

multiFACETed

Skill, vision, grit, humility: Peter Pincus strikes a balance.

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PORTRAIT BY
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Ewer, 2014,
colored porcelain,
gold luster,
13 x 6 x 3 in.

SPINNING ON A POTTER'S wheel, the hunk of stiff clay slowly blooms into a shallow bowl, then swirls up into an elegant vase.

This transformation would be central to the creative process for many ceramic artists. But for the 32-year-old huddled over this wheel, his left arm deep inside the vessel as his right hand shaves the outside to conform to a cardboard template, this is only the beginning of a complex, 100-hour process involving dozens of tools and materials, and myriad techniques. Before it is over, this gray, thick-walled, 13-inch-tall stoneware pot will be cast in

RIGHT: Of all the qualities Peter Pincus brings to his art, patience might be at the top of the list. A typical urn takes more than 100 hours to make.

plaster, the mold will be cut apart with a bandsaw and re-assembled into a new form, tinted slips will be carefully applied, and a gleaming, vibrantly colored, elaborately patterned porcelain vessel will be born.

"Porcelain is very pretty, but bad for forming," Peter Pincus explains while pricking air bubbles on the pot. "So I do forming in stoneware and firing in porcelain, creating a handshake between the two using plaster."

That's a simple summary of a mind-bogglingly byzantine process that has earned Pincus admiration in the ceramics world. But what it yields —

urns, vases, cups, and bottles whose elegant 17th- and 18th-century forms throb with 21st-century edginess — are increasingly gaining the acclaim of curators, collectors, and gallery owners.

Lewis Wexler, co-owner of the eponymous Philadelphia gallery, says that when he first showed Pincus' work, at the Collective Design fair in New York City this past spring, a pair of his urns were "showstoppers" and sold immediately, for \$6,800.

"We have had interest in his work from the design, ceramic, and contemporary art communities," Wexler says. "Peter is successful in combining a



very strong graphic quality with a true understanding of the classic vessel form."

Pincus has "moved the needle" beyond traditional ceramics techniques and aesthetics, says Sheldon Chester, a Minneapolis collector who purchased his first work by Pincus at the 2014 American Pottery Festival.

Chester, Wexler, and others laud Pincus' pieces as the "brilliant," "mind-blowing" work of an audacious, obsessive virtuoso who works at least 12 hours a day.

But they describe his personality in very different terms: sensitive, generous, guileless, grateful – and cheerful.

That's how his wife, Laurie, describes him, as well. "He is as happy throwing a form on the wheel or doing color work as he is grocery shopping with me and the kids on a Friday after work."

The vase he's building this morning, under the glare of fluorescent lights in the cinder-block basement of his 1950s ranch house in Penfield,

outside Rochester, New York, is destined for one of the half-dozen shows he's participating in this fall. That's when he'll also resume his second year as visiting assistant professor of ceramics at Rochester Institute of Technology's School for American Crafts.

"It's all too much, but when you're young you try to take on all the opportunities you can," Pincus says of his career. Over the past three years, he's been in 52 exhibitions, taught at a

local arts center and two colleges, served as a visiting artist and lecturer at a dozen other colleges, begun selling his work online and in several top galleries – and become the father of two.

A STACCATO OF THUMPS AND squeals from the floor above announce that his daughter, Evelyn, 3, and son, Britton, 1, have arrived with their grandmother. But Pincus, now coiling aluminum flashing into a

Pincus' work weds a deep understanding of the classic vessel form with modern, graphic edge.



LEFT: Urns, 2015, colored porcelain, gold luster, 17 x 17 x 8 in.

RIGHT: In the big picture of ceramics, Pincus has "moved the needle," says Minneapolis collector Sheldon Chester, who acquired this pair of 30-inch-tall urns this year.





Bright, crisp, kaleidoscopic: "Color can be a conduit," says Pincus, a way to draw people in.

cylindrical mold to place over the vase on the wheel, seems to hear only the music playing in his studio: the Punch Brothers' progressive bluegrass.

After a recent concert by the group, Pincus, an amateur mandolin player, gave one of his vessels to Chris Thile, the quintet's lead man and mandolinist, who next year will succeed Garrison Keillor as host

of public radio's *Prairie Home Companion* and who won a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant" in 2012.

"I aspire to approach through ceramics the level of complexity and clarity that he achieves with music," says Pincus. "And boy, would I like a MacArthur," he adds with a laugh.

For now, he'll have to settle for the praise of esteemed

ceramists such as Wayne Higby, who taught Pincus as an undergraduate and graduate student at Alfred University.

He compares Pincus' intense focus and discipline to that of an Olympic speed skater.

"For athletes, visualizing the finish line helps you get there. Peter can visualize something at the end and strategize how to get there."

Even more impressive than Pincus' multi-step process, Higby adds, is his sheer dexterity with materials. "He can pass on the choreography to his students, but he is Fred Astaire in his steps."

Snowboarding, rather than dancing or skating, is what Pincus relates to.

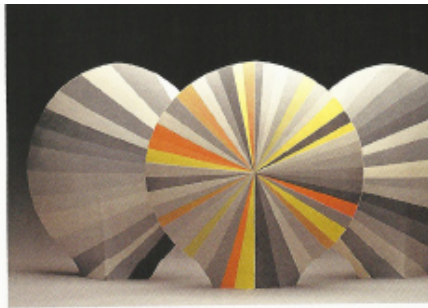
As a lackluster student in a competitive suburban high

ABOVE: Pincus made these 21-inch-tall vessels for a recent show at Ferrin Contemporary. He essentially applies tinted slip from the inside out, so that each hue obscures the edge of the previous one; in effect, he works blind.

TOP RIGHT: *The View From Here*, 2014, colored porcelain, 18 x 45 x 12 in.

MIDDLE: *Cup set*, 2015, colored porcelain, gold luster, 6 x 4 x 4 in. each

BOTTOM: *Bottle/cup sets*, 2014, colored porcelain, gold luster, 13 x 4 x 4 in. (bottles), 6 x 4 x 4 in. (cups)





LEFT:
Tint, 2002,
colored porcelain,
gold luster,
6 x 15 x 7 in.

RIGHT:
Vases, 2015,
colored porcelain,
gold luster,
22 x 20 x 9 in.

BELOW LEFT:
Boote, 2015,
colored porcelain,
11 x 6 x 6 in.

BELOW:
Blue Line Shift, 2012,
colored porcelain,
11 x 22 x 12 in.

How does Pincus do it? He's bappy to tell you. The process is so intense, he fears no copycats.



school near Rochester, Pincus dreamed of becoming a professional snowboarder – until, at age 16, he took an art class.

"I saw someone at the wheel and became obsessed with it," he recalls. "A part of this was the majesty of the wheel and seeing something come out of this lump."

Working at the wheel also transformed Pincus. He became a focused, ambitious student who went on to earn his BFA in ceramics and metal fabrication at Alfred in 2005, work as an artist in California, and return to Alfred, where he got his MFA in ceramics in 2011. He then worked in metal production, helped manage and develop the Turk Hill Craft School (a ceramics center), and taught at Roberts Wesleyan College, both in the Rochester area.

He still snowboarded occasionally until seven years ago, when he dislocated his left elbow. "It seriously altered my ability to make things."

Although he eventually recovered, he gave up snowboarding – at least for now. Yet he still relishes its similarities with ceramics: "There's a directness to it. It's a one-man sport – you have no one to blame but yourself. ... You can learn the process, the skills. The work is never done – you have to care for it like [you would] a kid."

And both are "very physical and very expressive – and extremely risky," he adds.

"But with ceramics, you have something to show for it at the end."

AFTER MIXING 39 POUNDS of plaster with 13 quarts of water, Pincus carefully pours the pancake-batter-like sub-



stance around the pot in the aluminum mold while slowly spinning the wheel.

"I need to let it stiffen up a bit," he says, and heads through the adjacent laundry room and upstairs to help his mother-in-law, Cathy Thorpe, settle the children for their post-lunch naps.

His own father left home when Pincus was 2½; his sisters were 5 and 8. They were reared by their grandmother and by their mother, Patricia Pincus, who worked several nursing jobs to keep her brood in Pittsburgh because of the pricey suburb's excellent schools.

A major motivation for his own work nowadays, Pincus often notes, is his commitment to providing for his own family. "Before I had kids, I wasn't that interested in selling my work," he says. Now he does all he can to expand and diversify his career, recently hiring two studio assistants, for example.

He's also mindful of his audience – of giving his work the widest reach possible. His palette is influenced not only by artists such as Josef Albers, but also by popular culture. "The vessel is a fairly academic pursuit. It can be off-putting to those not in the arts sphere," Pincus explains. "Color can be a conduit, a way to invite them into your world."

He has also experimented with social media, recently selling \$2,000 worth of work in 20 minutes via Instagram.

"That made me wonder whether social media killed the traditional gallery model," Pincus says. "But my recent experiences with Lewis Wexler and Leslie Ferrin [of Ferrin Contemporary] have proven that gallery owners have access to a different level of collectors and connoisseurs than artists could gain on their own."

"If you're trying to make a \$15,000 piece, you need a team.



It's not possible without galleries who believe in you."

A major player in his current success is his former advisor at Alfred, noted ceramic sculptor Anne Currier. "Anne is one of the most important people to me," Pincus says. "I would not be able to support my family if not for Anne, for our time together."

Currier is the one who encouraged him to experiment with the use of tinted slip-casting to embed colors, he recalls. She recalls also urging him to take his penchant for the decorative and the elegant "to the edge, and have utility be marginal."

"What he has done with it just blows me away," Currier says. "There's a subdued cacophony that's going on in his work. Look at those color combinations: How much more raucous can you get? But the structure is holding it all together."

"Peter's work grabs your attention and makes you think, 'How the hell did he do that?' But it just sits there and says, 'You don't have to know. Just look at me.'"

Back in his basement studio, Pincus examines the aluminum-encased plaster mold. "This is bad. It's off-center," he says, clawing out gobs of clay so he can examine the interior.

"The question is, can I make it look like it's on-center, because I've invested all this energy?" He spins the empty plaster mold, smoothing its surface with a wet sponge and sandpaper.

"Maybe I could cast around it—I do need a base for another form," he mutters as he heads to his drawing table and begins sketching.

✦ peterpincus.com
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Concept

Before Pincus starts constructing an urn, he homes in on its form. He develops (and ultimately constructs) it in parts, segmented along horizontal lines.



Color Work

ABOVE: Pincus applies the first color of porcelain slip (liquefied clay) to a piece of his plaster mold. (He must repeat this whole color application process for each mold piece, before banding them together and casting the object.)

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: Pincus has cut through the gray slip and is peeling away the excess. What's left is a neatly defined edge, ready for the next color.

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT: After applying the next tinted slip—this one a powder blue—Pincus cuts its edge. Faintly visible in the wash of blue is the ridge where the gray slip ends.

RIGHT: After a few more applications, Pincus pulls the slip, almost like a skin, away from the mold to give us a peek. If this were a real piece, he'd leave it in place, getting his first look only after casting is complete.

AFTER YEARS OF EXPERIMENTATION, Peter Pincus has devised the following recipe for patterned porcelain vessels. Essentially, it's as if he brushes layers and layers of paint on a canvas, and when the paint is dry, peels away the canvas, leaving a free-standing painting.

He offers these instructions freely—but with a warning: Each step (based on a typical urn) entails a plethora of sub-steps, tools, and materials. "Every stage is tedious and laborious and long," Pincus says. "It's a beast." And not a lucrative beast, either, as you can see by the time required (and the per-hour profit, revealed at the end).

1. Templating / 3 hours

Sketch vessel shapes until the perfect "icon" emerges.

Translate the form into separate segments (for example, foot, body, and finial). Examine, tweak, and convert into cardboard cutouts.

2. Moldmaking / 30-50 hours

Begin by throwing a stoneware vessel on the wheel, pausing often to measure the form against the cardboard template. Put a collar of aluminum flashing around the clay piece, sealing it to the wheel with a thick gusset of plaster. Mix up more plaster, and pour it into the void as the wheel spins.

When the plaster is hardened, peel the stoneware clay out of the new mold and smooth its interior. Mark angled cuts, then slice the mold into pieces with a band saw, discarding portions to create a narrower,



enhanced form. Smooth the remaining plaster pieces against a block of sandblasted glass until they fit perfectly together. Cast top and bottom plates out of plaster to finish the mold. Repeat for the other segments.

3. Drying / 1 to 3 days

To ensure the mold pieces are dry so they can absorb moisture from the slip, arrange on a table between blasting fans.

4. Color work / 10 hours

Prepare the color palette by mixing powdered mason's stains with porcelain slip. Take a piece of the mold, and pour or brush on the first color.

When the slip has dried to the texture of skin, scrape off the excess from the sides and back of the mold section. Using

an X-Acto knife, cut through the slip to designate the color's edge. Peel off the excess slip, sponge the mold surface, and apply the next color. Repeat until you have the desired layers and patterns.

When the colored slip is all dry, fit the mold sections together and secure them with straps. Fill the mold with more porcelain slip, and let it sit for 20 minutes, so the plaster absorbs moisture and a layer of porcelain fuses to the skin of tinted slip.

Pour out that final slip, and let what remains dry. Unband the mold, and carefully remove it for future use. Trim and smooth the form.

5. Bisque firing / 16 hours

Fire the forms at 1,888° F.

The Reveal



ABOVE: After the color work is done, Pincus bands together the mold, fills it with uncolored slip, lets some fuse to the tinted-slip skin, and pours out the rest. Here, he gently pulls the mold off a completed vessel.



RIGHT: The interior layer of uncolored slip thickens the walls of the pot.

6. Wet sanding / 3 hours

When the pieces are cool, smooth any rough spots with wet sandpaper.

7. Glazing / 30 minutes

Apply a coat of clear glaze to the interiors (and any exterior surfaces that will have luster).

8. Firing / 9 hours

Fire the pieces again, this time at 2,250 degrees F.

9. Lustering / 4 hours

When the pieces are cool, brush the designated sections with syrup-like gold glaze. Fire them—one last time—at approximately 1,300 degrees.

10. Sanding / 30 minutes

Smooth any rough surfaces using wet sandpaper.

11. Gluing / 2 hours

Fasten the urn's segments together with marine-grade epoxy. After the glue cures for a day, sand the junctures, tape them off, and rub in a coat of tinted caulk—as if applying caulk—to ease the transition between the glued parts.

12. Finishing / 1 to 2 hours

Once again, sand and sand.

Pincus figures that—after accounting for expenses, from materials and employee salaries to shipping and gallery commissions—he earns between \$15 and \$20 an hour. Asked why he doesn't patent his process, he replies, "You would have to be crazy to choose to do this for a living." —*SWJ*