

An abstract ceramic artwork by Wayne Higby, featuring a dark background with large, irregular, layered shapes in deep red, teal, and white. The white areas have a cracked, glaze-like texture. The overall composition is layered and textured, suggesting a complex, multi-dimensional space.

Infinite Place

THE CERAMIC ART OF
WAYNE HIGBY

ARNOLDSCHÉ

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WAYNE HIGBY



Carla Coch
Helen W. Drutt English
Tanya Harrod
Peter Held
Wayne Higby
Mary Drach McInnes
Henry M. Sayre
Ezra Shales

ARNOLDSCHÉ

ASU Art Museum
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

To my children, Myles and Sarah,
and to my grandchildren, the three Os:
Olivia, Oscar, and Owen

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Arizona State University Art Museum, Tempe,
Wayne Higby, Alfred Station, and the authors

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Wayne Higby, raku-firing, artist's studio, Alfred Station,
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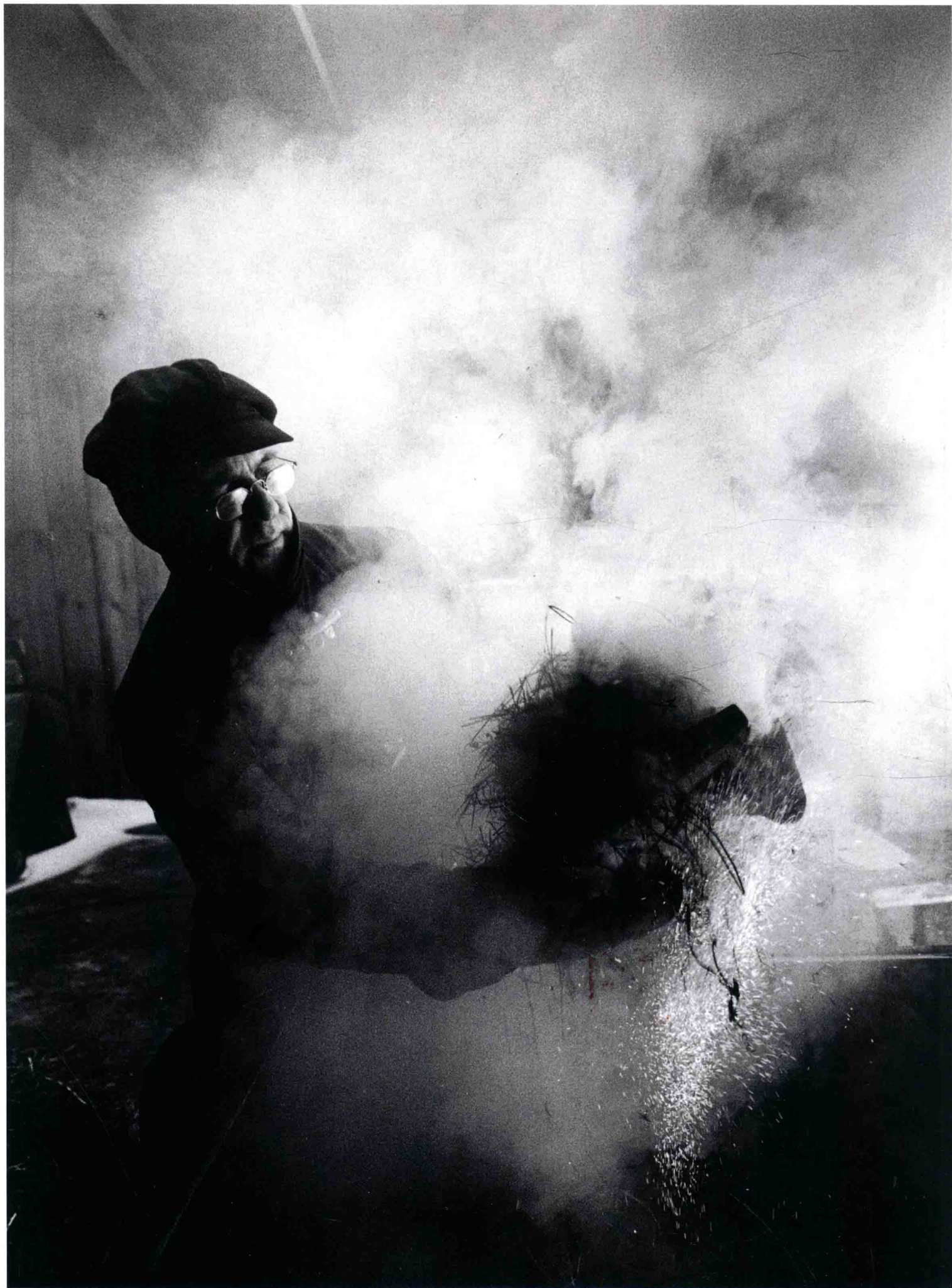
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Reading Public Museum, Reading, Pennsylvania
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Philadelphia Art Alliance, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
May 15–August 3, 2014
Racine Art Museum, Racine, Wisconsin
September 21, 2014–January 4, 2015
Memorial Art Museum, Rochester, New York
January 25–May 29, 2015

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The Man within Himself

HELEN W. DRUTT ENGLISH

What shapes the lives of others—their careers, travels, passions, associations to people, responses to art and nature? What makes a child of Colorado nurtured by a Western American landscape and horses, living a meditative existence in his mind, become, within himself, the man who loves China. For China was to become Wayne's Parnassus and Elysian Fields rolled into one.

As a young man in Colorado, riding his horse through the hills, Wayne Higby embarked on a solitary search. In 1963, the opportunity to travel presented itself, and his Grand Tour began—the lure of exposure to highly developed cultures and a journey indispensable to his education. Exposed to the Heraklion Museum Minoan pottery during his visit to Crete, Wayne's perception of art changed—as did his career mission from law to art.

In a flashback: My journey with Wayne began in 1973, when I encountered a unique landscape box in an exhibition entitled *East Coast Clay*, at Moore College of Art, in Philadelphia. Smitten, I wrote him a letter, inviting him to join my newly formed eponymous gallery in Philadelphia, which was committed to the resurgence of the craft movement. Upon the occasion of his first solo exhibition at the Helen Drutt Gallery, Wayne insisted on, and was responsible for, the wall of shelves being removed. This cast aside the assortment of his peers' pots—a grand decision that freed the gallery from a craft-shop mentality and forever changed my commitment in the eyes of the art world.

Countless exhibition opportunities have occurred since that time, ranging from nine solo exhibitions (1976–96) to group exhibitions. Interspersed with studio visits, we have explored his childhood through trips to the most significant sites of his life, as well as travels from Alfred, Reading, Colorado, and Philadelphia to Europe, Asia, and Scandinavia. We have indulged in intense personal dialogue, in seven a.m. telephone calls, that concerned the role of the gallery, family matters, the destruction of beauty, and shared concepts in response to career moves that included the selection of authors for essays. These conversations, as close to the ones that Kahnweiler and Picasso enjoyed, often can develop between an artist and his dealer friend. There were times I felt my brain was being pushed.

Among the roads traveled together we have been to Atlanta, Georgia, in 1983, at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference, when Wayne was introduced to author Philip Rawson as we were plotting the republication of *Ceramics* (1990); when Wayne, artist Mark Burns, and I were on the road to Nara we reenacted the *Road to Zanzibar*, with Bing Crosby (Wayne), Dorothy Lamour (Helen), and Bob Hope (Mark). From Nara, Japan, we traveled to Reading, Pennsylvania, within one year. The hills of Reading leading to the Japanese temple brought the mileage distance closer, as we encountered Arrow International, Inc., the future home of Wayne's initial involvement with architectural installations.

Memorable moments included sitting in Marlin Miller's boardroom at Arrow International, discussing the forthcoming commission of *Intangible Notch* (1995), when it was suggested leaving the alcove and turning the wall so that the work could metaphorically join with the natural landscape seen through the large windows perpendicular to the wall. This allowed the exterior to be part of the interior. Can we forget the exhibition of *Landscape as Memory*, at the Museum

of Art and Design, Finland, in 1991, continuing the ceramic dialogue between Helsinki and Alfred? Long walks along childhood paths in Colorado, before his exhibition was planned for the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center, in 2001, made certain that I understood the influences of nature that informed the work. I also attempted to understand what formed this artist as we sat in the Alfred studio contemplating decisions about the porcelain slabs, influenced by Chinese abstract images on stone, and the decisions to remove the carved teak frame and hold the porcelain palettes with porcelain rocks.

Epistolary communication blurred the division between public and private from 1973 to 2002, when the letters ended, interrupted by the advancement of email, which coincided with the closing of the Helen Drutt Gallery. This was also a time when Higby's creation of large projects unified with architectural sites and enlisted private support from a patron rather than the support of public institutions and private collections for the acquisition of singular works of art.

Was it November 2005 that Dirk Allgaier and I journeyed to Alfred and the introduction to both Wayne Higby and Anne Currier was initiated? The seeds had been planted and the connection between publisher and artist was made. *EarthCloud* was published in 2007, by Arnoldsche; it documented the creation of the ceramic mural scape as it unified with the Kallmann McKinnel and Wood architecture of the Miller Performing Arts Building at Alfred.

There were many letters requesting meetings with Peter Held until that day, during the NCECA conference in 2010, when it actually occurred. Wayne was invited to join Peter at my home for lunch. The dining room, nearly dedicated to Higby's works, acted as a catalyst for further discussions between the curator and artist, resulting in this retrospective.

What is the role of a gallery director? Not to simply place works in public and private collections but to assist in molding a career and assuring that documentation of the artist's work will occur with dignity. I marveled at Wayne's transitions from sculptural forms as the large bowls thrown in Alfred were simplified. The movement from reality to abstraction coincided with "leaving" the object with the advent of major mural commissions.

Wayne first traveled to China in 1991. Things seen, heard, and smelled fused within him as he emotionally attached himself to that land. He responded to the notion that conceiving the earth as a living body and capturing that energy gives visual expression in Chinese paintings. The natural landscape is deemed sacred. Higby had begun to absorb those ideals as he created the *Lake Powell Memory* series, culminating in 1996—mystical investigations into the changing atmosphere of a special site for Wayne.

The concept of meditation and affiliation with Buddhist beliefs led to the erection of his teahouse, isolated from his studio and the main Alfred residence of Western Wayne; it sits on the edge of a secluded pond that itself emits an aura of serenity. A private place for a very private man who assumes an Asian sensibility as it moves slowly into his Western body.

Wayne joins other prominent writers, artists, politicians, and scientists whose initial journeys to China in the twentieth century changed their lives. Among them were economist-writer Harold Isaacs, Joseph Needham, David Gamble, Henry Luce, Pearl Buck, Thornton Wilder, and Richard Nixon. When you go to another place for the first time, do you establish an idea of what to see, where to go, what to study—what will occur within yourself? Phenomenological attractiveness toward China has produced another Higby, different from the one who roamed through the trails of an American mountain range. Wayne has poured into his work the soul and manners of a China that no longer exists, as he pursues the technical advances of a China newly discovered.

T. S. Eliot, in describing Henry Moore, asserts that art is, to him, the natural outcome of an activity in which the hands are as important as intelligence and intuition. He speculates about these artists who, through their achievements, become an exemplar to the next generation. Wayne is among them.

Geographies of a Mind

PETER HELD

It is a pity indeed to travel and not get this essential sense of landscape values. You do not need a sixth sense for it. It is there if you just close your eyes and breathe softly through your nose; you will hear the whispered message, for all landscapes ask the same question in the same whisper. "I am watching you—are you watching yourself in me?"

Lawrence Durrell, 1969¹

Take a road that never ends
The rivers are long and piled high with rocks
The streams are wide and choked with grass
It's not the rain that makes the moss thick
And it's not the wind that makes the pines moan
Who can get past the tangles of the world
And sit with me in the clouds.

Han Shan (Cold Mountain), circa 750²

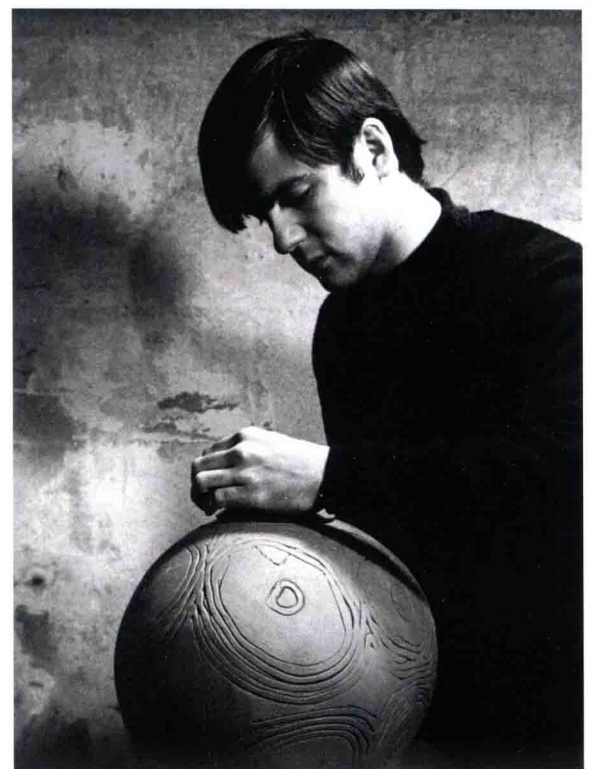
Wayne Higby is a consummately self-aware artist whose reflections on his own work are at once poetic, profound, and unassailable. The arc of his career tests one's grasp of how mind, space, and landscape coalesce. Early ascension placed him at the forefront of the American ceramics movement during an era of explosive growth and originality. It would be too simplistic to define him only as an innovator of raku-firing, although his iconic raku bowl forms made during the 1970s and 1980s are considered to be his signature works, his technique never gave primacy over content. As his story unfolds and as his breadth of work demonstrates, a broader perspective is needed for an artist equally committed to studio practice, and as well as his role as an educator, writer, and world traveler.

Defining Moments

Growing up in the foothills of Colorado Springs, Higby embraced the vast landscape of the American West. An only child, he found solace, joy, and mystery within the great outdoors with its craggy rock outcroppings, hidden caves, and majestic views of Pikes Peak. An acute observer with an intense curiosity, he found passion in youthful activities: horse-back riding, high-school theater, and the arts. Classes taken at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center throughout his childhood provided an early outlet for his latent artistic talents. As he neared college, his father, a prominent local attorney involved in politics, tried to steer him toward a profession in law, but his son was doubtful this would be his chosen path. In 1961 he enrolled at the University of Colorado Boulder, where he concluded he was ill-suited to follow his father's vocation. Pursuing his interest in the arts, he became an art major with the idea of being a painter.

In his junior year he took six months to travel with family friends, visiting Japan, Southeast Asia, India, Greece, and southern Europe. For someone who had led a sheltered childhood, it became shockingly apparent in Calcutta, India, that humanity was far broader than first imagined. A self-imposed four-day quarantine in his hotel room questioned his role in the world. In hindsight, the experience propelled him toward a vision of humanity and art, which paved his commitment to teaching.

The group then traveled to Greece, which proved to be another epiphany that would encourage a lifetime in clay. Standing entranced in front of cases of Minoan pottery, Higby began to grasp the integration of painted motifs on three-dimensional forms. Ceramics never entered into his conversations with the art faculty prior to this experience, and when he returned, he sought out George Woodman, one of his professors who taught painting, drawing, and philosophy of art. Trying to assimilate and grasp the import of his enthusiasm for pottery, he was soon connected to George's wife, the potter Betty Woodman. No better guide was possible, and Higby focused on ceramics during his last year at university (fig. 1). Meanwhile a visiting artist at Boulder, Manuel Neri, imparted new perspectives on the burgeoning West Coast ceramic movement, revealing the work of Peter Voulkos, Henry Takemoto, and



1 Wayne Higby, studio, 1968, Omaha, Nebraska.



2 *Objects USA* exhibition, 1969. Wayne Higby's jar far right.

John Mason, among others. Higby was introduced to Paul Soldner, who came to the "Fire House" for a raku workshop (Betty Woodman taught ceramics for the City of Boulder Parks and Recreation Department; the facility was a defunct fire station).

Wanting to continue his studies in clay, the Woodmans, along with potters Jim and Nan McKinnell, urged Higby to consider studying with Soldner at Scripps College; Soldner was taking a sabbatical leave the following year, so an alternative was sought. Higby's second choice was the University of Michigan, where he studied with the iconoclast Fred Bauer, who was working on his slab-constructed sarcophagi series, and John Stephenson, a more calming presence in the studio. During his graduate studies, Higby focused on the evaluation and absorption of historical pottery: Minoan, Greek, Chinese, and Islamic ware held a strong fascination after his world travels. He continued his interest in raku-firing and experimented with Egyptian paste (a self-glazing, low-firing clay body) as a means to integrate surface and form. Visual beauty, a term

many artists shun today, was embraced by Higby as he infused the past as he developed his individual artistic vision.

After completing his MFA, Higby was hired at the University of Nebraska in Omaha, where he taught from 1968 to 1970, followed by a three-year stint at the Rhode Island School of Design. This was an ideal time to be an emerging ceramicist, and Higby's work gained widespread recognition and acclaim. In 1969 he participated in the *Young Americans* exhibition held at the Museum of Contemporary Crafts (now the Museum of Arts and Design), New York, and in *Objects: USA*, and at the age of thirty, the Museum of Contemporary Crafts presented the solo exhibition *Wayne Higby/Ceramic Landscapes* (fig. 2). This meteoric trajectory not only provided validation and exposure for the artist but cemented his passion for teaching.

A Journey through Forms

Higby's boxes, bowls, and sculptures have been widely interpreted as three-dimensional landscapes in the tradition of American landscape art—an interpretation the artist patently and repeatedly refutes. Like the nineteenth-century luminist painters of the Hudson River School whom Higby greatly admires, the artist engages landscape as "the panoramic outer membrane of an inner manifestation of unity—a silent, unseen, unknowable resonance of coherence."³ These opulent radiant landscapes evoked nostalgic, or elegiac, emotive personal connections with the past, in contrast to a topographer's matter-of-fact objective recordings of the present.

In Higby's creative palette, space is not bounded by the vessel's walls but stretches without limit as far as the viewer's eye and imagination will allow. Just as a model-maker fits a ship into a bottle, Higby, with a spatial mastery uniquely his own, nestles buttes, canyons, rivers ... an entire cosmos in a bowl. Peering over the rim, the result is at once immense and intimate, horizonless and sheltered.

His early works, *Inlaid Plates* (1967 and 1968) and *Inlaid Luster Jar* (1968), were inspired by his multi-continent odyssey. The artist's eye for pattern coupled with his already deft craftsmanship elevates these novice objects, which in their timelessness marry decorative motifs of the past with the burgeoning eclecticism of their era. Swirling spirals, found in numerous Megalithic world cultures, are evocative of the Minoan octopus motifs the artist first viewed at the Heraklion Museum on Crete, emphasizing the circularity of form, creating a unified and abstracted whole. Squat in profile with a pregnant midsection and bisected quadrants, *Inlaid Luster Jar* (cat. no. 01) successfully unifies form and surface, carrying the viewer's eye by the repetition of pattern and its monochromatic copper-green palette. Although Higby salt-fired the first of the plates (contemporary salt-firing was still in its infancy and experimental stage, and hardly any potter escaped its allure during this time period), raku was to be his preferred firing method and would remain so for the next two decades.

In 1969 Higby traveled throughout the American Southwest, the West Coast, and the plains of Montana, which would further alter the course of his art and, ultimately, his life. This shift can be seen in *Partly Cloudy* (1970), one of the artist's first sculptural boxes decorated with natural imagery—clouds, mountains, sea. In this piece Higby reclaims the landscapes of his youth and begins to develop, through an ingenious combination of reduction and oxidation, the palette—turquoise, sea green, mottled rust, stony gray, and creamy white—that would become one of the signatures of his body of work. An ongoing interest in architecture and organized structure informed the box series, a format to harness nature's expansiveness into a contained shape (cat. no. 10).

For Higby, innovation in art was never about creating new forms but rather forging new connections, and for the next two decades he would conjure, bend, and unfurl space within traditional pottery forms. In "boxes" such as *Calico Canyon Overlook* (1976) and *Orange Grass Marsh* (1976), the vessel walls grow bulbous, the edges soften, until the form appears almost as an inverted bowl. Higby had only to turn the bowl right-side up to attain the "infinite space"—in the artist's own words, "space beyond the physical"⁴—that would seal his legacy as a ceramics innovator. Both works have irregular cut bases, reinforcing the ruggedness of nature itself. Inherent in the firing process, the variegated coloration and crackled glazes coupled with smoky raw clay surfaces elevate the visual drama of each work. The lumpen cloud formations serve as handles floating in space, acting as organic counterpoints to the more formalist base forms.

Over a decade, his box series would become far more elaborate in both form and imagery. *Tower Lands Winter* (1988, cat. no. 30), a tour de force, is perhaps Higby's culminating achievement within this series. Five interlocking lidded boxes are conjoined at right angles and, with their sheer vertical rise, provide a true sense of the expansiveness of a high desert plateau, on the magnitude of the broad range of the American West. With both ends contoured and eroded into gentle slopes, they bracket the center landmass, anchoring the work. Here, the artist works his illusionistic bag of tricks with the white ground contrasting the iron-streaked sandstone cliffs, projecting and receding space, pulling the viewer's attention into an imaginary center. Unfolding like Chinese screen paintings, a topographical storyline bleeds from one container to the next. The meandering blue waters zigzag through canyon lands, unifying interlocking motifs and color fields.

1 Lawrence Durrell, *Spirit of Place: Letters and Essays on Travel*, ed. Alan G. Thomas (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1969), p. 158.

2 Han Shan (Cold Mountain), *The Collected Poems of Cold Mountain*, trans. Bill Porter (Red Pine) (Port Townsend, Washington: Copper Canyon Press, 2000), p. 57.

3 Wayne Higby, "Reflection", 2012, this publication, p. 173.

4 Mary Drach McInnes, interview with Wayne Higby, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, April 12–14, 2004, p. 53.

Intimate and Immense Bowls

During the mid-1970s, soon after arriving at Alfred University, Higby started in earnest to work with the large bowl form that is both universal and classic. Deeply committed to pottery with all its historical references and human associations, which he has poetically written about and spoken passionately on for decades, the concave and convex walls with their soft sweeping ovoid rims provide ample volume to mine his interplay of real and illusionary space. Freed from terra firma, the artist's works distill memory, feeling, observation, and perception into a unified vision.

Return to White Mesa (1978), with its thin flaring walls and eerily limitless imagery, attests to the magnitude and power of Higby's breakthrough. Its bone-chilling associations, conjuring stark winter vistas found on high desert plateaus, succinctly capture an austere beauty and remoteness. One can almost hear the wind wailing through sheer-walled canyons. His tentative investigations structuring space through blocks of color and his remarkable ability to convey a continuity between

inner and outer landforms belie not only the inventiveness of his work to come but also create a new vocabulary of the vessel itself. *Shelter Rocks Bay* (1980, cat. no. 19) is dominated by monolithic outcroppings of boulders, contrasted against a coral ground. The sweeping rim, accentuated by flowing waters, magnifies the inner volume of the bowl, providing the viewer with a freeze-frame in time and space.

He remarked during this period, "In my work, it is the commonplace bowl that serves as the known point of departure, the starting point for chains of associated memory. As an artist, I am in pursuit of a connection or series of connections between my emotional attraction to ceramics and my responsiveness to landscape."⁵

Throughout the 1980s and into the early 1990s, the humble bowl would grow into something iconic in Higby's hands—unbounded, mythical, shape-shifting. Just as Higby's "boxes" refused to remain boxes in a conventional sense, so the artist's bowls would begin to take on the contours of the landscapes they evoked. Higby served on the board of trustees at the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts for many years. Time spent on coastal Maine with its rocky shores and turbulent ocean was a dissimilar landscape from the Rocky Mountains of his youth (fig. 4). Beginning with pieces such as *Chimerical Bay* (1988, cat. no. 20) and becoming increasingly topographical and organic in later works such as *Midsummer's Bay*, *Emerald Tide Beach*, and *Storm Water Bay* (all 1991), a raw physicality not seen in previous works is evident. The light, too, becomes diffused, softer, making the clean hard edges of the past give way to more robust surfaces. Blue washes over a white ground capture the aqueous movement of the ocean or hint at a horizon dissolving into a shimmering haze.



3 Study for *Green Shore Landscape Bowl*, 1987. Colored pencil on paper, 18 × 23 inches. Collection of the artist.

5 Wayne Higby, "Innovation: A Matter of Connections," *The Studio Potter* 12, no. 2 (1984), pp. 20–22.

6 Wayne Higby: *Thresholds* (Buffalo, New York: Burchfield Penney Art Center, 2003), p. 5.

7 Mary Drach McInnes, interview with Wayne Higby, Smithsonian Archives of American Art, Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, April 12–14, 2004, p. 57.

Thresholds

To many observers, Higby's move away from traditional pottery forms and subsequent embrace of abstract sculpture may have seemed a break of monumental proportion from the rudiments that first made possible his spatial feats. To the artist himself, the cutting and moving of materials, beginning with the last of his sculptural bowls, led him quite naturally to the tile—the “building block” that continues to inform his work today. Inspired in part by his first corporate commission—*Intangible Notch* (1995, cat. no. 41) for Arrow International, based in Reading, Pennsylvania—Higby rethought his approach, working within a fixed architectural space on a scale unfamiliar with his past studio practice.

Lacuna Rock (1999), the earliest (and smallest) earthenware tile sculpture, introduces Higby's use of the threshold or gateway, a teasing opening through which light and intimation beckon the viewer to continue the journey. A freestanding slab of clay, *Lacuna Rock* conveys the loneliness of a twilight eve in this deserted landscape; an estuary snakes behind massive rock formations with its punctured opening, an empty space where imagination reigns.

Later earthenware sculptures, such as *Green River Gorge* (cat. no. 38) and *Eidolon Creek* (both dated 2002) place the gateway within a more textural and geologically traumatic agglomeration of outcroppings and ruptures. Higby still claimed to be striving during this period to establish “a zone of quiet coherence.”⁶ In the presence of these torn and enduring microcosms, the viewer may indeed feel that nature and human emotion have indivisibly fused. By extending that moment of passage, a slight delay, only for an instant, provides one that moment of insight.

Material Matters

In yet another seminal trip that would broaden his mindscape and prompt the series of porcelain tile sculptures titled *Lake Powell Memory*, the artist visited Jingdezhen, China in 1992. Higby had never worked in porcelain before and reflected, “What would I make? Well, the first thing you should do is forget everything you know about ceramics; just pretend you know nothing.”⁷ In the end, the artist took an approach at once iconoclastic and humble: he cut the clay into six- to eight-inch thick slabs and allowed the intense heat of the kiln-firing to crack and ravage the sculptures. To the surfaces of later iterations he added a *hua*—a subtle incised design inspired by a 1993 trip to Lake Powell, whose flooded canyon walls had left an indelible imprint—and then glazed the entire sculpture in classic celadon.

The result can be viewed in *Lake Powell Memory—Cliffs III* (1995), *Lake Powell Memory—Winter Rain* (1998), and *Lake Powell Memory—Recollection Falls* (1996), sculptures that belie their modest scale and seem to rise like massive rock faces shrouded in mist (cat. nos. 42, 48, 49). The strength of these



4 Haystack, 1990. Ink, brush on paper. 8¼ × 9½ inches. Collection of the artist.