

molding clay

PELLECHIO

artist cristina

Story by KATE CARTER Photographs by PAUL ROGERS

Katmandu. Wind River Range in Wyoming. The beaches at Tiverton, R.I. India's Gharwal region in the Himalayas. The Talkeetnas Mountains, Alaska. Vietnam, Cambodia, Argentina. Cristina Pellechio has traveled to all of these places, and their geographic extremes, as well as their cultural diversity, are what inspire the shapes and colors that emerge in her ceramics.

The term ceramics, in this case, might be somewhat misleading. What Cristina does with clay is to shape it into forms that are more sculptural than functional, more suited for walls than tables. For Cristina, clay is a three-dimensional canvas on which she applies complex layers of texture and color.



"Undoubtedly my work is influenced by the natural world and where I've lived in my life," she says. "My work is organic, full of intricate texture, detail, and lush color, with lots of patterns and repetition."

"I'm trying to push clay and its limits in a new direction, in an artful, non-traditional way," Cristina explains. Nothing is simple about what she creates. Her style is complex, alluring, methodic, meditative, and mesmerizing.

Cristina still remembers her introductory experience with clay in the first grade. "We made tiles and pressed them into flowers. It was a fun, hands-on type of art activity." The joy of that first tactile encounter with clay still molds her today. "I love being in my studio. I never know what each day will bring, and that keeps life interesting. I'm thrilled to have art be a pivotal part of my life, and I feel so fortunate that it is."

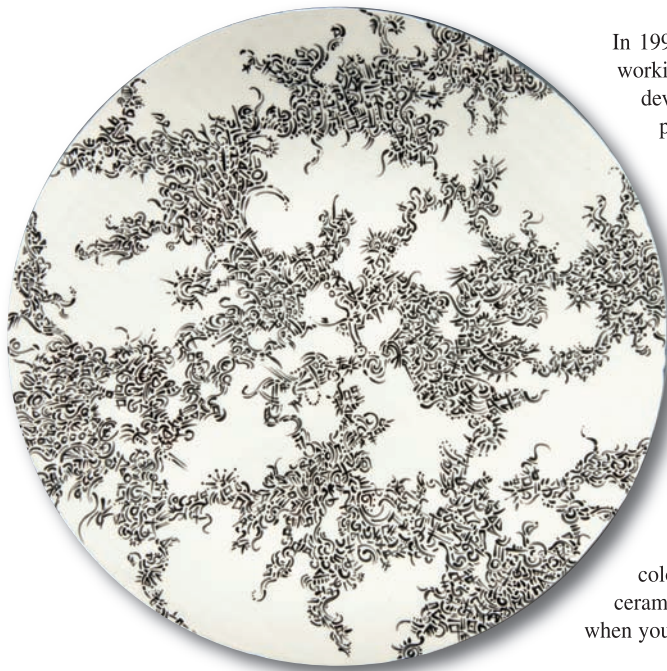


Cristina, 43, grew up on the ocean in Tiverton, R.I., and attended the University of New Hampshire, where she focused on photography and watercolor painting while earning a degree in health policy. It's also where she met her husband, Job Heintz. The two loved to ski and rock climb, activities that have greatly influenced her life's course. Both worked as instructors for National Outdoor Leadership School, which gave them the opportunity to travel to mountainous regions in the Himalayas, the Cascades, and the Chugach in Alaska.

While living in Tunbridge, Vt., in the early 1990s, Cristina prepared exhibits for display at the Hood Museum of Art at Dartmouth College. "It was there that I attained a tremendous appreciation for all different art mediums," she says.



Opposite from top: *Watershed (iii)*, *Angkor Lilies*, and *West to East*. Above: *Ripple (ii)*.



In 1996, the couple went to Nepal where Job had employment in Katmandu working for Pro Public, a nonprofit public-interest law firm he helped develop while attending Vermont Law School. In Nepal, Cristina put her photographic skills to work for the Nepal Mountaineering Association where she created a photographic presentation to document non-technical trekking mountains, and to record a clean-up expedition of Mt. Everest. She was also able to call on her experience at the Hood Museum of Art in a consulting gig at a new mountaineering museum in Pokhara.

Upon returning to the States, the couple decided to live in Stowe, due to its central location between Montpelier and Burlington. It wasn't long before Cristina discovered School House Pottery in Moscow (now Seminary Arts in Waterbury Center), where she took a ceramics class. "I loved it so much I did an apprenticeship with Mame McKee, who owns the studio," Cristina says. "That was when I realized clay was going to provide me with the opportunity to combine everything I had done creatively, by taking my background in painting and photography to create 3D canvases," she explains.

"Color is a very important part of my work. With clay I could explore color in a way that I couldn't with painting and photography. The mystery of ceramics was exciting for me because you never really know what you will get when you open up the kiln after a firing," she adds.

Then, just as Cristina was embracing her new relationship with clay, Job was hired by the Mid Atlantic Environmental Law Center at Widener University in Wilmington, Del. The couple moved south, and Cristina made another discovery: the Clay Studio in Philadelphia. She worked there as a "studio tech," assisting students with technical questions about their ceramics. "The Clay Studio was a dynamic, stimulating, and inspiring place, with a rich residency program. Artists came from all over the world. It was incredible how much exposure I got to the clay medium while I was there," Cristina remembers.

She also volunteered on the Claymobile, which went to inner city schools in Philadelphia to teach clay classes to underprivileged children. The kids had an opportunity to be creative with clay, and the Claymobile returned the following week with the fired results. "My Philly experience is what stimulated me to pursue ceramics on a more professional level," Cristina recalls.

From top: *Untitled. Untitled.*

While in Delaware, Cristina made yet another discovery, and Tatiana arrived nine months later. The couple resettled in Vermont to raise their growing family. Job is now the CEO of the Himalayan Cataract Project while Cristina learns how to balance the challenges of being a mother—Tatiana is now six and sister Alexandra just a year old—with her career in ceramics.

Cristina's home studio is small, just 12 feet by 16 feet. Next to her desk a cabinet overflows with watercolors, brushes, ceramic glazes, and assorted clay tools. Racks of deep shelves holding clay pieces in various stages of production cover one wall; the others are bare. There is no work table or bench. Instead, Cristina works on the floor when she's shaping greenware, and at her desk when she's glazing.

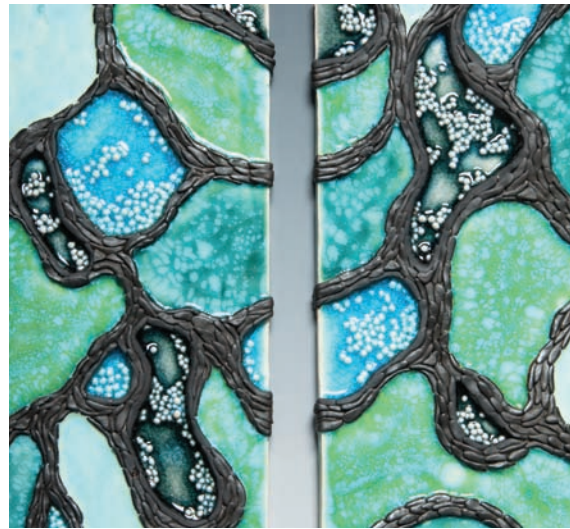
Typically she starts with a slab of greenware, usually stoneware or porcelain. Then she begins the process of building up, creating relief and depth.

"It's very procedural. A lot of texture is established in the early stages. Once the piece is bisque-fired, then glazing begins. I use multiple layers of glaze on each piece. It's as time-consuming as the building stage," Cristina explains. "I'm always striving for a chemical understanding of the glazes. I take a lot of notes to document the dialogue I'm having with the clay," she says. Her journal is bulging with her thoughts, written in tiny print alongside snapshots of final products. "Colors as they come out of the jars can change 180 degrees after they are fired. With experience, I can somewhat predict how things will react, but it's taken years to get to that point," she says.

Cristina's ceramic work might be a single piece or a collection of pieces united by design and color. She has several pieces at the Green Mountain Fine Art Gallery in Stowe, and this past fall she was invited to show her work at the *Art at the Coach Barn* exhibit and sale at Shelburne Farms. In 2005 she was selected as one of the nation's emerging artists by *Ceramics Monthly*. Her work has been on exhibit at the Helen Day Art Center in Stowe, Shelburne Arts Center in Shelburne, Southern Vermont Arts Center in Manchester, the South End Art Hop in Burlington, and many other locations in Vermont, Texas, Florida, Georgia, California, New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts. She also completed a large-scale commission in New York and one in Stowe. Although she has put her camera aside, she still paints, and is a member of the Vermont Watercolor Society.

It's the alchemy of the kiln, however, that keeps her hands in clay. "The challenge of working with clay is what keeps me excited about being this kind of artist. I might have an idea of how things will ultimately turn out, but there are no guarantees. There's a certain amount of control you have to let go of. I love that. I love the mystery of not really knowing what the finished work will look like until the kiln lid is opened."

For more information about Cristina Pellechio's ceramics, email her at cristina@pshift.com.



KATE CARTER



From top: Detail, *Untitled*; Cristina Pellechio; *Speranza*. Opposite: detail, *Spring Ascent*.