

# Carly Slade's Oeuvre

## Monuments to Everyday People

by D Wood

*I eagerly anticipate the chance to grow together, getting to know the vessel you will become, and falling in love a little more every day I go to the studio.*

This promise, while known to all artists, is rarely spoken. It is about devotion to a medium, a discipline, and a lifestyle; it speaks of the reality of being a maker. Each craftsperson makes this vow when they embark on a career dedicated to mastery of their chosen material and its techniques.

A ceremony acknowledging the marriage of artisan and wood/metal/glass/clay is unusual. It might be seen as a student prank, yet the truth of the occasion is significant. It anticipates Richard Sennett's 10,000 hours of labor and learning required to become a virtuoso. And it is extraordinary that a neophyte would recognize the huge commitment and translate it into words.

### The Wedding: Commitment to Ceramics

Carly Slade is the author of the vows to ceramics (excerpted above, see entire vows at [carlyslade.com](http://carlyslade.com)). They were part of a performance, *Our Big Day*, staged at the Alberta College of Art and Design (ACAD) in 2009. Slade began studying ceramics as a lark. She enrolled at ACAD for painting but says that the discovery of the ceramics classroom "blew my mind." Katrina Chaytor, the instructor, made slab building look easy. When Slade found it wasn't, she gave up everything to perfect the technique. Later, despite winning a scholarship for wheel-thrown pieces, she chose to pursue slab-built pottery.

After completing the foundations courses, Slade selected design as her major, mostly as a panacea to her parents' concerns about job prospects. However, unable to sleep, she returned to the registrar's office to retrieve her form and says that she "put a big check mark beside ceramics." She graduated with a BFA in 2010.





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1 *Big Berta*, 18 in. (46 cm) in length, ceramic, embroidery, quilt, mixed media, 2017. 2 *Medicine Hat Mainliner*, 36 in. (91 cm) in length, ceramic, embroidery, wood, 2010. 1, 2 Photos: Aaron Paden. 3 *9106 88 Ave* (from the installation *Pat's*), ceramic, embroidery, AstroTurf, pallets, cement, found material, mixed media, 2016. Photo: Elizabeth Torrance.



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Slade worked in construction during summers, beginning when she was 17 years old. She installed natural-gas pipelines, thereby embedding in her psyche one of the themes that would pervade her work. Slade comes from a region of Canada that relies heavily on tradespeople who serve the oil industry. Her parents, proudly blue collar, created a home that she says, “placed value on things that were handmade, on things that took labor and time.” In addition to their day jobs, Slade’s father restores motorcycles and her mother is prolific at needlecraft. It follows that Carly would be comfortable in and revere the arena of hard work and the people who do it.

Her output as an undergraduate student included large hand-built vessels with peep holes for viewing miniature figures, and dioramas depicting oil-patch activities. These consisted of clay, findings from her pipeline job, as well as lights and other mixed media. Immediately after graduation, Slade was the co-owner of a precast glass-fiber-reinforced concrete (GFRC) shop that made countertops, furniture, and wall paneling. Slade says, “I learned a lot about tools, making things, and industry; how to hire and fire people, how to run a shop, be a boss; how to be a woman in a man’s world.” GFRC products are made in molds that require thinking backward, a procedure that now facilitates her ceramic sculpture.



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### The Marriage: Bonding with Ceramics

Slade's work appeared in group shows in Alberta during the three years that she worked making concrete. She always knew she would go to graduate school when the time was right and it became right when she grew miserable in the business. She explains, "I lost my spark; I lost my shine; it wasn't creative; it wasn't exciting." Adding to the despondency was the effort of trying to be an artist in the evenings and on weekends. Graduate school meant time, space, facilities, peers, focus. She chose the MFA program in spatial art at San Jose State University (SJSU), in San Jose, California—it made her feel shiny again.

Prior to making the journey to San Jose, Slade did a residency at Medalta in Alberta (2012). Each day, on her way to the studio, she had to wait at a level crossing and watched the passing trains. Instead of being aggravated, she imagined the narratives that the engines and rolling stock contained—the people, scenery, and goods they had witnessed. When she reached the studio, she decided to make a train that incorporated clay, textiles, and found materials. Slade believes this was the breakthrough that led to her work at SJSU.

Her three years in California were invigorating—it was the first place she'd been where making ceramics was cool—and pivotal. Slade's work was chosen for NCECA's "National Juried Student Exhibition" (2016) where she placed third among graduate submissions; and she was selected by Monica Van den Dool to appear in "Lineage: Mentorship and Learning" at the American Museum of Ceramic Art in Pomona. Following graduation, she was awarded a residency at the Archie Bray Foundation in Helena, Montana (2016), and an Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Grant (2016, 2018). She was fortunate to attend the Bray alongside a formidable group of women; Eliza Au, Lily Fein, Iva Hass, Yoonjee Kwak, Melanie Sherman, and Shiyuan Xu. She says, "To be around that level of rigor, of craftsmanship, of dedication, was so inspiring and fantastic . . . It gave me comparables."

### Progeny: Ceramics Portfolio

From Montana, Slade moved to Kansas for a year-long residency at the Lawrence Arts Center and then to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she was the artist in residence and adjunct professor at Tyler School of Art (2017–19). The City of Brotherly Love inspired admiration of architecture akin to—a definition of brotherly—the working class. Slade chooses tired, quirky buildings in neglected areas that have housed businesses or occupants. She then renders the structures obliquely in two senses: they begin as oblique projections—a method of perspective drawing that depicts an object's front correctly,





but the sides and top are at unnatural angles. When rendered in clay, the buildings are askew and, therefore, memorable. Oblique also means obscure or uncertain, the condition for blue-collar industries and lives in the wake of technology. Slade's fabrications are a metaphor for the erosion of the built environment and livelihood. The pieces might include fabric for signage, stitching details on clay, found materials—whatever is needed to instill character and preserve idiosyncrasies that might soon disappear.

Slade is currently an instructor at Arizona State University in Tempe. In addition to a roster of classes, she worked on a recent exhibition (January 2020) at Greenwich House Pottery in New York, titled "City Wide." According to Slade, the exhibit paid homage to Philadelphia's "spirit, history, DIY survival, in all its grit and glory." Initially she hated the city, but confesses, "Philadelphia gets into your bones like sticky sludge that kind of seeps in and next thing you know, you love it."

While the ethos of Carly Slade's ceramics is about working—the jobs that folks do, the means by which they do them, the places they live—it's also about movement and home. Loaded semi-trailers, food trucks, delivery vans, trains, and buses dominate the portfolio; buildings in the places she's lived and in her imagination show her fascination with the past and a desire for permanence. As a student and early-career academic, Slade has been unsettled, a state that is replicated in her practice. At the same time, her transitions mirror those of skilled workers—their loss of jobs, lifestyle, neighborhood, and situation in North America. Her dedication to recording the threatened trades, services, and communities of her demographic heritage are the offspring of her marital vows.

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**4** "City Wide" (installation view of the exhibition at Greenwich House Pottery, 2020). Photo: Alan Wiener. Courtesy of Greenwich House Pottery. **5, 6** 2046 W Diamond St. (installed at Greenwich House Pottery), 21 in. (53 cm) in length, ceramic, embroidery, electroluminescent wire, metal, mixed media 2019–20. Photos: Alec L. Smith. **7, 8** 1700 N 24th St., 4 ft. 11 in. (1.5 m) in height, ceramic, embroidery, quilt, LED lights, beads, 2019–20. **9, 10** 238 W Clearfield St., 4 ft. 2 in. (1.25 m) in height, ceramic, place setting, LEDs, mixed media, 2019–20. **7–10** Photos: Ann Treasa Joy. Courtesy of Greenwich House Pottery.

## Making Monuments by D Wood

For Carly Slade, the six months it takes to create a sculpture are filled with labor, skill, and learning to honor the buildings and places in her portfolio. The process begins on Google Maps. Sometimes the building is one she's seen and sometimes it's chosen by a digital walk around a neighborhood to find a building from a specific time period. Slade calls this "a modern way of looking at history." She's capturing past times in ceramics that will last forever, at the same time as the buildings are digitally frozen in perpetuity on the cloud.

Next come scale drawings. Slade does the math and reduces everything to the size of the intended ceramic sculpture (1, 2). When she first attempted to sculpt these buildings, she tried to orthographically project each of the angles. Then it occurred to her to keep it simple: she screwed two strings to the wall to achieve two-point perspective three dimensionally. She holds the strings, moving them up and down to get all of the horizontal lines, a surprisingly accurate method.

In addition to making buildings in two-point perspective, Slade fabricates on a 10°-angle wedge base (see 3, 4). She justifies contorting the architecture as follows:

- The wedge mimics how one looks up at a building in real life.
- If it's made normally, people think it's just model-making. There's nothing interesting or unique. It doesn't talk about the labor.
- The distortion symbolizes the illusion that the outside mirrors the inside.

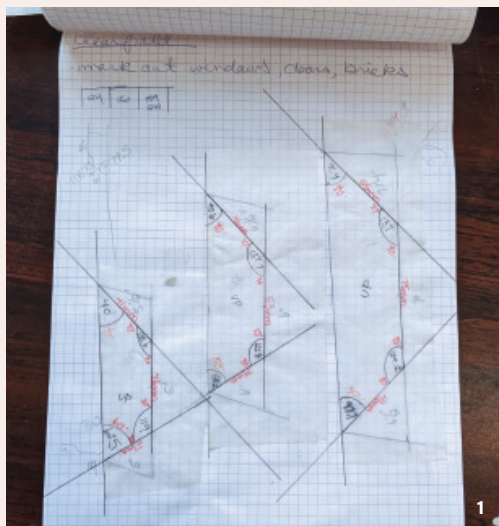
Slade prepares slabs of ¼-inch-thick clay using her grandma's rolling pin or a slab roller. She rolls out 50 pounds of clay slabs and stores them. Strenuous compressing is the

most important part of clay preparation for her large-scale slab building. She drafts out the elements and calculates the angles for the perspective distortion on all four sides. Her father helped expand her range of standard angles by modifying Dirty Girl Slab Bevelers. She now has ones that cut bevels at a 33° angle, a 43° angle, etc. "A bevelled joint is much stronger than a butt joint and makes for interesting viewing angles."

The clay slabs are cut and detailed; inner flanges hold up the walls. The clay is textured with a brick or rock and then clapboards, tiles, bricks, and shingles are carved into the surface by hand, maintaining perspective accuracy (3, 4). Window casements, door frames, eaves, utility protrusions, steps—all the clay details—are added (5). Molds are used for tires, light poles and food trucks. The poles are hollow for the insertion of a wire for an LED bulb. The tools needed to get the right surface are made or repurposed, like a baker's dough cutter.

Slade uses Standard 181 cone-6 clay. She bisque fires her work to cone 1, then refires to cone 04 or 06 multiple times to build and set layers of underglaze color (6, 7). Typically, a final firing to cone 04 fixes glaze details. By doing multiple firings for the layered color, Slade slows the glazing process and can make repairs as she goes. If a color is unacceptable, underglaze is added. If a crack develops, it can be filled with paper-clay slip. She explains, "Because it's not functional, I have more leeway."

Additionally, Slade makes quilts or embroidered signage, pedestals (gallery pedestals don't accommodate a building on a 10°-angled wedge) and crates. She says, "Only in the last couple of years do I feel I can make what's in my head." That's an achievement, laboriously earned.







1 Footprint plans for the bay windows of 2038 W Clearfield St. The angles change for each window in two-point perspective, and they're smaller to create an illusion. 2 Printed image from Google Maps with measurements and scaling added by Slade. 3 2038 W Clearfield St. under construction. The largest bay window is built intact and then carved to make it look burnt. 4 1700 N 24th St. in progress. Side view shows the skewed perspective. 5 Wet work on 2038 W Clearfield St. The piece needs to dry before being bisque fired to cone 1. Wax resist is painted on the thin parts; this prevents them from drying too quickly. 6 A base layer of underglaze is painted on, a stage Slade refers to as color blocking. 7 The piece is brushed with black underglaze and then sponged off so that the black stays in the details. 1-7 Photos: Courtesy of Carly Slade.

