

Hands-on Jurying:

Holding a Virtual Ceramics Exhibition in a Pandemic



Joanna Richardson, Salt and Sugar Speckled Jar, Juror's Choice Award, sponsor: Tucker's Pottery Supplies, 2020 Ottawa Guild of Potters Virtual Annual Exhibition. Image: Rajeev Nath, 2020

Ceramics are judged largely on how they appear to the eye of the beholder. But to properly assess quality, a person needs to hold and handle a piece and assess its weight, balance, and proportion.

Virtual ceramics exhibitions – the only kind of exhibition possible during a pandemic – present organisers with a choice: they can opt for “jurying from digital,” where the juror selects pieces by relying solely on photographs; or they can plan for “in-person jurying” where the juror selects from among the physical pieces themselves. During the 2020 COVID 19 pandemic, in planning their first virtual annual exhibition, the Ottawa Guild of Potters (OGP) chose to go for a hands-on approach.

The Exhibitions Committee – Isobel Salole, Carol Lim, and myself – began event planning. First, Huntington Properties offered the Guild vacant office space in Ottawa ON for the judging and photographic sessions. The Guild then opted for professional photography. Photographer Rajeev Nath is a local: he would be able to take photos under all circumstances except a complete lockdown. Juror and well-known potter Marney McDiarmid agreed to make the 200 km drive to Ottawa from her home in Kingston to evaluate the submitted pieces in person. Everyone knew full well that, with rising and falling levels of infection in Ontario and rapidly changing requirements for social distancing, restricted movement, and self-isolation, plans might need to change.

While hoping for the best, the committee was pragmatic and planned for the worst,



Cover, Ottawa Guild of Potters 2020 Virtual Exhibition Catalogue, showing Maria Moldovan, "Departure," Best in Show, sponsor: Pottery Supply House. Image: Rajeev Nath, 2020

working up three different exhibition scenarios that all complied with public health directives. In Plan A, members would deliver their submissions to the temporary office space where jurying and photo sessions would take place. Plan B would cover the situation where Marney couldn't travel to Ottawa due to public health directives: the photo session would still go ahead; and she would judge using Rajeev's photos.

The committee would move to Plan C if Ontario found itself in complete lockdown, in which case Marney would make her selections on the basis of photographs submitted by the potters, which would also be used for the exhibition itself. By November 2020, as the jurying session approached but further public health directives were possible for hard-hit communities, Committee members became increasingly worried. Fortunately, Ottawa remained in the less restrictive category: in-person jurying could go ahead.

On jurying day, the committee used Plan A to organize logistics and keep people safe. Potters dropped off their pieces according to the staggered schedule that had been decided in advance; sanitized their hands upon entry; remained masked; and kept a careful distance apart. Marney worked alone, even managing to complete the jurying and

return home to Kingston the same day (and before the first storm of winter). The following day, the photo shoot for the Exhibition Catalogue went off without a hitch.

However, not even a virtual exhibition is complete without an opening ceremony! The OGP Virtual Annual Exhibition was scheduled to open with a ZOOM Awards Ceremony on December 5th, at three o'clock. Committee members sat in front of their computer screens, wondering whether the virtual ceremony would come off. A practice rehearsal ironed out some issues, but uncertainties lingered. What if the screen froze? Or the sound failed? How many people would attend? To everyone's great relief, a full 100 attendees logged on and everything ran smoothly. And, thanks to careful preparation by the Guild's tireless volunteer webmaster, Dave Drapeau, the virtual 2020 Exhibition itself went live as soon as the ceremony closed.

In her closing notes to the Exhibition Catalogue, Marney speaks to a special element of her work:

In the middle of COVID-19's second wave I was given a gift – the opportunity to spend many hours surrounded by wonderful pots. I was able to pick up the pieces and experience how they felt to the touch. I tested out lids and looked at the pots from all angles. With so much of our lives now taking place online, it was a joy to be able to fully connect to the work that was submitted to the show, and I'm thankful to the organizers for finding a safe way to make this possible.

Marney echoed that sentiment in her comments on her Juror's Choice Award sponsored by [Tucker's Pottery Supplies](#) granted to Guild member Joanna Richardson, again validating the choice of in-person jurying:

"Smooth to the touch, light yet solid to hold, the piece captivates the hand as much as the eye. The smoky interior is a comfort. This exquisitely rendered pot feels like it is of the earth."

We hope the OGP's next Annual Exhibition will take place with the pandemic well behind us. If not, the Exhibitions Committee plans to repeat what they did in 2020. The presence and enthusiasm of a 100-strong community of attendees at the Virtual Awards Ceremony; the Juror's speech and comments on the entries and award winners, and on the significance of touch and heft, of physicality, in ceramic art; and the words of thanks from the award winners themselves – all confirmed that staying "hands-on" was not only well worth the effort of careful and informed planning, it affirmed the essence of making and experiencing art in clay.

The OGP 2020 Exhibition Catalogue was presented as a flipbook, a digital publication that resembles a real magazine, complete with visual page-flipping and sound. To see how it works, as well as view the other online features the OGP used in its virtual presentation of the show, go to <https://www.ottawaguildofpotters.ca/annual-juried-exhibition/> Online polling software was also used to create a web-based "People's Choice" award.

FUSION thanks OGP President Amy Bell for her support of this article. For permission to quote from their remarks and/or reproduce images of their work, FUSION is grateful to:

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