

BILL FARRELL

INVESTIGATIONS WITH CLAY

February 11 - June 4, 2023

IN TRIBUTE

My wife Jennifer Lapham and I first met Bill Farrell in the mid 1990s after moving to Chicago to pursue graduate studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago where, after nearly 30 years, he was in his final years of teaching. At the time, there were only a few places in the country where one could situate clay within the broader context of contemporary art, and this was where we wanted to be.

A deeply committed maker and passionate educator, Bill was an important part of the post-war generation of artists who helped expand ceramics from a primarily utilitarian pursuit to one that engaged the scale and materiality of contemporary sculpture. Over the decades, Bill's own work took many forms; from his use of unfired clay dipped in latex, to the integration of neon and large-scale public works, he was continually exploring new directions and asking rigorous questions. Perhaps surprisingly, his final chapter in the studio took him back to clay in its most traditional form: wood fired pottery and kiln building alongside artists from around the world. One of his lasting legacies will forever remain embedded in the work he left behind and the structure of the educational programs he helped to create. Alongside his colleagues, and now carried on by others, he set in motion something much larger than himself which has ultimately influenced generations of artists.

Many years after his retirement, my family occasionally spent weekends at Bill's home in Galena, surrounded by friends brought together by a love for ceramics. Towards the end of his life, he began sending me notes touching on a variety of subjects ranging from the evolution of studio ceramics to the nature of education. It was a privilege to receive these writings and to be given the opportunity to bear witness to the later years of someone's life in such an intimate way. Bill's legacy and the works in this show serve as a reminder that our lives have great meaning, through both large and small gestures.

Paul Sacaridiz

**Maxine and Stuart Frankel Director
Cranbrook Academy of Art**

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

am I a sculptor... am I a potter

am I a potter... am I a sculptor... am I a painter...

There was a day when I thought this was a momentous decision I had to make; now I realize it was unimportant! Are not hard decisions about passion? Can it not go either way with success and confidence?

I came into ceramics accidentally, being last on the list of teaching assistants at Penn State to teach a section on clay throwing. Schooled as a painting major, the clay thing was a bit foreign, for sure. My aesthetics in the mid-fifties centered around abstract expressionism, combines and collages, field painting, etc. Getting the clay to do what I intended was a challenge. That summer, I went to Alfred University in upstate New York to learn to throw and picked up a potter's vocabulary. Alfred back then presented a technical approach, so after studio hours I would climb through the studio window to loosen up with crazy constructions and leave them mysteriously on the studio shelves.

There is something fresh about entering into a new media. The vessel idea points to form, balance, texture, etc. and how they relate to function. I brought a point of view shared in different disciplines, which helped me to look past the material and focus on what I could make from it. Many potters easily become slaves to clay and therefore love it. I hope to remain adversarial, making my vessels my way.

I see the tea bowls as most sensuous, engaging dance, rhythm, the figure, and asking the highest level of passion and craft for maker and user. This is the closest I can be to sculptor and potter without changing hats!

Sculpture is more elusive, as metaphor... asking questions without attempting answers, leaving the viewer with sufficient doubt regarding content, thereby teasing you into active thought.

I am sure my vessels can do the same.

Bill Farrell, 1981

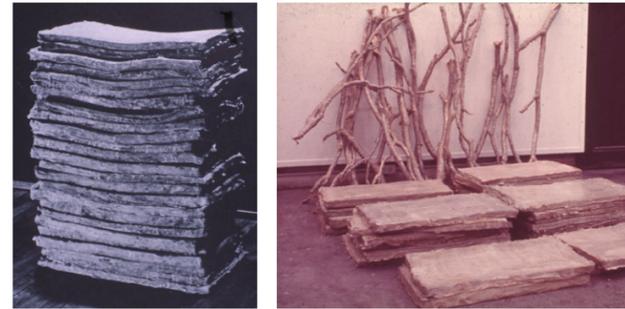


A LIFETIME OF MAKING

1960s-70s

Slab Roller Series

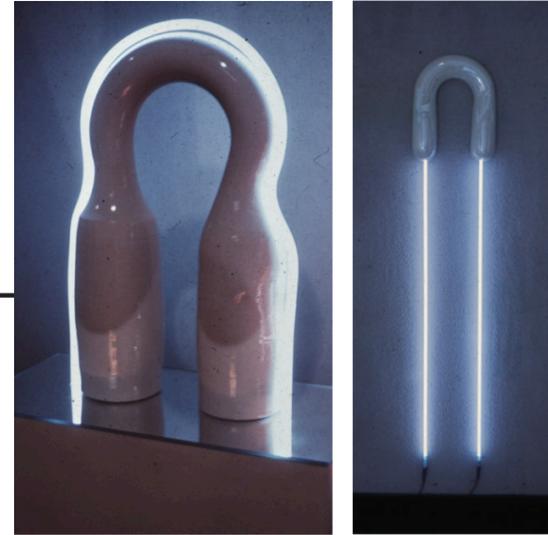
Bill Farrell became a professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) in 1968. There he launched over three decades of intense investigations with clay, expanding his journey between practical vessel and sculptural form. Farrell exerted great influence in the clay world. The slab roller series represented a transition from utilitarian object to experimental form. The works were made with raw unfired clay, pounded out and coated in latex. Farrell devised a clay slab roller based on the Dickerson Combination Printing Press invented by his friend, Ted Dickerson. He traded his clay slab roller design to Robert Brent for one of the first Brent electric potter's wheels.



1970s

Neon Series

Farrell founded a neon lab at SAIC and incorporated this modern material, typically associated with advertising signage, into his clay sculptures. He outlined clay slab rolls and extruded tube pieces in neon, using it as an extension of the clay form. The forms with glossy surfaces were especially complimentary to neon, reflecting the colorful glow.



1980s

Black Latex Series

Continuing with combinations of unexpected materials, this series paired bisque-fired tubes with found objects. The distinction between materials that was so evident in the neon series, disappeared under a coating of black latex. Mechanical forms influenced the sculptural works while the wall pieces resembled letters and words when installed together.



1980s-90s

Graphic Surfaces Series

The vessel form reappeared in works that focused on surface design. From glossy geometric patterns to his favorite mechanical-inspired shapes, these designs whirled and looped around altered vessel bodies. Farrell also experimented by drawing directly onto cold, unglazed surfaces of fired forms with oil pastels, revisiting an early bent-dumbbell shape originally called *Popeyes*. This new version was renamed *He Says, She Says* and expanded the form to a visual dialogue alternating between dominate and submissive voices. His explorations in this significant new group of works helped earn him a National Endowment for the Arts award.



1990s

Tubes Series

A passion for antique motorcycles, cars, and bicycles energized Farrell's work throughout his life. Shapes like exhaust systems and tire inner tubes continually found their way into his designs. A favorite of the artist's was his *Tubes* series. These works consisted of clay extrusions coated in rubber and paint and wired together. His first experiment in this series was a small floor grouping covered on three sides by a wood frame. A colossal sculpture installed at Navy Pier in Chicago for Art Expo took eight kiln loads to create all of the tubes. When fully assembled, it spanned 4 feet high by 16 feet long. Years later in Italy, Farrell created a second large tube sculpture but this time using unglazed stoneware for the tubes.



2000s

Wood-Fired Series

In 1996, Farrell moved from Chicago to a home and studio on Buckhill Road in rural Galena. After retiring from SAIC in 2002, he devoted his later work to exploring wood-firing using a 100 cubic feet catenary arch kiln that he built at the Buckhill Road studio with assistance from University of Iowa students. He was especially fascinated by tea bowls and explored that form extensively. He also occasionally made large-scale sculptural work. As his health declined, the physical strain of maintaining his own kiln became difficult. He participated in firings at friend's kilns but turned more attention to his other passion, restoring antique cars and bikes. His raku tea bowls were some of the last ceramic works he created.





AN AFFILIATE OF THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

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