

STUDIO Potter



Kari Marboe and Nathan Lynch, Counterparts, Duplicating Daniel, Mills College Art Museum, 2020. Photo credit: Phil Bond

Photography

**PHOTO
GALLERY**

Duplicating Daniel

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September 1, 2020

Since I set roots in Northern California in 2017, I have been exploring the region as well as meeting new artists in the area. I met [KARI MARBOE](https://karimarboe.com/home.html) in 2019 at Nancy Selvin's exhibition opening at Patricia Sweetow Gallery, San Francisco. I had met Selvin in 2013 at Chris Gustin's studio and when I moved to Petaluma, she invited me to give a talk to her students from [CALIFORNIA COLLEGE OF ARTS](https://www.cca.edu). Selvin introduced me to Marboe. I remember sharing basic courtesies and exchanging our email addresses and then the year just flew by. I

saw Marboe again a year later, in the same gallery around the same time of the year. This time, I told her, “Let me know when you have an exhibition in the area, I would love to know more about your practice.” Marboe indeed had an exhibition on view, and she invited me to a panel discussion that was taking place a week later.



Most clay people have come across Daniel Rhodes’s books on ceramics. But it is rare that one sees his art work in exhibitions. A week prior to seeing Marboe’s show, I happened to see a special exhibition, *California Clay*, at the Petaluma Art Centre. There was a Daniel Rhodes sculpture, alongside a Peter Voulkos and Robert Arneson. I thought to myself, “Yes these men have most certainly helped to shape the California clay history, but where are the contemporary makers?” So I was intrigued when I read the premise for Kari’s show. I thought, “Here is a contemporary artist, who is revisiting a historical figure, but is not shying away from experimentation.” The interactive quality of the entire exhibition was so refreshing that I wanted to know more about Marboe’s work. Her show was one of the last shows I saw before the Bay Area went into shelter-in-place. Given the constraints on traveling, I thought a socially distanced interview could be a great way to know more about her work. I hope this interview gives *Studio Potter* readers a virtual tour of the exhibition, a peek into Marboe’s practice, and a bit of news from the West Coast.

—Ashwini Bhat, for *Studio Potter*

Ashwini Bhat: *Duplicating Daniel* started as a collaborative project between you and the Mills College Art Museum (MCAM (<https://mcam.mills.edu>)). Can you tell our readers more about this project?

Kari Marboe: From 2016–18 I was an adjunct at Mills College in Oakland, California, and taught ceramics. One semester, the MCMA collaborated on a project with my class where we pulled



contemporary ceramic works out of their collection. We had the chance to see pieces in person, write condition reports, understand museum practices, research ceramic artists, and eventually create response works based on the experience. During the project I poked around the museum's archive room. There was an old index card box labeled "Deaccessioned, Missing, or Stolen Works" sitting on the top of a filing cabinet. I loved everything about that blend of categories and that almost none of the cards were labeled with

the category they were in. One of these missing works, a tall burlap-textured sculpture, had been made by Daniel Rhodes. I joked that I could replace his piece, because I make ceramic sculpture too, and that's how *Duplicating Daniel* started.

When I joined Mills College I recognized the traces of Antonio and Eunice Prieto, Ron Nagle, and Michael Swaine. I started the *Duplicating Daniel* project in my second year of teaching and I felt that cross section of past and present in the large, ceramics-specific, Spanish Colonial Revival studio. The feeling reminded me of this quote:

The ceramic medium has a rich potential. It is so various and adaptable that each culture and each succeeding generation finds in it a new means of expression.

Daniel Rhodes, *Clay and Glazes for the Potter*, Chilton House, 1957

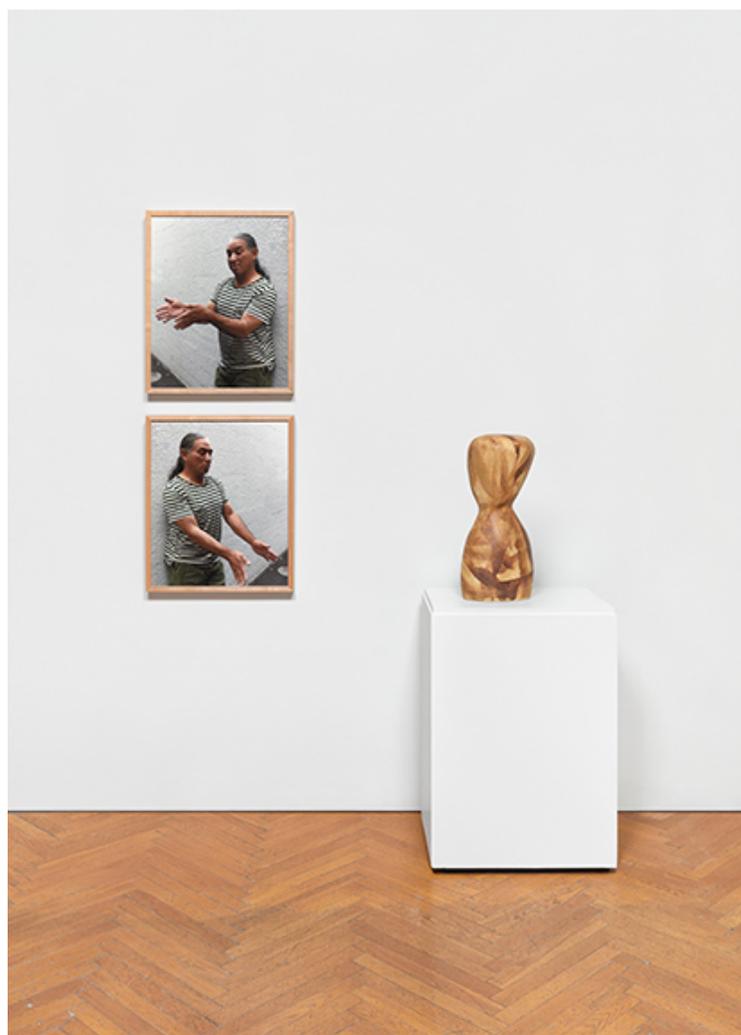
Daniel Rhodes was widely known for his books and less known for his artworks. He taught at New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University, Alfred, New York, showed at Greenwich House Pottery (GHP), in New York, and lived, at the end of his life, in Santa Cruz, California. I traveled to those places as part of my research to create duplicates of the original. Eventually one of these duplicates, *Unmistakable Feel of Pottery*, would take the place of the missing work in the museum.

AB: Where did your process begin and how did it develop?

KM: I tried to give equal weight to all incoming information I received: press release language, archived photographs, techniques, conversations at a diner, hand gestures, and jokes. I let the re-creations be guided by this information, not just the formal qualities of the missing sculpture. The re-created objects could be based on what the missing sculpture looked like, informed by the only two pieces of evidence I ever found: a murky black and white photocopy from a 1970s thesis and a contact sheet containing one snapshot of the work. I ended up making several groupings of sculptures. Each grouping is titled after a

synonym of the word *duplicate* for that reason. Their synonym reflects the tenor of their efforts – for example *Doppelganger*, *Look-alike*, *Imitate*, *Reiterate*, etc, etc.

The first iteration of this work was developed during 2018, in collaboration with Nicole Seisler, an artist, curator/director at A-B Projects in Los Angeles. She invited me to do an exhibition



that fit within A-B Project’s theme of expanded ceramics. She also guided the development of the project parameters and came up with the title *Duplicating Daniel*. As I mentioned earlier, most of the sculptures’ titles translate the story behind how that object came into being. For example, *Look-alike* was made after I asked Arthur Gonzalez in the hallway at Mills College if he knew Rhodes. He thought I asked what a Rhodes sculpture looked like and made a gesture with his arms. I happened to be holding my phone and snapped a couple of pictures, then went to the studio to make that shape. When Nicole and I installed the work at A-B we put that piece next to the two photos of Arthur, stacked so that the hourglass-shaped sculpture mirrored the hour glass gesture vertically.

Shortly after the A-B show, the Mills College Art Museum curator Stephanie Hanor and Jayna Swartzman-Brosky, the program director,

who are so incredibly supportive of artists, offered me the chance to do a second, larger iteration involving all different stages of the project. When I first met both of them to discuss the exhibition, it felt like they understood and supported both my methodology and intention behind this exploration.

AB: What started as a project to find a “replacement object” grew into a much larger exploration, taking you to Alfred University, GHP, and meeting other artists. What was that experience like?

KM: One of the most exciting parts of the show was the chance to talk to strangers. I love cold calling. It's probably my second favorite thing to do after teaching, which is also a form of cold calling sometimes.

Duplicating Daniel involved a lot of cold calls and connecting with strangers. I was also trying to be conscious about giving equal weight to all elements of the exhibition, a practice I want to continue in my future work. I included the cold call experiences and in-person research experiences in the wall labels for the exhibition. It made for insanely long wall labels, but the curator understood I was aiming to tell a long-winded story.

Collaboration with the Alfred community expanded with the help of various people. Linda Sormin introduced me to the Alfred faculty; John Hosford, a librarian and an art archivist at Scholes Library, generously helped me study the Rhodes archive. Multi-disciplinary artist and a friend Michael [Swaine] introduced me to Andrea and John Gill. All the people I met brought their stories and a new point of view of Rhodes. In one of our conversations, John [Gill] told me not to be timid about being a ceramics practitioner.



*I believe that it is important for artists not to make a premature commitment to a narrowed objective before they are ready. Granted, such a commitment may make the work more easily recognized, but a narrowing of focus should come from inner necessity rather than from calculation. Worst of all is the temptation to tailor one's work to some **au courant** image which later may prove to be uncongenial. I regret now that I didn't dig deeper into some of the various promising mines that I opened up. But in art one must follow one's hunches.*

-Daniel Rhodes, *Ceramics Monthly*, September 1987

In 2019 I did a fellowship at GHP. Kaitlin McClure, the gallery and residency manager, literally wheeled their archive into my studio on the first day. Rhodes did a show there and had work in their collection. Both Kaitlin and Adam Welch, the director, who is writing a book on the history of GHP, were excited by the hunt for information.

I also met with the sculptor, Richard Deutsch, who told me about how he had raised his two daughters with his wife in the Rhodes house up the hill from the kiln. They purchased the property from Rhodes's family after his unexpected death at Sierra Nevada College in 1989. Deutsch's own art practice started



out with a focus in ceramics during his UC Santa Cruz college days:

Dan's work never directly influenced me. I spent a lot of time around him mainly working together on the kiln, chopping wood, getting our work ready to move into the kiln, and firing the kiln. What I loved most about him was how worldly he was. Clearly, Dan was most excited when he was describing his 'clay' experiences throughout the world. My goal, always, was to get him talking about what he saw, experienced, and learned in Japan. That was the Holy Grail. Dan knew details such as – what Hamada was looking for in the clay body that constituted a successful firing, or the firing techniques done by the Shigaraki potters, and so on. There was a whole world of wood firing history developed through centuries of firing that was fascinating. Every pot told a physics or geologic story, recording the

metamorphosis of going to hell and back. Dan knew so much about Tamba pottery, Shigaraki ware, Bizen ware, jars of the Muromachi period (1336–1573), and the stories around these multi-generational pottery families and villages. We certainly were only scratching the very surface of what was possible with wood firing.

Dan was conservative when it came to his clay work as clay is such a brutal game. He didn't like to see his sculptures crack. The main thing that bonded us was the commitment to – it doesn't matter what you make, what matters is the fire to the clay. It was so important to us not to upstage that phenomenon with anything too beautiful – in fact, just the opposite.

-Richard Deutsch, 2020

I asked at the end of our visit if I could dig up some clay from the property to work into a piece. We were excited when we found some clay almost right away and squished a couple samples. Richard still seemed very “ceramics” to me.



AB: You really opened up the space for other collaborations. I love that about research-based projects, which invariably bring other people into the process. I myself have often collaborated with other artists; it always keeps my own practice fresh and challenging. At what stage did you envision the exhibition would include these collaborations?

KM: Other than these wonderful interactions, I worked on collaborations with my partner, artist Nathan Lynch. That became a part of the exhibition as well. I deeply admire Nathan's practice and love the *blobjects* (his word) he makes. Nathan describes the history of his formal approach below, which directly relates to Mills:

One of the things I learned working with, working for and living next to Ron (Nagle) was the pursuit of a form through many, many different iterations, varying proportions, and balanced relationships.

-Nathan Lynch, artist, Associate Professor at California College of the Arts, Mills College MFA alumnus

While working on this project I jokingly mentioned to Nathan that perhaps I should use the two remaining photographs (of the missing object) as the replacement object instead of trying to make one. But, it would be a frustrating experience as the photos being two dimensional might keep falling down! Nathan's daughter was listening to this kitchen table conversation and suggested we make clay models based on the photo but put a kickstand on them so they could stay up, just like her bike. This made us work on an entire body of sculptures which were various representations of the photographs, all having supportive kickstands, all made on our kitchen table!

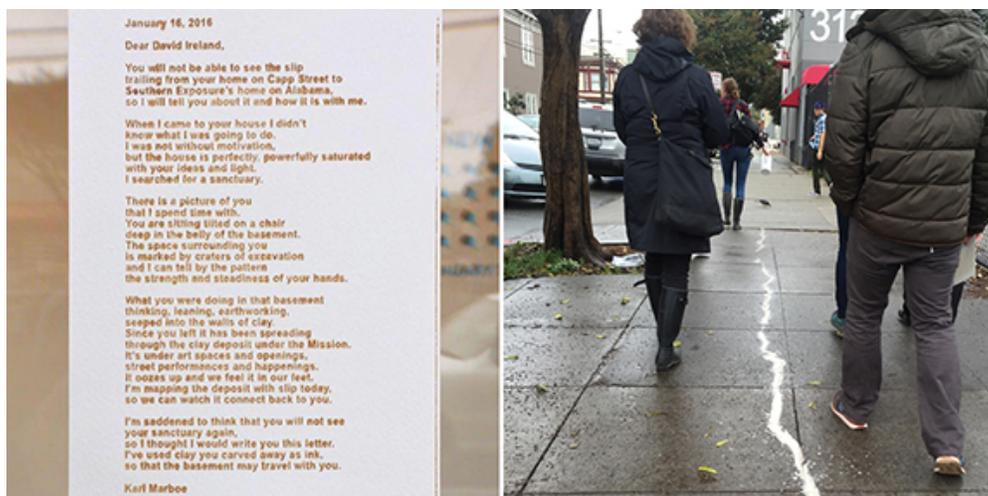
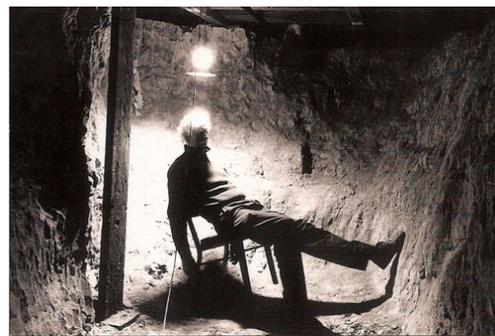
In 2019 I did an off-site residency with Mutual Stores, an artist collective in Oakland, California. Along with Rosa Novak, who runs the program at Mutual Stores, I recorded two oral history episodes – one with Phil Linhares, former director of the Mills College Art Museum, in the object storage room, and another with artist Nancy [Selvin], at her studio in Berkeley.

The line of eight-by-eleven-inch watercolors that wrapped around the last exhibit room contained seventy-five words that are synonymous with, or related to, the word *duplicate*. I chose to do them all in variations of brown because when I first started the project I showed Nancy the black-and-white photograph of the missing Rhodes piece and asked her what color she thought it might have been. She told me that the Rhodes would have been "a cool, but uncool, brown." Also that her maiden name is Brown. These works are my study of the word duplicate and the color brown, a composite made from many different color combinations.

AB: A section of the exhibition is dedicated to exploring words. As an artist coming from a background in literature, I am immediately drawn to your attention to language. I see that, in your

studio practice, you have often used words as an essential material. I am curious about this process.

KM: I often think about how to blend research and the connective relationship of materiality in the form of stories and sculptures. I like to let language inform the stories I'm telling, and, quite often, the sculptures, or performances, become variations of the original language. In one of my earlier projects, *Basement Clay* (2016), both the format and the first two lines of my artwork are influenced by one of David Ireland's works at the 500 CAPP STREET FOUNDATION (<https://500cappstreet.org>) in San Francisco: a five-by-seven-inch red notebook containing the letter Ireland wrote to his sister when she could not make it to the initial opening of his artwork/house. My piece was a letter to Ireland for the reopening of his house after his death, and as personal as his letter was to his sister. David used ink in his letter and I used clay, excavated from his basement for mine, which later was silk screened onto watercolor paper. I wanted his clay to form the language.



In *Duplicating Daniel*, three works were based on a GHP press release from Rhodes's exhibition in 1962. I loved the way the press release was written so much that I selected three phrases: "one-man show," "unmistakable feel of pottery," and "boil out of the pot naturally." The sculptures were based off of these phrases formally and through material choices. I thought about how these descriptions and ideas may have carried into, or influenced, his later work, including the missing piece from the Mills College Art Museum.

Another piece of language that influenced my sculptures came from an artwork by Rhodes titled *Fish face. Jack Dempsey, whale pot. It's a whale of a pot! Piranha pot!* This is an unusual title for Rhodes's practice, as is the squished-basketball shape of the piece with the most distinct feature being the mouthlike slit on one side. I let the sentiment of the words guide the forms of my work and out came a series of fin-covered, looping sculptures. I used the porcelain paper-clay as a nod to the development



and use of additives Rhodes is known for in his work. The porcelain paper-clay recipe and technique was shared with me by Lisa Chicoyne, an artist and instructor at GHP.

AB: I was glad I could attend one of the discussion sessions when the exhibition was still on view, just before the Bay Area went into shelter-in-place. The audience participated in a playful performance orchestrated by Swaine. When I look into your earlier projects, like Folsom Mugs, Bench Projects, and Reverse Rehearsals, performance and theatrical elements have been an integral part of your studio practice. Tell us a little more about this.

KM: Nathan first introduced me to the idea that ceramics can have a performative aspect to it through his projects and the artists he admires including David Hammons, Adrian Piper, and Erwin Wurm. I became influenced by that work as well as pieces by Sophie Calle and David [Ireland]. I really enjoy folding performative aspects into work, because I like talking to strangers and seeing how people translate or interpret directions.

For example, in 2017, I did a performance piece called *Extra Good Showing* at Wave Pool in Cincinnati, Ohio. I asked participants to sculpt clay based on 1900s correspondence between the architect Julia Morgan and the architectural tile company Gladding, McBean, & Co. of Lincoln, California. With each direction given during this fifteen-minute piece, the participants engaged with a past form of correspondence, connected with a site specific material, and physically engaged with an archive.



For *Duplicating Daniel* we concluded the exhibition with a performance by Michael. He asked me to lie under a table containing a few sculptures of mine from the show and played an elaborate game that involved the audience selecting the final object to return to the museum's collection. I really loved the game aspect of that and plan to incorporate more performative elements into my work in the future.

AB: Have you had any special interaction with Daniel Rhodes's spirit?

KM: *Awkward pause...*

I had hoped, and even assumed, that a special interaction with Rhodes would form while sifting through his photos, sculptures, handwriting, anecdotes, and sketchbooks, but it never did. It felt a little bit like when you are trying to engage with someone, but you both keep looking in the wrong eye. You are definitely close, but decidedly not connected.

At the same time, I feel connected to his ideas. I learned about Rhodes in 2002 when my Aunt Jane gave me a copy of *Clay and Glazes for the Potter*. Since then, I often thought of these two sections from the book, especially when teaching ceramics at CCA:



The ceramic medium has a rich potential. It is so various and adaptable that each culture and each succeeding generation finds in it a new means of expression.

and

While the forms of ceramic art may change suddenly and drastically, materials and methods change very slowly, and potters today are using for the most part techniques which have been common for centuries . . . ceramics, even after thousands of years of development, remains endlessly fascinating and a field of activity in which a variety of creative insights can find expression.

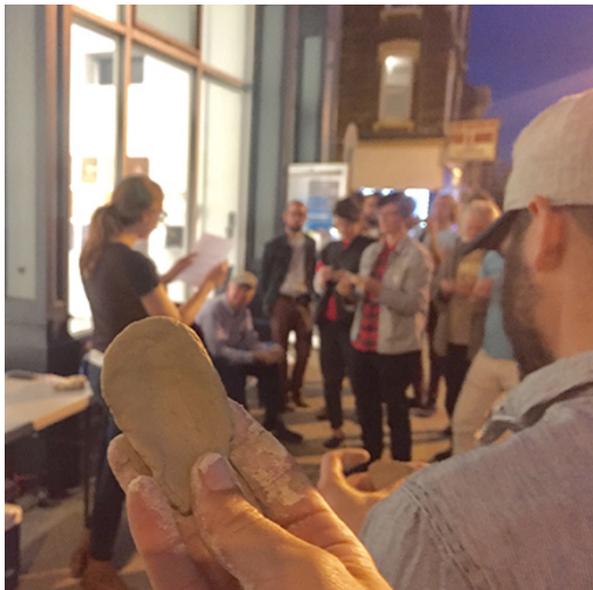
-Daniel Rhodes, *Clay and Glazes for the Potter*, Chilton House, 1957

To me this feels like a prompt – a call to arms that asks us to push a common material into new territories, and to tease out your specific idea of ceramics and share it. Although my heart never felt a spark with Rhodes as a maker, I find his prompt, and his way of teaching, inspiring.

AB: What projects are you working on currently, anything you would like to share with our readers?

KM: I am currently working on three projects:

The first one, *Extra Good Showing* (first executed in 2017, mentioned above). The work will be in a group exhibition curated by Tanya Zimbardo January 3-April 3, 2021 at the Berkeley Art Center, Berkeley, CA.



The second one, *N* (<https://www.greenwichhouse.org/pottery-about/jane-hartsook-gallery/>) *EGORO*

(<https://www.greenwichhouse.org/pottery-about/jane-hartsook-gallery/>), is an exhibition at GHP, New York City, which focuses on questions and sculptural responses surrounding the life and career of Minnie Negoro. This exhibition is in collaboration with Sequoia Miller, chief curator at the Gardiner Museum, Toronto and will run August 28 – September 25, 2021.

The third one, *Keith + Kari*, will be at Saint Mary's College Art Museum, Moraga, California, September – December 2021. This exhibition will pair William Keith

paintings of California sites including Mt. Tam, Lake Lagunitas, Stinson Beach, and our Moon with sculptural responses that incorporate site materials by me.

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