

Breaking Patterns Mending Lives

In the modern and semi-modern world it has become the norm to eat together as a family. It's how we bonded, passed on our histories and created family ties. Whether we were eating out of the carcass of a beast, sharing grubs next to a communal fire pit, or in a tent with the men eating first, followed by the women and children, or around a table made of Formica. It was how we made connections. It's part of what makes us human. A receptacle was the center of the family. Someone put food out on something, and we shared. Plates, platters, slabs of wood, giant leaves. In the West we traditionally use plates and platters.

The World is changing, and now unfortunately more and more of our families are becoming fractured. This of course is happening for many reasons. Each family has their reasons. We have more working parents, more kid's activities, divorce (marriages have about a 50% chance of survival), war (when will we learn?), and some families just don't have the food to share... all cultures and countries have their reasons. Anyway, enough about the reasons families can be shattered.

You know, put your own family's reason

here_____.

This brings us to the Harts, Sara and Benedict, of HartWare Pottery in Sheffield England. Located a few short kilometers from where Lady Godiva made her glorious ride of taxation protest.

The Harts met as Sara Prime and Benedict Hart in arts class just before the onset of WWII. It only took one short session of classes before they became young sweet hearts. The war was raging and bombs were dropping so they joined the effort. At this point War seemed like a worthwhile cause. She trained as a medical aid and he ended up in the kitchen feeding the troops. They got separated during the war, but these were focused kids with dreams and aspirations, who moved back to Sheffield, their childhood hometown and reconnected.

As they were interested in the arts and wanting to make a life there, they ended up apprenticing together at Sheffield Clay, a small pottery studio. They soon married, very happy to move out of their parent's homes. They loved their new life together making plates and platters for families, and of course making their own family. These were simpler times. Eventually they bought the pottery business from its elderly owners. Sara and Ben loved making pottery and it turned out they were very good at it, turning this small local production studio into a thriving venture that sold their ceramic ware all across the British Isles, thus was born HartWare Pottery.

Ok, I feel if you have read this far, (Thank you) it is only fair that I present this story, as it is, for what it is. It is my story, at least this is how I remember it. I am Myles Hart, son of Sara and Benedict, they were my parents.

I, as you see, make ceramic art myself. Very different in some ways and very similar to what my parents did in others. This body of work comes directly out of my association with my parents and their work. Like most parents their perfection was relative. They say that you can tell a lot about people by how they deal with stress. We had some serious stress.

They loved each other, my parents, and they loved me and my brother, Parker. Parker was my big brother, only 11 months separated us and as we grew up we became closer, we might as well have been twins and plenty of people thought we were. We embraced it. Parker was the kind of kid everyone liked, the brother everyone wished they had.

We grew up in that family business making plates and platters for the table. The type of things a Mom/Dad feeds a family with. My parents were HartWare Pottery and we were the Hart Boys. We knew nothing else. We mixed clay and washed molds. We loaded, unloaded and fired kilns. We put on handles and feet, used the jigger jolly, and picked up supplies. We delivered pottery. It was our life and we loved it, it was our family. We were potters. We were a family of potters. Our parents depended on us to be the helpers they could not afford

to hire. It was fine with us, we made some money and we were part of the family business.

Then everything changed on March 15.

Parker had gotten up early to put the kiln into its first reduction, (sometimes I joined him, that morning I didn't) 55 minutes of orange hot spitting backpressure. Usually we were gone for about an hour and then we would jump back in bed for a bit more sleep. I woke up at about 6:30 and he wasn't in bed. I expected to see him down at breakfast. Parker wasn't there, and mom had not seen him. I grabbed a piece of cinnamon toast and wandered out to the studio.

I knew the moment I swung open the studio door that something was wrong, there was no heat, just the sweet acrid smell of unburned gas. Most people were scared of that smell, not me, by this time in my life I had tamed the gas. It was the fuel that fed the fire. Mud + Fire = Life for the Harts.

Except there and then... it meant death. There was Parker, that tangle of dirty blonde hair resting on his gloves to soften the hard cement floor, his legs crossed at the ankles, his hands clutching his jacket to his waist. He must have lain down to close his eyes for a bit and enjoy the warmth of the kiln, as we often did. I grabbed him by the collar and dragged him out into the crisp air of that spring morning, screaming the whole way.

I ran back in and turned off the gas. But it was too late, Parker was gone... He must have put the kiln in reduction and maybe a fluke draft blew out the flame and he didn't notice, why would he...he was asleep. Not a bad way to go, if you gotta go. But he didn't have to go, he was just a kid.

That's kinda when it started... well not kinda, that's when it did start. That's when the train came off the rails. There were times when we all wanted it to be okay and we tried, but we couldn't, it was too much, we were done as a family. There was enough self-blame to go around. Why had dad not fixed the auto shut-off when the pilot went out? Why hadn't Mom brought Parker a cup of hot chocolate that he loved out in the studio? Why hadn't I joined him that morning? There was plenty of personal blame and no matter how much people tried to convince us it was not our fault, we couldn't get over it. We all had our ways of coping. Everyone does.

Dad started drinking too much and mom stayed away from home sometimes days at a time. She was lost and inconsolable. Her way of dealing with her grief was walking, she would walk for kilometers and kilometers and then collapse from exhaustion and sometimes strangers would bring her home if we were lucky. I hated seeing my parents like that so I just pulled away. I stayed in my room when I was not in the studio. Being in the studio had that push pull of something you love, but reminded you of the worst thing that ever happened

in your life. At times I believe I felt Parker's presence there so I kept going back.

I missed that kid... We were a mess of a broken family. Even though it was no one's fault, my parents continued to blame themselves. Isn't it strange how we do that, even when we know we are doing it? We are unable to escape the storm of our own emotions. I tried to keep the pottery going, but I didn't really know how to hold a family together. I was adrift in the same raft, on the same ocean, in the same storm. They gradually lost total interest in the business and sold it off, luckily, before it collapsed completely, giving them a few pounds to survive on.

It took me a bit of time, but eventually I took my savings and left. I moved to the United States, Los Angeles to be exact, to work for a legacy ceramic company that was looking for cheap skilled labor (I had been that before). Channel Clay Works had been around for almost a century. Seemed like a good choice. It was for a bit of time. I picked up some pointers there, but they were stuck in the past and closed soon after I started working there. They had sponsored my green card so I was good for a bit. I stayed in Los Angeles and moved around working for a couple of small production pottery studios. I had the skills, I could make a pot. That got old sitting at a wheel throwing hundreds of pieces a week and it really wreaks havoc on your back.

I was getting restless and the crappy air was starting to bother me, I needed another change. So I packed my elephant ear sponges and ribs and moved up to San Francisco where things were looser. I perceived it as more artsy and that was appealing. There was talk of a group of potters in San Francisco that had banded together and opened a workspace to share expenses. I tracked it down. It was a clay co-op, a place near Fillmore and Sacramento. Run by a group of potters that called themselves *The Reductionists*.

They had come from all over the country, much like the Hippies had gravitated to Haight-Ashbury. They seemed to have started percolating these ideas in their former studios that shared this common philosophy about clay. This “Now do something with it” concept. The world is filled with people who could throw a pot, but the *Idea* was the thing! You need to infuse ideas into your practice. Your work had to be a part of a bigger story, a human story, otherwise they were just very nice containers sorta like Tupperware.

That really changed my approach, as it were, a paradigm shift. So much about clay is either function or esthetics. This concept of, does the mug handle fit your hand , does the spout on the pitcher dribble, and so on and so forth. Or does the foot give the vase enough lift, or is the rim too thick or are the colors “pleasing” to the layperson. These were the challenges of those who worked in clay after it moved from being the vessel

that carried water back to the hut. Of course this form/function mold has been broken by many in the modern era, most notable in the 20th century by Peter Voukos, who really pioneered the concept of clay as a medium for fine art and not just function or craft.

My association with The Reductionists has started my move to push around my wheel thrown work. It was also the beginning of the concept of a narrative to support and stand next to my presentation of clay work. To use the combination of “words + mud” as a podium to present a creative expression. To share thoughts and feelings that I was not interested in dealing with. To explore my past. To use the written word as an integral part of the piece, not as a side note or explanation.

I have always had difficulty with the artist’s statement. One such as “This is a body of work informed by the lack of caring that Washington is showing toward our environment, which is why I make these reusable vessels. To keep plastic out of the sea.” All this is fine and dandy, just not my thing. My exposure to The Reductionists has given me the strength to deal with my own challenges and issues with the loss of my brother and the collapse of our family.

I have been working out of that studio ever since. They turned out to be a very supportive group that enjoyed a drink so I stuck around. I started making personal connections again. They were becoming my “family.” After a couple of years

I started to look at myself (shit that is painful.) This body of work *Broken Patterns*, comes out of that semi-self searching I tried to do. I wasn't going to fully commit to the therapy, but I was willing to talk to the clay and you about it. Anyway, this is my delayed response to what had happened to us, our family, after we lost Parker. I needed to deal with it, I was going to tough it out...I thought. No way, I was a mess. So I went to what I knew... clay. I could swim with myself in the clay, in that mud.

Yet my entire ceramic career has been about making nice pretty well balanced plates, platters and bowls for the home table. For families to enjoy and serve food on. A semblance of stability for the family. Mom, Dad, the kids and a meal. And yet around this symmetry was and is... chaos. Our family had it, we were no different and after we lost Parker it was all broken.

The temptation would be for this body of work to break everything and render all the pieces, in this offering useless. Piles of shards of ceramic. Illustrating the broken-ness of our modern families, and yet that is not what we are about, most of us do not end up a shattered mess on the floor. We are stronger than that. We pull it together, at first it is a fragile "ok", but it improves with time, we survive. Well most of us survive, we make due, soldier on, some don't, but most do.

You will see these platters bear a resemblance to the well crafted dinnerware of our mothers, grandmothers and aunts

homes. The family dinners, the holiday celebrations. And to the ones we used to make at HartWare Pottery. They hold memories of those happy times, those family times. My pieces do retain some of their form, image and utility. Yet they are not quite round, not quite smooth and have broken patterns. And still these pieces will hold your food, display your fruit and hang from your walls. They are a version of what was, after living through, what we have become. Not perfect... far from it, never to be those perfect platters, plates and ...memories of our youth.

Because as we grow older and move further from our youth, it will grow more and more perfect...as it should.

Myles w/TheReductionists