

# JON GARIEPY: Stormy Weather

Susannah Israel



Photo Carolyn Clover

Jon Gariepy's ceramic boat sculptures and ocean paintings share a massive presence. The big boats are built in sections, enticing the viewer to peek inside for a glance at the structure of the interior. These ships have been places. Their surfaces are dry washes of restrained colour, with dark values and the visual feel of faded paint. Gariepy's use of paint is intuitive and innovative. He says: "From the beginning I have been determined to work as loosely and freely as possible. I feel this gives my work a feeling of movement and spontaneity."

In the summer of 2004, after a lifetime of robust health, Jon was faced with some serious health issues. This experience radically changed his perception of his own mortality and motivated him to get serious about his art, no longer able to think "I'll get to it someday."

A review of Gariepy's life suggests that he has been serious about his art for a long time. He was already painting from early childhood. "Painting and drawing was always something I could do, how I was identified." Encouraged by his high school art teacher, Gariepy majored in Art at California State University, Long Beach. Gariepy says, "I absolutely loved the art department environment. This was my first introduction to art exhibitions, art films and the Long Beach Museum of Art." Gariepy then attended Saddleback Community College, where

he was awarded Painter of the Year, completing an Associate of Arts degree in 1972.

A few years later he attended Sonoma State University. "Gerald Bol was my watercolour instructor and most influential for me. Gerald's attitude was that it was important for him not to teach too much, to allow my unique originality to surface." In 1981 Gariepy completed his BA in Watercolour Painting. For the next twenty years making art took a back seat in the artist's life, competing with work and family responsibilities.

Six years ago Gariepy discovered clay at the I Street studio of Jane McDonald. He worked there and was attracted to hand-building for the textures and sculptural forms possible. Then Gariepy was motivated to make the 85 km trip to Oakland to study ceramic sculpture at Merritt College. He next studied with Bill Abright at College of Marin, benefiting enormously from his detailed approach to surface design. He learned mouldmaking from Abright, creating a 15-Volkswagen "stack" sculpture. He

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- top Tool of the Oligarchy, h 20.3 cm x w 76.2 cm x d 12.7 cm, 2011  
 below Bangladesh Express, h 53.34 cm x w 157.5 cm x d 25.4 cm, 2011  
 opposite page Old haunt, h 27.9 cm x w 45.7 x d 15.24 cm, 2011

worked for four semesters developing a body of work, approaching the clay surface in a painterly manner.

About choosing the boat form, Gariepy says, "I was searching for subject matter that was personal." He spent his early childhood fishing with his grandmother on Rainbow Pier in Long Beach. He loved reading sea stories by Howard Pease about the adventures of a tramp steamer travelling the world. As a teenager he would often ride his bicycle to the harbour and spend the whole day there. This early point of view – the boy fishing from a pier – locates the viewer as a witness and gives the looming size of the big ships a personal scale.

"When I saw Anselm Kiefer's amazing boats, at first viewing I felt I never needed to create another ship or boat ... his work says so much. But as I reflected I realized there are so many interpretations of any subject and my interpretation is as valid as anyone's. I still have more to say about the boat and I get personal value by putting my thoughts out there. My current focus on peace and environmental issues is not new news, however I feel those issues always need examining."

Gariepy references his peace and environmental concerns in his ceramic works, such as the two large container ships, Tokio Express and Bangladesh Express. The colourful containers are toppling from their stacks, perilously close to spilling into the ocean. These pieces are based on real events, says Gariepy. Annually thousands of ships break down, are delivered to Third World countries, and then driven up on the beach to be crudely dismantled at considerable cost to the environment. In *Overkill* and *Same As It Ever Was, Same As It Ever Was* the ships are bristling with weapons. These two ships both reference the World War I Battle of Jutland, where thousands of men were

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Photo Joe McDonald





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killed at sea in a matter of a few days. In the yellow submarine, *Make My Day*, the sub refers to the 1960s days of peace and love while acknowledging our human propensity for war.

Gariepy's glazed surfaces create a sense of process and the look of having survived or weathered the prevailing conditions. The word weather has several relevant meanings: atmospheric conditions; adverse weather such as a storm; to come safely through a crisis or difficult time. In *What Seems to be the Problem?* Gariepy refers to the predicament of the unseen sailors; the boat is listing and we are made sharply aware of danger lurking in an apparently serene environment. Such illusions of safety remind us that sometimes we can only overcome adversity by sailing through the storm.

Gariepy's painting style on ceramic sculpture evolved from his interest in colour field painting. He applies washes of ceramic underglazes to bisque-fired clay, letting the drips show and leaving areas of clay visible. Lines are enhanced with contrasting colour



Photo Carolyn Clover

top  
below  
opposite page

*Make My Day*, h 30.5 cm x w 142.24 x d 20.32 cm

*Red Stack*, h 63.5 cm x w 63.5 cm x d 27.94 cm

*Help May Not Necessarily Be on the Way*,  
h 33.02 cm x w 76.2 cm x d 25.4 cm



Photo Joe McDonald

to bring out details. Acrylic paint is sometimes applied to the surface. The matte finish of underglaze blends beautifully with acrylic paint, as in the subtle palette of the green and white boat *Old Haunt*.

Texture and scale are both created and implied with fine detail. Gariepy does not want these forms to look like ship models. "It can contain small points of verification, like the appearance of metal, wood, faded paint, but more human than a model." Peering inside these ships we see hints of torpedoes, wooden decks, crew's quarters and cargo.

Whether the piece at hand is clay or canvas, all source images get set aside when the actual working process starts. Gariepy says, "I work with the simplest tools and methods. I study, I read, I meditate, I listen, and I look. I try to work from a place of not knowing."

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ist has received significant recognition and support for his recent work, which combines a single vision in two media. Gariepy says, "I feel it is important now to have paintings to go with my sculptures." In December 2011 Gariepy exhibited both ceramics and paintings in a solo show called *The Tide Is In*, at John Natsoulas Gallery in Davis, California.

Jon Gariepy reminds us that we all set out across uncharted waters in our lives, and indeed weather many storms. Sea voyages have long captured the human imagination with the elements of risk, adventure and the unknown. The artist's huge sense of scale conveys that we are powerless to resist the magnitude of such forces at work. If, in the end, we are just going for the ride, we can still bring our human perspective to the experience. With characteristic willingness and courage, Jon Gariepy faces the elemental questions in both his life and his art.

**Susannah Israel** is an artist, writer and educator living in east Oakland.

### Jon Gariepy

Education: Bachelor of Arts (Art Studio), Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, California, 1982. Associate of Arts (Liberal Arts), Saddleback Community College, Mission Viejo, California, 1972. Solo Exhibitions: John Natsoulas Gallery, "Jon Gariepy Sculpture & Paintings – The Tide is In", Davis, California, December 2011. College of Marin Solo Exhibit, Kentfield, California, February 2009. Graffiti Restaurant & Gallery, "Vessels 2007", Petaluma, California, November 2007. Petaluma Mail Depot Gallery, "Faces: Ceramic Masks", Petaluma, California, May 2007. Group Exhibitions (selected): The Ceramics Annual of America, "2nd Annual AA Exhibition", Fort Mason, San Francisco, California, October 7-9, 2011. John Natsoulas Gallery, "22nd annual 30 Ceramic Sculptors", Davis, California, April-May 2011. Awards (selected): Honorable Mention, The Ceramics Annual of America, "2nd Annual CAA Exhibition", Fort Mason, San Francisco, California, 2011. Merit Award, W. Keith and Janet Kellogg University Art Gallery, California State Polytechnic University, "Ink and Clay 37", Pomona, California, 2011.

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