



## JOSEPHINE HEILPERN | FOUNDER, RECREATION CENTER

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*"It's a really incredible and beautiful thing for me to think about: I'm now a part of the history of this clay, this relationship between the human and the earth."*

Josephine Heilpern is the kind of person that can make you excited about clay. As she gleefully guided us through her ceramics studio, *Recreation Center* — a flower-painted former auto body shop-turned-shared artists' space — we found ourselves fascinated by even the most minute details of her process: the speckles that form when the glaze interacts with clay in her kiln, for instance, or the subtle differences in each piece she creates.

It was a similar fascination that attracted Josephine to ceramics in the first place. After graduating from Cooper Union with a yet-unfulfilled urge to create functional art objects, Josephine found her calling in an unlikely setting: a farm with an on-site studio. The experience of eating food she grew off of plates she made by hand was a crucial turning point for herself as an artist. "It was the first time that I had felt something for real. It felt natural," she says.

Josephine has now been crafting mugs, pitchers, and other everyday objects by hand at her self-run ceramics studio since 2012. "I wanted to make things that were functional, could be used every day, and were affordable — to me, that's really important," she says. Nearly every single piece in *Recreation Center's* collection adheres to this ideology: simple patterns and practical design, functionality above all else. With a small nod to the influential *Hampton group*, each piece is designed with the beauty of the clay itself in mind, sticking to a small but bold array of colors and simple, playful patterns.

For the sake of our curiosity, Josephine invited us to watch her work step-by-step through the process of creating her *Doc Mug* — "Cooking show style!" she joked as she tied on her apron — from a lump of clay to something to sip your morning coffee out of. Read on for a step-by-step look at Josephine's process:



#### STEP 1: THROWING.

"This is where my muscles come from," jokes Josephine, dropping a 50-pound cardboard box of clay onto the table. She uses a piece of wire to slice off a section of clay and begins the wedging process – kneading the clay to make it soft, pliable, and free of air pockets and bubbles.

Josephine takes a ball of this clay and places it on her spinning pottery wheel, quickly dipping her hands in a small trick-or-treating bucket filled with water. "Throwing's my least favorite process," she says as the wet clay spins through her hands, quickly beginning to take the form of a mug. "I think it's just the messiness. I can't use my hands. I can't look at my phone – I'm just covered in clay the whole time."



"Once they're done, I'll put them all on a tray like this to dry overnight. These," she says as she pulls out another tray of semi-dried mugs, "are now leather hard", so they're at the point where I can trim them."

*\*leather-hard (or unfired pottery) dried and hardened enough to be trimmed or decorated with slip but not hard enough to be fired.*

#### STEP 2: TRIMMING.

"This is when things get closer to becoming finalized. The bottom doesn't look that great right now – so this step is when I correct the shape of the object." Using a sharp tool, she carefully trims the raw edges of the mug-in-process, still rapidly spinning on the pottery wheel. "This is actually one of my favorite parts. I like how the tool digs into the clay – it makes things feel really complete all of the sudden."



#### STEPS 3 & 4: CRAFTING AND ATTACHING THE HANDLE, WAXING/GLAZING.

"I use an extruder – which is basically a big play-dough spaghetti maker – to make my handles." She trims, shapes, and attaches the leather-hard handles to the body of the mug. After coating the base of it with wax, she dips the entire mug in a bucket of glaze, which dries into a smooth, shiny finish.





#### STEP 5: DOTTING @ BAKING.

"These are all done by hand. I'll usually line up a ton of mugs and do it factory-style." Holding the base of the mug with one hand, she begins dotting the inside of the mug with a paintbrush. "You can see that there's no pattern here. I'm just kind of going for it - they're all going to be different."

"I don't want to make the same thing. I'm a human, not a machine."





The mug goes into Recreation Center's electric kiln, where it bakes at over two thousand degrees. "Clay is unbelievable. It can get hot," she explains. "There's metal that can't get this hot -- it'll melt. This is some resistant stuff."



#### STEP 6: THE FINISHING TOUCHES.

One of the tell-tale signs of a Recreation Center mug is a brightly-colored rubber handle, which Josephine achieves by dipping the mug into a tub of industrial-grade rubber paint. To Josephine, the neon yellow rubber isn't just about adding a juxtaposing color into the mix. It's also about the unexpected rubber texture of the handle, a contrast to the rest of the clay mug. "It makes you think of the object you're using," she says. "When you put your lips to this mug, you feel the texture of the clay, the glossy texture of the glaze, the texture of the handle. There's a lot of feeling in this."





Josephine's commitment to every part of the creative process was something that truly stuck with us. Each step of the process invoked a story as she walked us through it – from working with a woodfire kiln to clay-digging in Maine – and it's clear that every part of creating these ceramic pieces is meaningful to Josephine. And after watching her craft something even as simple as a single mug, it's clear that it's more than just a mug. It's a little piece of Recreation Center and its commitment to simple and beautiful design – and by extension, a little piece of herself as well.

[LEARN MORE ABOUT JOSEPHINE @ RECREATION CENTER](#)

*Image to right: (L-R) Mug, Courtesy of Josephine Holgers, Recreation Center*



*Side image: Josephine wears a "Dove" apron. Artistic arrangement by Stephanie Tatham.*



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