FRESH FLAIR!
Lust for Life

In Sullivan County, Matthew Solomon elevates ceramics to the level of high art

Withering leaves, shriveling petals, and drooping stems don’t immediately call beauty to mind, but Matthew Solomon can see beyond these supertuous flaws. “A flower in bloom is pretty,” says the ceramicist, whose heavily botanical-inspired tableware and objects d’art are in his studio in Sullivan County, New York. “But a flower past its prime, with its broken symmetry, is sublime.”

Although Solomon has always had an artistic bent—in the mid-1980s, he studied at the Appalachian Center for Craft in Tennessee—he came to ceramics via a circuitous path, long after becoming a lawyer, like his parents before him. But gardening, a hobby he picked up while working as a trial lawyer in the late 1990s, led him to rediscover his passion for art. “I was uninspired for so long,” he says, “but the depth of nature really took hold of me. I bought some clay and couldn’t stop producing.”

In 2007, he left law to pursue ceramics full-time. “I try to capture the cycle of life, so I often incorporate flowers in various stages of bloom, just as you would see in a garden,” says Solomon, who sells his wares at his eponymous shop in Narrowsburg, New York, and at Maison Gerard in Manhattan. A candlestick, for example, is a plume-like tangle of overgrown, thistle stems, so abundant they disguise the item’s typically straightforward form. To create it, he starts by pressing a flat piece of clay into a circular mold for the base. With another mold, Solomon crafts two clay spheres and adorns each one with three hand-built spoons that can...
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Frozen In Time

Wilted flower petals and shriveled leaves are hallmarks of Solomon’s ceramic pieces (top and above right). Soaks in the process range from scoring a candlestick base before attaching it to the flower (above left) to applying plaits to a unique-fired flower (opposite). See Resources.

accommodate water and single flower bud (a nod to Delaware vases). Next, he makes the candlestick’s neck—a series of spool-shaped pieces—using a third mold. The component parts are then scored and attached with slip, a clay mixture that serves as an adhesive. The object is wrapped in plastic to keep it from drying out while Solomon rolls, twists, and pinches bits of clay into hundreds of miniature decorations that include stems, seared leaves, and tiny prickles. (The process of adhering these elements to the candlestick with slip can take a full day.) The finished design dries for a week or more before undergoing a bisque firing, after which it’s smoothed, glazed, and refired. “Sometimes I can’t believe that I quit my job to do this,” says Solomon. “And I’m getting to do exactly what I want to do.” —Kelli Veeco