



# Workshop: Unfired Clay Sculpture and Sustainable Ceramics

By Judy Nelson-Moore

The promotion of sustainable ceramics is a desire to protect the natural environment and increase the quality of life for ourselves, others and our descendants. Ceramics is traditionally a craft that uses resources: Emits carbon in the process of firing; uses chemicals, some toxic, in the formulation of glazes; discards excess clay and glaze materials; uses water to prepare materials and clean tools; and puts discarded work into the landfill. There is discussion among clay artists about how to reduce the impact of environmental impacts in the practice of the ceramic arts.

Last Spring, I was talking to Barbara Campbell, the president of the El Rito Arts Association, about the development of arts programs, including ceramics, at the largely unused campus of the Northern New Mexico College in El Rito. This is a project that actively engages people in the El Rito community as well as administration at Northern New Mexico College. It occurred to us, since the ceramic studio would have to be developed from the ground up, that we could take the opportunity to develop the ceramic studio with the idea of sustainability from the beginning.

As a beginning “volley” in the effort to develop the arts programs, we decided to offer a workshop on unfired ceramic sculpture. After all, [concerns for reducing carbon impact of firing could be supplanted by...not firing at all!](#) We wanted to have a way to engage the community in the idea of an arts program on the campus, start the discussion of sustainability, and provide a fun, creative experience. Because of my long experience in paper clay sculpting, Barbara asked me to lead the workshop. The receipt of a grant from the New Mexico Potters and Clay Artists help fund this initial workshop, with the College providing the facilities.

The location of the workshop on the El Rito Campus of Northern New Mexico College is a beautiful setting. The campus has been largely unused for several years following the move of the offices and classrooms to Espanola. However, the current president, Rick Bailey, has plans to revitalize the El Rito Campus and return it to active use. One part of this plan is to work with the El Rito Arts Association to develop an arts program, with studios, workshops and classes.

The workshop was held August 9-12, 2018. Five participants and I met in the “haz mat” building on the El Rito campus where the college had prepared a room with tables for us. I brought in clay, tools and surfacing materials to support several techniques. We dug in for three full days of exploring the materials and our own creativity.

All five participants were very enthusiastic and included Doris Fields, Jody Martinez, Martha Stevens, Nancy Brandt, and Anna Bush Crews. Each reported getting a lot from the workshop in the way of specific knowledge, inspiration, and time and space to explore their own creativity. They freely shared their unique and beautiful backgrounds and approaches which increased the richness of the experience for us all. Some participants had clay experience before and some did not, but all learned and had fun with unfired clay.

Pictures taken at the workshop, seen in this slide show, can describe the experience better than any words:

This slideshow requires JavaScript.

At the end of the workshop, the El Rito community was invited to a reception where we showed

works that we had made and answered questions about the workshop experience. Here are pictures taken at the reception:

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Unfired left, fired right

As it turns out, my thinking on unfired clay has come to mean something different to me than it did when I started. In the beginning, making unfired clay sculpture and offering a workshop in this method was a way to incorporate two ideas into the work: Using materials that would otherwise be destroyed by the fire, and reduce the amount of firing, thereby reducing the carbon impact in the environment. As I prepared for the workshop, I began to view making unfired clay works as a testament to fired ceramics. Each piece of sculpture, I feel, should be considered based on its genesis and concept whether it should be fired or not. If it is to be fired...there should be a reason for it...a hardness, a surface quality, a glaze, or a shape that requires fired clay. If it is not to be fired, there should also be a reason for it...a surface quality, incorporating materials that would burn out, or a planned wearing away as part of the design. These are some of the reasons for an unfired sculpture, in addition to the desire to reduce firing. While looking for other artists who work with unfired clay on the internet, I discovered that many of these artists do not come from a fired-clay background, as I do, and maybe that enables them to think more openly about the unfired potential of clay material.

The use of paper clay is ideal for the making of unfired clay sculptures. The addition of paper pulp to regular clay increases the unfired dry strength of the clay to the point that, properly handled, no firing is necessary. This has been demonstrated beautifully by other artists working with unfired clay sculpture. Two of these of particular note are US Artist [Rebecca Hutchinson](#) and Australian artist [Graham Hay](#). During the workshop, I demonstrated the strength of paper clay and participants made works of widely varied natures without restrictions of traditional clay building "rules" and fired stress concerns.

The workshop discussion of sustainability centered around increased awareness of how individual artists can change methods and practices that produce waste or reduce use of non-renewable resources. Our discussion is outlined in this slide presentation: [UnfiredClayWorkshopPowerPoint](#)

The National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) has formed a task force on sustainable ceramics. Here are two references worth investigating:

- NCECA panel on Sustainable Ceramics at 2017 NCECA Conference:  
<https://tinyurl.com/ya86hedv> (this is an NCECA iTunes podcast)
- Sustainable Ceramics book by Robert Harrison. Here is a review on the NCECA blog:  
<http://blog.nceca.net/sustainable-ceramics-by-robert-harrison>

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