

Build or Bust!



“Build or Bust!” is an invitational, short-term, collaborative work session that spans two days, includes up to 12 participating artists, and takes place at Deb Schwartzkopf’s Rat City Studios in Seattle, Washington. We caught up with Deb and the participants from this year’s event to find out more about it, and ask how this intensive work session has had an impact on their creative outlook.

—CM Eds.

Deb Schwartzkopf (1)

When participating in residencies in the past, I gained friendships, insight, and skill building information from others as I worked around them. I chose to buy a house and plant myself here in Seattle, instead of continuing on with moving from experience to experience. Now I am endeavoring to dig into my community and invest. Bringing people together at my studio helps me keep growing in my work. It also keeps me learning from friends, both new and those I have known for many years. I used to measure time with what state I was living in during a residency or teaching appointment. Now I think of what event happened at my studio or which group of assistants was here changing my experience or adding their mark.

I started this event the second summer after buying my house. The first summer was spent building the kiln shed and making the space a functioning studio. It was a huge overhaul. I have grown personally and in my ability to manage all the moving parts in the studio since first establishing the studio here. I have more energy to host events, foster assistants, and create work than when I was adjusting to having a mortgage, making big changes in the facility, and at the steepest grade of the learning curve in many ways. I’m still learning in a big way, but there are more systems in place that help me work well with assistants, balance my studio time, and manage projects or events at the studio. I consider this whole environment one big art project.

The Build or Bust! event changes every time as the people invited are different every year. The first year focused on sculptors and the figure. The second year, potters and the teapot. This last year was the most open theme (Elemental) and it was a mix of potters and sculptors. Next year’s event will have a functional theme.

It is fascinating to see groups come together, to see how or if they connect. One thing each group has had in common is experiencing surprise at both how much they have in common, and the variety of thought and creative approach that exists within our field.

Over time I have become more organized, but I am still hoping to participate more as a maker than as a host in the future. My studio assistants are making a big difference in this arena and I’m grateful for their help. I am also thinking of making the next group a bit smaller to aid in this goal.

Logistics and Planning

As far as logistics and planning are concerned, I try to invite a mix of two out-of-town artists, and some people who are local or nearby. Two to three artists stay with me and my partner Joe Wilkinson here at the house. Sometimes there have been more if people want to camp! I have a good friend who hosts one guest. Guests from within the Pacific Northwest region often know someone in the area they can stay with. And, if local people are invited, sometimes they are both guests and hosts. It is a very generous community. I try to make it so no one is paying for a hotel and is staying nearby for the event. I make lunch for everyone both days so we can all hang out and chat. Often we get dinner together one evening. The last evening has been my big annual potluck party and we all meet more people and have an amazing spread of food.

In terms of sourcing clay and supplies for the event, Clay Art Center in Tacoma has donated clay for several years. I order all my materials through Clay Art Center regularly and I am thrilled to have such a great clay supplier in the area. Additionally, Amaco/Brent has donated underglazes for years.

I organize the studio so that all of the invited artists share the same space. This fosters conversation and sharing of information. I have two studio spaces. One is more of a teaching studio and we meet there for the event. We have lots of space to spread out. And, since I teach classes there, I have pottery wheels, table space, a slab-roller, an extruder, and whatever equipment a person might need. Locals also bring their own hand tools. Everyone shares and it is a blast.

I feel more in touch with my community through hosting events. I have found people working in the same community have often never seen each other build over a space of two full days.

Many work in a solitary setting on their own work, even if they are instructors or residents at other art facilities. They are surprised to learn about each artist's way of working. When we spend two whole days together, we get past the initial introductory conversations. We often learn how much we have in common, we commiserate in our difficulties, we share tips, and we guide each other to new insights. This is what I love about gathering makers together! There are many things that I take away from an experience like this. As I go about my days, I put to use or can share small things I have learned from many people. They may be details, but applied at the right moment, they can be a leap forward. Or shared with the person searching, they may be just the right addition. I am excited by this action of gathering and dispersing.

<http://ratcitystudios.com>



Canne Holladay (2–4)

I had a great time helping with the Build or Bust! event in 2016 as Deb's assistant, so when she invited me to participate in 2017 I was really excited to have the opportunity to come back to meet and build a community with other really amazing artists.

I was honored to be included, although I felt nervous in such good company. I worked through a couple ideas I had been holding onto, and really enjoyed having time to chat with the others in the studio and over meals.

Each artist had their own perspective on the theme Elemental, whether the elemental quality came from their process of building, or firing, or sources for inspiration. It was really interesting to see how everyone responded uniquely, but still in kind. There were lots of blobbie forms taking shape, as well as pieces that were created as a cluster, web, or woven together.

Elemental has a few meanings for me. I think about the human, the body, the person, starting with the smallest part, the cell.

Microscopic images inform the surface of my work, where I derive patterns and relate the forms I am working with back to the body. One unexpected outcome from the work session was that I had been holding a vessel form in my head for a little while, and over the weekend I got to put one together. I was pleasantly surprised to see how it could exist. Now I need to explore that idea further.

I really enjoyed seeing how the others took their many parts and appendages and grew them into whole forms. The event was a really good time to listen to each other, especially to hear from those in the group who have more life experience than me. So, I mostly worked, and watched, and listened. Working alongside this talented group of people was really food for thought that I will continue learning from as I work and as the event recedes into the past.

<http://evelyncanne.com>

Joe Wilkinson (5, 24)

I saw Build or Bust! as an opportunity to work in a unique environment with ceramic artists of a variety of levels in their careers, disciplines, and processes. It seemed like a no brainer to answer the call to hang out for two days at Rat City Studios with a bunch of fellow artists, especially those like Deb Schwartzkopf, Carol Gouthro, Sam Scott, and Patsy Cox.

Deb set up a great space for all of us, with name tags placed for us to show up and know where we were going to get started. She has built a beautiful property and studio. I was a little intimidated coming to work around all of the other artists, but as I started meeting everyone, that feeling subsided. The format was loose and everyone was at a space of figuring out what they were going to create while there. It was great to work next to Marge Levy. She is such a supportive and collaborative person. The thing I loved most about creating in that space was witnessing the diversity of processes at such high levels of craftsmanship. Additionally, the food each day was a real treat.

This year's theme, Elemental, suggests change and a sense of becoming. My work evolves through thoughts on processes of geologic and cosmic phenomena like alluvial fans or accretion discs, acting as metaphor for human development, so the theme felt welcoming.

I had a new discovery in my work during the event and it has since taken a further step forward. The systems of line and waypoints I have been creating gained a membrane-like structure, resembling a black hole. Being in that shared studio space with everyone made me think of the connectivity coming from so many places and experiences, and it manifested into the void between the structure.

The piece that Marge created brought a tangible sense of collaboration to the experience. She asked that each artist there create a small contribution to a what resembled a charm bracelet, only larger. It turned into an amazing chain of ideas and memories and really embodied what I believe Deb was most hoping for.

www.joewilkinsonstudio.com



Carol Gouthro (6, 7)

I participated in Build or Bust! because I respect and admire what Deb Schwartzkopf does to promote and create community, and to encourage cooperation, communication, and sharing within the Seattle clay community. I was familiar with and admired the work of the artists she invited, so it was exciting to spend a weekend watching and working with them.

Deb's studio space was open, light and inviting, filled with the other artists working, chatting, laughing, and creating. I usually work alone in my studio toward a gallery deadline, and need to think about creating a unified body of work, or filling a dinnerware order. So it is a rare luxury to allow time in the studio to experiment and explore with no goal or outcome in mind as I interact with other people and get feedback. I spent the two days experimenting with handbuilt and drop-molded shapes, changing things up, and feeling no pressure to finish anything. I did, however, end up with some new energetic forms and shapes to incorporate in my next body of work.

The theme of the event, Elemental, to me encompasses how I approach, begin, conceive, proceed, etc. in making my work. I

have a strong interest in natural forms and minutiae. During the Build or Bust! work days, I focused on experimenting with new shapes and forms, component parts to be used later in my work, in either wall pieces or free-standing sculptures. I also did a small collaborative component for Marge Levy's charm bracelet, but mostly watched how the others approached clay, handled it, built with it, and enjoyed talking with the other artists about what they were doing.

Since the event, I have been in contact with several of the other artists who live locally and look forward to an opportunity to connect again with some of the others who live outside the area. Build or Bust is still simmering in my mind. The ideas for using new shapes, and old shapes in new ways, are still rattling around in my head. As I begin work in the next few months on a two-person show, I am looking forward to revisiting these.

www.carolgouthro.com

Isaac Howard (8, 9)

I had an amazing time with all of the participants at Build or Bust! The atmosphere was very relaxed and low pressure. Time spent in the studio varied between periods of quiet, intense focus on individual work, and rounds of hilarious banter. There was plenty of time to take a break from working to see what other people were doing and to ask questions about their processes and ideas. We had potlucks every day at lunch, which helped to break up the studio time, and gave everyone a chance to chat. I would do it again in heartbeat!

I viewed the Elemental theme of the event fairly literally. Elements of all of the things that I find as sources of content tend to bubble to the surface. My penchant for materiality, love of nature, and fondness for historical ceramics are all pretty evident. I think Deb chose to invite all of us because she was trying to gather a group of folks who could bounce ideas off of each other in a mean-

ingful and developmental way. It didn't really seem like the theme of the event played as large of a role as the quality and caliber of the ideas present. I think when you see other people trying some new things and expanding their own clay vocabulary it rubs off. Play is contagious!

I chose to focus on a few variations of some familiar baskets, faceted trays, pitchers, and cup forms during the work session. I had been starting to fool around with cone 6 oxidation glazes recently, and the quiet forms I had been making for wood and soda firings weren't exciting me with glaze on them. Build or Bust! was the perfect break in my typical work cycle to take a wee bit of a side step and start experimenting more with adding stamped and paddled textures to my forms.

www.iehoward.com



Lisa Conway (10, 11)

I live about 3 hours from Seattle and participated in Build or Bust! to connect with more with clay folks in the region. I live in Portland, Oregon, but my teaching job is in Vancouver, Washington. My students move around the whole area after graduation, and I like to know about other opportunities for them. Plus Deb has such great energy, I was really looking forward to seeing her studio.

Deb set me up to stay with a friend of hers who lives about a mile away. I drove up the day before so I could be at her studio first thing in the morning. I brought pieces that were half-started so I could just keep building on them for the entire two days; I thought I'd get more feedback on my work this way. I especially liked the big open room we worked in; it made overhearing conversations easier and everyone felt comfortable chiming in at any time.

I appreciated the younger people participating in the session. Lately, I've had more of an appreciation for the developmental

stages of someone at the start of a career in clay. I brought in a cup made by fellow participant Eliane Medina to show my students at Clark College and they just swooned over it! It's gorgeous, and I know it will influence some of their final work this term. I've seen more work by fellow participant Amy Simons exhibited around Portland. I'm very drawn to the way she handles clay and will be watching for more from her in the future.

In terms of new things that I learned and the ways that the experience is influencing me now, I got some great advice on applying underglazes from Carol Gouthro. And, I have an idea for an exhibition at my college based on what I saw people working on at Build or Bust! The idea has been floating around in my head for a while but solidified after I saw Chad Gunderson's work.

It's great to get a kick in the pants like that, and it certainly motivated me in my studio back home.

www.lisaconway.com

Sam Scott (12–14)

When Deb first asked me to participate, I had another event scheduled, and, as I typically work late in my studio, until after 4am, thus do not get up until after 1pm, I wasn't sure if I should accept the opportunity, but ultimately decided to take part. What attracted me was the opportunity to get to know the established and the up and coming artists. Some I knew, most I did not.

I arrived a bit late and most everyone was there and set up. Deb showed me where my space would be and I unloaded the equipment I brought to use. I knew most of the participants were handbuilders, but was thrilled to see Patsy Cox next to me, busily throwing small forms that she was going to assemble later. For the next two days, it was great having her warm, generous, and thoughtful manner a few feet from me. As the first day went on,

it was clear that either by design or serendipity, with Marge Levy located in the center of the room, she became the hub from which the rest of us, as spokes, radiated out. The day was busy making friends and work. Dinner gave me a chance to speak more to Deb's assistants, who are just beginning their journeys with clay.

The next day was focused on finishing work, collaborating with Marge, and engaging with the greater community at a potluck. As I drove home, I reflected on the difficulty I had altering my work and sleep patterns but felt it was well worth the disruption to meet these people and have meaningful connections.

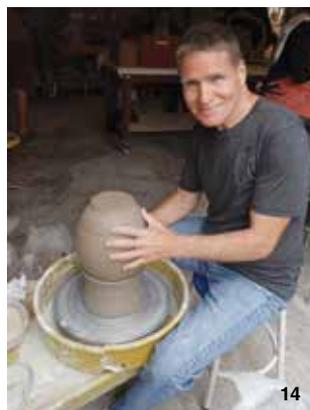
Related to the theme, I feel that the event explored the elemental aspect of relationships among creative people working in close proximity for an intense period of time. I enjoy my private space when working in my studio, but appreciated the dynamic and



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Chad Gunderson (15, 16)

Participating in Build or Bust! was one of the most exciting things for me of late. After moving to Tacoma, Washington, this event made me feel like a full member of the Pacific Northwest clay community, more than anything else. I've been working in a very solitary space; I'm either working in the studio alone or there's a barrage of students knocking at my door. Working at Rat City Studios with other artists was inspiring and everyone's energy was invigorating for me. To share space with other working artists and be able to just chat and observe their processes is something that I have been missing. It's Deb's ability to build community that I have to thank for that.

The most unexpected thing that happened at Build or Bust! was the way I connected with all the other artists. The conversations and connections I made after each day of working were just as important as the work time.

During the work session, my focus was to make some more molds for my glaze-casting process, but also to explore some new ideas that I plan to take further. Specifically related to exploring ideas, I brought books, images, and diagrams of space exploration vessels and instruments to reference. I plan to incorporate some of the sketching I did at Build or Bust! in my next body of work. These shapes and forms I'm developing will become stands and/or supporting elements for my cast-glaze sculptures.

<http://chadgundersonart.com>

Patsy Cox (17, 18)

I am a big fan of Deb Schwartzkopf and her work, and I had a deep appreciation for the work of the invited artists but did not know most of them personally. When I found out Marge Levy was participating, I had to go!

Build or Bust! was two days immersed in making work in the company of others who I came to admire during the course of the event. Seeing Deb's beautiful studio, home, and garden complete with chickens and bees was totally inspiring. Having her assistants participating in the adventure made me think differently about mentorship. She has an incredible connection to her community and has built something special around her work as an artist.

The Elemental theme allowed me to use the most basic processes to produce my work. Having such a short period of time and hoping to finish one piece, I had to be efficient with my time. I threw components on the wheel

collegial experience. Everyone took time from their own making to sit for a while with each artist to discuss their process and ideas one on one. This time was focused on motivation and technique.

The outcome was exactly what I had hoped for. Deb gathered a group of artists; some like myself, Marge Levy, and Carol Gouthro, who began working in the 1960s and 70s; some younger who were established in studios or teaching positions like Deb, Patsy Cox, Chad Gunderson, Lisa Conway, and John Chwekun; others who were exploring their options for the future, like Joe Wilkinson, Amy Simmons, Canne Holladay, and Isaac Howard; as well as Deb's young assistants. The synergy of these experience levels led to some lively discussions with a lot of humor.

The event informed a series of 16 of *Impression* plates addressing Build or Bust! that I made prior to the event and gave to each

participant to commemorate our common experience. Each plate was different, but included the words "Build or Bust" printed with alphabet blocks.

I see several of the artists who were there at various ceramics events in Seattle. There is a closer connection when I encounter them now as friends and not just colleagues. I also keep track of the out-of-town artists on social media.

I am extremely hopeful for the future of ceramics after meeting these young, talented, and focused artists. After almost 50 years of making, I am continually amazed at the breadth and quality of the work being produced today and I am honored to have met some of them at Build or Bust!

www.samscottpottery.com



and assembled them to complete one sculpture there that would normally take me months to fabricate.

I did not explore any new processes but was completely inspired by the way the other artists made their work, which varied significantly. Some artists were thoughtful in their planning, other used processes that I had not seen before. Because of the time frame, there were a few works in which I was only able to see the process and not the finished work. For example, Chad Gunderson's glazed pieces needed to be fired before he could finish them—so I was only able to see how he made the structures that held the melted glaze. I'm glad he had finished examples there.

I became very connected to a couple of the participants that I had not previously known and developed a huge appreciation for them and their work. I left feeling so moved by the geography, the pace of life, the commitment of the other artists, and Deb's devotion to her community, her assistants, and her practice. It was a totally inspiring and refreshing experience.

Since the Build or Bust! experience, I'm working a bit faster, cutting out extra steps that slow down my overall process, starting to think more seriously about glaze, and wondering how we were able to make the work that we did in that time frame!

www.patsycox.com



John Chwekun (19, 20)

Our time together in the studio during Build or Bust! was dappled with patches of cheerful conversation and quiet work. It is our draw toward the latter that connected us, even in advance of meeting. There was unspoken respect for this from everyone present, and it colored all that took place. It was incredibly kind of Deb to bring us together in the way she did, and I am grateful to have been included.

www.johnchwekun.com

Amy Simmons (21, 22)

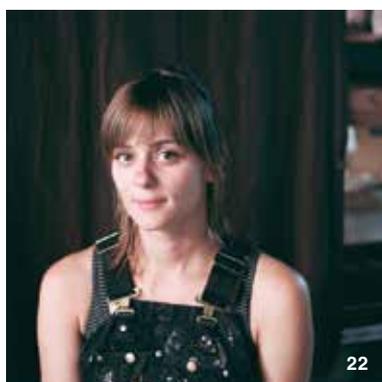
I decided to participate in Build or Bust! because it's inspiring and productive to work with or alongside other creative people. It's even more rewarding if the group consists of individuals from all different backgrounds, and with a wide range of ages and levels of education or career experience like this one did. The diversity of ideas and experiences makes for thoughtful and entertaining conversations between group members.

During the two-day work session, I chose to try and finish an entire piece, so I was working with familiar techniques, but at a slightly smaller scale and faster pace than I typically do. It was wonderful to connect with other artists while working in a communal space. In my experience, artists are great at opening up quickly with one

another, especially while in the throes of making. It's like chatting with a coworker, but you can share your weirdest, most vulnerable thoughts, and still receive productive feedback from them.

Since many of the participating artists were from The Pacific Northwest, I can easily stay in touch with them. We live in an exciting community that is growing fast. I think a lot of the news coverage of development in Seattle is focused on the tech industry and associated growing pains, but artists are moving here too. Our arts organizations are thriving and great people like Deb are anchoring a network of studios and connecting an expanding community of makers.

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Marge Levy (23, 24)

I was aware of intense group creative fests Deb Schwartzkopf had held at her studio and sensed the creative energy they seemed to cultivate and celebrate. I wondered what I would do if invited and purposely did not make a plan for Build or Bust! but decided to be in the moment when the time came. And I was.

I had no plans until I sat down with a bag of clay and thought about commemoration and about charm bracelets that I had as a child and, as an adult, had collected. I brought some Brazilian *pencas de balandangen* (bouquets of expressive metal bangles) with me. But I packed them away, and started to make a significant form in a random scale—a baby octopus that I remembered from a recent dive trip—and then a bracelet of clay chains, and then more small sculptures of abstract forms or objects. Gradually artists around me contributed small objects to my commemorative large bracelet, documenting our time together and their diverse ways of handling clay. It was unexpected and pretty thrilling.

Why we make work is elemental, and for me, not always clear. Marking time is one element and interacting with others is, too. I enjoyed spending time with people I had known a bit in other capacities and loved seeing how they approached clay and life. There were good extended conversations with lots of interview questions on my part and open, frank responses on theirs. Very good, generous sharing, too.

I have worked collaboratively before with papermakers and ceramists, usually with an overriding purpose or design. Not in Build or Bust! I

always work in a community studio, a classroom, or workshop, but knowing our time together was limited got all of us talking more than usual. Accepting contributions for my project was great fun. It gave me a concrete commemorative object, not just the two-day experience.

At the end of the workshop we all showed our work and I loved watching people who know me in another context see me as a creator too!

I loved seeing the pace of creation and expertise in touch and feel. Everyone had such good hands and minds. Some people tried completely new things in the studio and struggled and failed. How brave to go that way. All of the artists were inspiring to see in action.

I used my same old modeling skills—a little clumsy, on purpose, but direct and clayful (I like that word). I saw some processes I was less familiar with—Carol Gouthro's press molds, Sam Scott's master potter hands, Lisa Conway's humorous lumps, and Patsy Cox's patience and contemplation.

In recollecting the experience, I reflect how grateful I am to have found a creative community right here at home in Seattle,—one created by Pottery Northwest and Deb Schwartzkopf that is generous, caring, and embracing. As a mature person, I so appreciate the diversity of age and approach to clay, to learning and life experience. Being included in the roster was a very special experience. Like parentheses in time (like this!).

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