. owned by Mr. Jose Gomez, to create art tiles and backsplashes to go along with their field tiles imported from Italy, Europe, and the US. Although the money was good, it was not consistent. Having left teaching in December 2000, trying to open my studio a week before the 9/11 terrorist attacks took place, and holding on to a part-time job at The College of The Bahamas, I had to quickly find other ways of diversifying my income. I continued creating my fine-art ceramics, which included teapots, vessels, figurative sculptures, and wall art but again, the market for acquiring fine art in the Bahamas was about two to four percent of the population. There were only a handful of serious art collectors in the country, and most companies did not (and still do not) engage in appreciating Bahamian art and adding it to the overall décor of their buildings.

Realizing this, I knew that millions of tourists flock to the Bahamas annually and the prospects of having a consistent income would be more plausible in this area and so I focused on creating a ceramic souvenir line. Up until March 2020, the souvenir industry had sustained and expanded my business as well as my personal life—being able to build a home and my own studio, and in combination with my husband's income, to provide for our two girls. The Jessica's Tileworks Studio Ltd. souvenir line consists of a selection of over 150 pieces and has grown in popularity locally and among returning guests.

When I am developing an idea, a design, or a new series for commercial and personal work, I start by looking at nature. Most of my work reflects nautical and botanical influences. My father was a deep-sea fisherman and taxidermist and my mom was a prolific gardener, which has contributed to my interest in both the sea and plants.

When I approach a subject, I zoom in closely to one area of what I feel is the most interesting part of that object and then I focus mainly on the contour lines and textures of that object. You can compare it to how Georgia O'Keeffe used her photographic lens to zoom



Opposite left: *Seagrape Trays*, 11 in. (28 cm) in diameter, low-fired stoneware, glazes, 2019. **Opposite right:** Salt and pepper shakers, 5 in. (13 cm) in diameter, low-fired stoneware, glazes, 2019. **1** *Eleuthera Autumn Turtle*, 7 ft. (2.1 m) in length, low-fired stoneware, glazes, 2012. *Photo: Jim LaRoda.*

into the beauty of a flower's blossom and expand it 100 or 1000 times bigger than it appeared in nature. From there, my creativity chimes in and tries to reconstruct all the information that my brain has consumed into a basic, simplified interpretation of the object. Another approach I take is to look at a piece or a body of work that I created 3 or even 10 years ago and then cultivate new ideas and experiences in that composition.

Ripple Goddess (2007) is an example of both of the aforementioned approaches. This piece resulted from my fascination with the brain coral. I was intrigued by the linear, obscured patterns created on the coral and how each was formed uniquely. I recreated these patterns on the silhouette of a female form and used a basic white glaze, so that the focus would remain solely on the linear design. Later, in 2008 and 2014, this pattern continued on several other pieces of artwork like the *Ripple Fish* and the *Ripple Brain Coral*.

With my figurative sculptures, however, the process is completely different. My focus is not so much on the human form, but rather on using the form as a canvas to express a thought or a concept. I refer to images or photographs to help convey what I need to express. I am fascinated with African art and the African-Bahamian diaspora. In my figurative pieces, I explore the merging of this diaspora through the use of traditional African symbols and aesthetics along with Bahamian Junkanoo (a Bahamian cultural festival) symbols, colors, and patterns. This can be seen in *KENGE*, 2013, and *Bahamian BamButi*, 2013.

Additionally, I also took a Surrealistic approach to this topic with improvisational techniques engaging the elements of nature with whimsical, sardonic, and absurd expressions. This can be noted in *Son of Abraham*, 2013, and *Gussie Up for Sunday*, 2014.

CM: *How many people work with you in the studio?*

JC: Presently, I employ two people. However, they are contracted artists, which means that they are freelancers who are registered as self employed. I made that change back in 2012 as a result of the high cost of doing business. Prior to that, I had full-time employees. The staff

is always between 2–3 people who are responsible for the production of the souvenir line, which includes our signature seagrape leaf trays, starfish bowls, and trays, to name a few. There are times when they may also be involved in painting some of my fine-art pieces.

CM: *What are your main sources of income and how do you handle the logistics of shipping work?*

JC: My main source of income is the souvenir line. I also have exhibits and teach private classes. Online sales have increased in the past two years, and as of March 2020 our US sales had increased by 60%. A small number of these sales resulted from my website or Instagram; however, a large number of the sales came from people who have either purchased my work when they visited the Bahamas on vacation or were gifted a piece of my work.

When shipping to clients that reside on the various Family Islands in the Bahamas—the Bahamas have a chain of 700 Islands and Cays—I often send the products via our mail boat system. Packages usually get to clients within a day or two, but it is the fastest and safest way that I have found to ship. I have learned over the past 22-plus years that shipping via ground freight or via boat is much safer than air cargo when it comes to ceramics. With air freight, there is a 50% chance of damage. This is due in part to the way courier companies throw packages around regardless of tags placed on the exterior that say “Fragile” or “Glass.”

When I ship to the US, I give the client two options, either a 3–9 day postal express delivery or DHL courier service. Both have proven very effective and with minimal to no damage. Often times, depending on the items being shipped, I send an extra piece in the event of damage. Yes, it is a cost that I have to ultimately absorb, but my number-one aim is to please the client rather than focusing on how much money I can make. I think it is a blessing when people who are well traveled and have exquisite taste email or call me to purchase one of my products.

I have not participated in major ceramic exhibits or trade shows in the US (or further abroad) due to the high cost of producing the



2 Upper floor gallery space of Jessica's Tileworks Studio. **3** *Rippled Goddess*, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, low-fired stoneware, glazes, 2010.
Photo: Neko Meicholas.

work, packaging it for transport, and shipping to the gallery. I have tried many times to solicit local sponsorship and the support is almost nonexistent. Unfortunately, I find that this is still a very much male-oriented world. I have watched my male counterparts (who are painters, wood and metal sculptors, or mixed-media artists) ask for the same support to exhibit internationally and the support is provided. What I am told often, and which I cannot dispute, is that it is easier to ship a painting than ceramics. I have sent proposals to corporations in the Bahamas and private donors and often they do not even respond. It has become discouraging over the years, and so I have decided to continue working and creatively giving my best and when the time comes, it comes.

CM: *How did you first get involved in further developing the arts community and arts education in Nassau and beyond? What has been the most successful approach to introducing people to the experience of working with clay?*

JC: An arts community developed here in the Bahamas around the early 1970s. After the Bahamas received its independence from England in 1973, it initiated a desire for Bahamians to display the best and showcase the best of who we are as an independent people. Artists like Stan and Jackson Burnside, Rolfe Harris, Alton Lowe, R. Brent Malone, Eddie Minnis, Antonius Roberts, Maxwell Taylor, and so on emerged out of this patriotic mindset. These artists came together and started to define what Bahamian art and Bahamian culture was. Through their artistic endeavors and workshops, they taught and inspired younger artists along the way to do the same; to become professional artists and to express Bahamian roots and influences. I was educated by several of the aforementioned artists either by studying and analyzing their work or having the privilege of working with them directly.

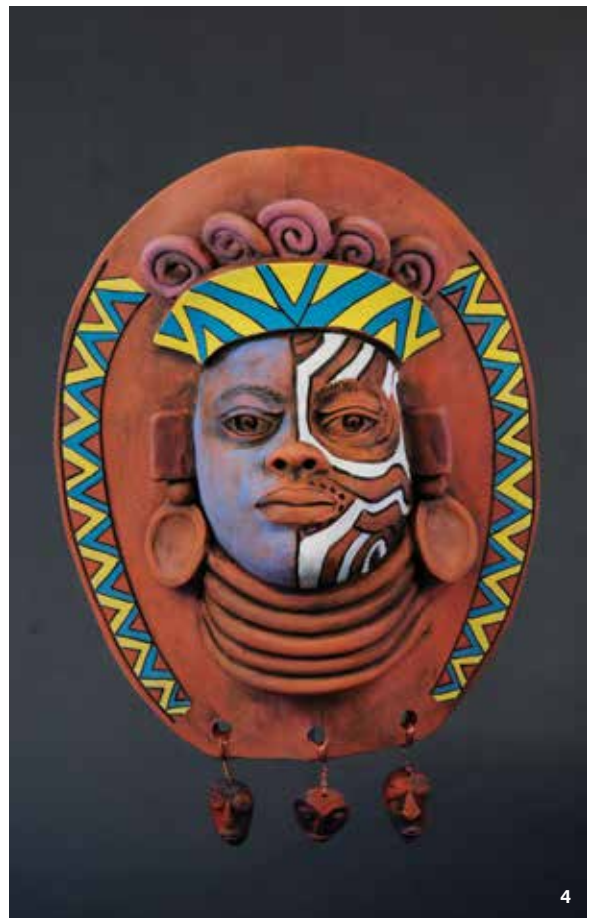
After graduating from RISD, I felt that it was my civic duty to not only come back home and make a contribution to the Bahamian art scene, but also to encourage younger artists to explore a career in ceramics rather than painting. Part of achieving this goal was to offer classes from primary to post-secondary levels. In 1997, there were only a handful of high schools on the island that were teaching ceramics as a part of the art curriculum because not every government high school had the basic equipment and materials needed.

I worked at C.I. Gibson Secondary School from 1997 to 2000, and during that period, I did in-house workshops with the teachers at my school. In the summer of 1998, I did a workshop with about 10–12 high school teachers on the three basic handbuilding techniques in ceramics and pit firing (to demonstrate how firings could be achieved without an electric or gas kiln). I also offered adult evening classes privately to also promote working in clay, and then I was hired to teach ceramics at several privately funded workshops. All of these efforts collectively encouraged the growth and interest in developing a ceramic-artist community, but it was the success of exhibiting finished pieces and selling one's work that really engaged others to want to pursue this art form.

I initiated the All Ceramic Exhibition (ACE), which ran from 2009 to 2013 to bring ceramic artists together while providing an opportunity to exhibit and sell work, to demonstrate that three-dimensional work is just as important and expressive as two dimensional artwork, and to give the public exposure to handmade ceramics being made locally. There were several iterations of the exhibition, which included between 4–12 artists.

CM: *What are the biggest challenges you face both creatively, as an artist, and as a business owner? How do you address these challenges?*

JC: One of the biggest challenges that I face creatively is time. Because of my family and business commitments I have very little time in the day



4 Bahamian from the BAMBUTI, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, low-fire terra cotta, oxides, underglazes, 2013. **5** Descendant of Abraham, 27 in. (69 cm) in height, low-fire terra cotta, oxides, underglazes, 2013. **4, 5** Photos: Jim LaRoda.



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6 Jessica Colebrooke working on a house name tile, low-fire stoneware, 2020. Photo: Erin Colebrooke. 7 Lower floor production area of Jessica's Tileworks Studio, Carlisse and Erin Colebrooke working in the studio. 8 Carlisse working at the painting station in the studio. 9 Dani and Brad Playing Ball, 5 ft. (1.5 m) in length, low-fired stoneware, glazes, 2012. Photo: Jim LaRoda.



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to produce my fine-art or creative pieces that allow me to express my artistic voice, regardless of how people respond to them.

There are also limited spaces here in the Bahamas to exhibit work, and so every artist is competing for the same spots. The logistics of funding is the greatest issue preventing me from showing work abroad. The government leaders do not see the significance of investing in professional artists to represent the country like they do for athletes. Funding of the arts usually comes out of our own pockets or from corporate sponsors.

As a business owner, the biggest challenges are the high cost of business licenses, tax pay outs like national insurance, high rent costs in commercial areas, expenses for local advertising (like local newspapers and tourist-oriented magazines), and the high cost of electricity and gas, not to mention the constant electrical blackouts that can interrupt firings, unless you have a heavy-duty generator.

CM: What excites you most about the development of ceramics in Nassau and the Bahamas?

JC: About 26 years ago, there were so few ceramic artists or potters in the country that you could have counted them on one hand. Today, I am excited to say that the number of potters is in the double digits. Now, that may not seem like a whole lot, but because of the challenges, it is almost remarkable. There are ceramic artists like Joann Behagg, Sue Bennett-Williams, Katrina Cartwright, and Jessica Minnis that practice locally and then there are those like Anina Banks who work in the US, but exhibit at home whenever possible.

My goal was to bring ceramics to a point in my country where it is viewed as fine art and demands the same aesthetic respect as paintings in a notable gallery. I lived to see that realized, but there is still so much to conquer and achieve in this beautiful and technical world of ceramics. I am confident that ceramics will continue to develop in the Bahamas and that the foundation has been set for adequate development.

the author Jessica Colebrooke (née Maycock) was born on the island of New Providence, Bahamas, and graduated from the College of the Bahamas (now the University of the Bahamas) and the Rhode Island School of Design, in Providence, Rhode Island. She is a practicing artist; the proprietor of Jessica's Tileworks Studio Ltd., established in 1997 and located in Nassau, Bahamas; and a married mother of two girls.