

# RINGS *of* COLOR

by Naomi Lindenfeld

I experience visual wonder and discovery when carving into layered colored clay. Rings of color reminiscent of ripples of water, wood grain, and geological striations reveal themselves. It is magical to me that this way of working with clay results in a richness of color, flow, and a multi-dimensional quality.

I have been drawn to working with colored clay since watching another student work with it while attending Boston University's Program in Artisanry in the late 1970s. The nature-inspired and rhythmic imagery that appears as a result of working with layers of oxide-stained porcelain captivated me.

## Research

Once I was on my own and ready to delve into exploring with colored clay, I sought out the work of the relatively few other potters working with the technique at the time. I also learned about the historical Japanese traditions of working with colored clay and the more recent adoption of the term for it, *nerikomi*.

The process of staining the clay, layering, and creating patterns captured my imagination and I have not looked back since.

I take inspiration from the beauty of the Vermont landscape that surrounds me as well as from my love of dance. Colored clay has proved to be a great vehicle for expressing the patterns that I resonate with and the sense of movement that compels me to dance. Although I love to do various styles of dancing, African dance has been a source of exuberance and exposure to another culture for over ten years. It incorporates patterns of steps, drum rhythms, and vibrant, colorful designs of African textiles in the *lapas* (wrap-around skirts) that we wear while dancing.

For a number of years I have handbuilt a wide array of pieces, mostly with the slab method. These include trays, platters, mugs, lamps, butter dishes, vases, teapots, and other functional items. I have enjoyed creating everyday objects that become both stimulating and soothing resulting from carving abstract designs into the colored clay. Lately, I





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1 Nesting pinch bowls, 8 in. (20 cm) in length, pinched colored porcelain, fired to cone 10 in gas reduction, 2011. *Photo: Al Karevy.* 2 *Curves and Waves* platter, 16 in. (41 cm) in length, slab-built colored porcelain, fired to cone 10 in gas reduction, 2015. *Photo: Charley Freiberg.* 3 Naomi Lindenfeld working on *Curves and Waves* vase in her studio. 4 *Wind and Trees*, 8 in. (20 cm) in length, pinched colored porcelain, fired to cone 10 in gas reduction, 2015. *Photo: Al Karevy.*

have been experimenting with more representational images such as leaves, bark, tree branches, and vines. Other natural forces come into play as the layered colored clay echoes geologic surfaces that have been eroded by wind or water. I have expanded these effects by increasingly using thrown and pinched forming methods.

Once a potter has been seduced by the marbled, swirling effects of colored clay, anything that is done with it can be seen as appealing. However, bringing a personal vision to it adds complexity and a dynamic tension that arises between the organic nature of the process and the intentional composition. Exposing the layers with a carving tool can be very much like drawing. I sometimes let the cross-section that reveals itself when I slice open a loaf of colored clay dictate how I will carve a pattern. Other times, I carve a design

or a recognizable image into the surface and the rings of color from the cross-section become an ethereal background.

### Process

Start by wedging a Mason stain or a pure coloring oxide into the porcelain. I have done tests to determine the percentage of colorants needed for a given shade. Recommended percentages are between 8% and 12% for Mason stains and between 2% and 4% for pure oxides. After weighing it, mix the powdered colorants with water to make a paste, then work that into the clay and wedge until the color is uniform (1). Note: wear gloves when working the colored paste into the clay.

After making up a variety of batches of different colored clays, I choose the color combinations that best capture the feeling I am



1 Wedge Mason stain into the clay. Rubber gloves are recommended in order to avoid any absorption of the metallic oxide through the skin. 2 Roll coils with chosen colors. 3 Flatten the coils with a rolling pin and stack them up, patting them down each time to stick them together. 4 After stacking the coils into a loaf, elongate it, cut it in half, stack the halves and repeat two more times to thin out the layers. 5 With a fine, brass wire, slice the loaf open, undulating the wire slightly to bring out more of the rings of the cross-section. Take a slice for the piece that is about to get made and the remainder of the loaf gets wrapped in plastic for future use. 6 To achieve a white interior, laminate the colored clay slice onto a thin slab of porcelain. 1–6 Photos: Al Karevy.

after; typically combining four or five colors in a layered block to get some sense of depth, and alternating pairs of colors with a coil of white to lighten the colors. After selecting a palette, roll each piece of colored clay into a coil, flatten them with a rolling pin (2) and stack them up, patting them down each time to stick them together (3).

Elongate the resulting loaf, cut it in half, stack the halves (4) and repeat two more times to thin and refine the layers. When slicing the loaf open, undulating the wire slightly brings out more of the rings of the cross section (5). A slice is cut and the remainder of the loaf gets set aside and wrapped in plastic to use for future pieces. To create a white interior for functional pieces, laminate the colored clay slice onto a thin slab of plain porcelain (6).

In some cases, I sketch the shapes and lines that I plan to carve on the surface with a dull wooden tool (7). Other patterns are done freehand, or in response to the rings of the cross-section, carving into the white areas to bring out the colors that lay beneath.

The next step is to carve into the soft, colored clay with a small loop tool (8). Carving into the layered clay and removing some of it reveals the striations in the layers underneath. Even after many years, there is a sense of discovery as this process organically unfolds.

After carving, cover the slab with a cloth and roll it flat. The cloth keeps the rolling pin from sticking to the clay and keeps the carved lines from closing in on themselves. Instead, the carved

areas are brought flush with the surface (9). Next, I sometimes cut what will be the edge or rim of the piece to follow the shapes of the carved design.

While the slab is still flat, use a metal rib to compress and smooth the surface, sealing up any cracks that formed during the stretching and rolling process (10). Wrap the cloth around the edges and press along the just-cut rim to smooth them.

Next, wrap or fold and construct the slab into the desired form (11). I often paddle corners to round and soften them, and leave the seams showing to avoid smearing the colored clay when making attachments. Add a base if needed (for example for a cylindrical vase form). The piece is then bisque fired and glaze fired (12).

When working with the pinched method, start with a piece of the layered block. I slice the sides off to expose the cross-section, flip them around and reattach them so the clay is a round ball. After pinching out the form, I shape, carve and cut the top, all in a way that follows the lines of colors, taking advantage of the organic nature of the process.

Throwing with layered colored clay will result in swirls. To take it further, faceting and carving a wheel-thrown colored clay vessel will add more dimension and interest.

My work is bisque-fired, some pieces are glazed just on the inside with a clear celadon base glaze and then all pieces are fired to cone 10 in a reduction atmosphere. The resulting unglazed, colored-clay surface is smooth, vitreous, and completely washable.



**7** Sketch the shapes and lines that will be carved on the surface with a dull wooden tool. **8** Carve into the soft, colored clay with a small loop tool. It is by carving into the layered clay and removing some of it that the striations below are revealed. **9** Cover the slab with a cloth and roll it flat. The cloth keeps the rolling pin from sticking to the clay and keeps the carved lines from closing in on themselves. Thus, the carved areas are brought to the surface. **10** Use a metal rib to press and smooth the surface, sealing up any cracks. Cut the rim edge into the final shape. **11** Wrap the slab around a cardboard tube to make it into a cylindrical shape prior to standing it up and altering it, then attaching to a slab base. **12** *Curves and Waves* vase, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, slab-built colored porcelain, fired to cone 10 in gas reduction, 2015. **7–12** Photos: Al Karevy.

### Lifelong Inspiration

I grew up exposed to the craft world, and my work and life have been greatly influenced by observing the creative process. My mother, Lore Kadden Lindendorf, a refugee from Germany, was a weaver, fiber collage artist, and teacher of weaving and art history. She had the great fortune of studying with Anni and Josef Albers at Black Mountain College in North Carolina. There she was immersed in the college's avant-garde, experimental environment. As a child, I was riveted by her stories of that time. Black Mountain College also shares connections and educational values with The Putney School, a progressive boarding high school where I have brought a similar approach to my ceramics teaching since 1997.

To help close the loop with my mother's influence, the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center invited me to create a show where I reinterpreted my mother's fiber work with functional ceramic ware and free-form ceramic sculptures. In the spring of 2015 my mother's textiles and my response in clay opened as an exhibit titled "Dialogue: Lindendorf + Lindendorf." Through being challenged to make work for this show, I came to realize that my method of working with clay—the flow, the abstract quality, the images from nature, and the vivid colors—echo my mother's textile works. This endeavor has propelled me forward in my continued journey of using colored clay to convey my passion for movement and vibrancy.

**the author** Naomi Lindendorf works out of her studio in West Brattleboro, Vermont, and teaches ceramics at The Putney School. She also teaches colored clay workshops around the US. Learn more at [www.naomilindendorf.com](http://www.naomilindendorf.com).

