



Week II: June 11-15, 2018

Animal Portrait Sculpting and Mold Making with Wesley Wright

By Jacquita Beddo

This review covers the second week of my “All Access Pass” adventure. The “Animal Portrait Sculpting and Mold Making with Wesley Wright” workshop. Due to the purchase of the Santa Fe Clay All Access Pass, I didn’t have to make a difficult choice between workshops I wanted to attend in June. [Read about my decision to purchase the All Access Pass in part one of this series.](#)

As many of you know, I often put jack rabbit ears on my figures, so my plan was to do a human face with rabbit ears. However, Wesley convinced me to actually make a realistic animal. Everyone else in the workshop brought reference pictures of their chosen animal. I had pictures of jack rabbits that I have collected over time, so that made the decision of what animal I would sculpt.



The interesting thing about Wesley Wright’s approach to teaching was several videos he showed initially with time lapsed pictures of sculpting an animal. Knowing where you are headed before you begin was truly a valuable tool. After getting this overview of the process, we began a whirlwind of activity. The goal was to make a press mold that would be reused.

We had three full days to produce a finished sculpture. Wesley’s approach was practical. He gave us tools to make sure we were keeping features such as eyes, nose/snout, and ears in proper proportions. His approach was much like a drawing class: measuring how big something is by other portions of the animal. I’m familiar with the proportions of a human face, but not for a jack rabbit, so this was a bit out of my comfort zone. For instance, where there is one eye width between eyes on a human, we were guided to measure how many eye widths are between the eyes of our chosen animal. The same for a nose or snout, etc. We were encouraged to keep the portions in scale for the animal we were sculpting. Constantly measuring allowed us to keep the piece on track. One of Wesley’s catch phrases was that we needed to learn to see. I have looked at jack rabbit ears, but Wesley encouraged me to “see” them. I discovered there is a difference.



Wesley demonstrated his techniques by sculpting a walrus, which shows sculpting flesh. The rest of the workshop participants sculpted furred animals, and this gave him the chance to speak about different scenarios and demonstrate various techniques. He emphasized the importance of rendering the underlying musculature of the animals. This is where my last-minute decision on a jack rabbit was difficult. Others in the class found images for several angles of their animal, and including pictures of their skeletal and muscle structure. That preparation was key. We were almost all working late on Wednesday to make sure we were ready for a long day of the mold making process on Thursday.





Thursday was pretty grueling. Patrick Kingshill worked as Wesley's assistant. He was invaluable keeping up with all of us mixing plaster for all our molds. Most of the attendees made three-part molds, but a couple of us that had to cut the ears off and make separate molds of the ears separate from a two-part mold of the head. Since I did a larger than life jack rabbit, my ear molds were pretty substantial. Making the molds was tedious and hard work, especially working in the sun outside to avoid plaster contamination in the regular clay studio.



We prepared our piece for mold making by first drawing lines on our sculpture to indicate where

each section would be, always trying to minimize the prospects of undercuts. As we were sculpting, Wesley encouraged us not to sculpt to keep from having undercuts to give a true rendering of the animal. After drawing our sections, you then isolate the first section you are going to apply plaster to with clay “walls.” The plaster will need to be at least 2” thick. We also press in registration marks. Wesley warned us these needed to be soft indentations; deep ones where you push your finger in can later break off.



Wesley taught us the “island method” for mixing plaster to get the plaster to water ratio correct. This consists of starting with a bucket of water and adding plaster slowly until an island of plaster forms in the bucket that doesn’t melt away. Plaster should always be added to water, not the other way around. After you have an island of plaster that doesn’t melt away, you let that sit for a few minutes to hydrate the plaster. Wesley recommended that we mix plaster for 120 stokes, but the idea here is that you make sure it’s well mixed, trying not to splash and create bubbles in your mix. This agitation of the plaster also speeds up the chemical reaction that causes it to harden.





The plaster is mixed and ready when it coats your hand and little wrinkles are covered. Flicking plaster onto the piece (which is quite messy) is a good way to keep from getting bubbles on the detailed surface. You flick plaster until the surface of the original is covered. Then you stir the remaining plaster again to get it to start to thicken and then start building up the plaster so that you cover the section you are working on two inches thick. The plaster starts out the consistency of yogurt, then pudding, then gets thicker. When the plaster becomes less “workable” you smooth the surface of the mold. Once it sets and is hard enough, take the clay walls down and prepare the next section of the mold. You can reuse the clay you used for the walls as mold clay, but this clay can’t be used for ceramic pieces because it’s been contaminated with plaster. Before mixing plaster for the next section use something to prevent the plaster from sticking to plaster for a release. This can be Murphy’s Oil soap, or a product made for this purpose, like pure lube.



We let the mold cure overnight. The next day we opened the mold both to get the original out and to have access to the mold. One tip Wesley shared was to roll the mold around on the floor to get it to start opening. Then we gently and carefully pried the pieces apart. This can be quite scary because you don’t want to damage the mold you have spent hours making. We were warned on numerous occasions that sometimes you lose the original in this process but everyone in the class had their original survive except for one ear, so we felt like this was a huge success.



The last day of the workshop (Friday) was spent getting the original ready to fire by hollowing the piece. If we had time we could then press clay into the mold to make a second piece. Most of the

class left with two pieces to fire and a mold, quite a haul for one workshop! This was a fabulous class where we accomplished an extraordinary amount in five days. We made some wonderful friends and I wholeheartedly recommend this workshop for the mold-making experience and sculpting an animal. I love my jack rabbit and can't wait to find more ways to use this mold.



[Learn more about Wesley Wright's ceramic art.](#)

I had to take the third week off out of sheer exhaustion, but I will write another review of the final workshop in June at Santa Fe Clay: "Rendering the Human Form With Clayton Keyes."

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