

## Ruth Duckworth

by THOMAS W. COLLINS

RUTH DUCKWORTH has worked for many years as a sculptor, painter, and potter, and feels that ceramics provides her with a natural way of combining all of these activities. Her work ranges from the delicate to the massive. Mrs. Duckworth came to this country from England in 1964, and is currently artist-in-residence (Professor of Ceramics) at the University of Chicago. She has had nine one-man ceramic exhibitions since 1960 and has just finished a 400-square-foot mural of fired clay for the anteroom of the new Department of Geophysics Building on the University campus.

I first met Ruth Duckworth at Midway Studio (which serves as the pot shop for the University of Chicago) during a hectic teaching session and was impressed by her gentle and accommodating manner. We agreed to meet the following week at her private studio on Halsted Street. This studio is quite modern and spacious, with a split level area in the rear which she uses as a sales gallery. Within approximately 600 square feet of work area, Ruth has outfitted her studio with a plaster wedging table that was cast on an old meat chopping block, a 20-cubic-foot gas kiln, a 300-pound capacity dough mixer, a 20-foot work table, two smaller work tables, and an electric wheel. Directly behind the studio is a courtyard which separates her apartment from the studio and provides an appropriate setting for two of her large sculptures.

Ruth was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1919, and studied painting and sculpture for four years in Liverpool just prior to the war. During the war, she spent the first two years giving puppet shows in schools in Northern England, and the final two years as a tool maker in a Manchester factory. Following the war, the young English artist began to work free-lance with wood and stone sculpture. An idea to make glazed sculpture panels in the early Fifties led her to clay, and she turned to the study and teaching of ceramics at the Hammersmith School of Art, and later at the Central School of London.

Studios here in the United States are somewhat different from those Ruth knew in England. There, ceramic artists work exclusively with electric kilns. Ruth has come to prefer the greater flexibility of gas, and now fires most of her work in a reduction atmosphere. She has also

adopted our method of preparing clay bodies from dry ingredients. Although it requires more effort than the English method of working with ready-prepared clay bodies, it gives her more predictable results at high temperatures. She uses a white porcelain slip for casting, a porcelain body for wheel throwing and pinchpots, and several stoneware bodies for handbuilding. Ruth favors the use of English kiln furniture but enjoys the durability of American shelves. She also mentioned that glaze-swapping is less common in England, where the recipes of individual potters are closely guarded.

Ruth Duckworth began her clay work making functional forms. She contrived to design and produce delicate, light tableware while much of England was busy equating domestic stoneware with heavy forms. Since that period in her development, she has grown to find a greater challenge in asymmetric free form, and very seldom returns to the wheel.

In the early Sixties, Ruth began working with porcelain. She did some casting, but found this material to be equally adaptable to the creating of small pinched forms. In 1964 she was invited to the University of Chicago, and since then has spent the majority of her time in this country. In 1966 she was encouraged to set up a private studio in Chicago to design and complete the large scale mural mentioned earlier. The mural, which contains built-in lighting structures in the ceiling, is epoxy-mounted to the four walls and ceiling of the anteroom.

I sense that Ruth thoroughly enjoys teaching at the University. She works closely with her students, stressing the importance of personal confrontation with clay and the realization that it means different things to different people. She feels (as do many art educators) that it can be personally gratifying but professionally disappointing to find her students' work too greatly influenced by her own. She also reveals a continuing interest in knowledge of contemporary ceramics. While she admits to feeling little rapport with the current use of neon paint and acrylics on fired clay, she encourages any new directions that might allow the clay artist a greater freedom of expression.

At present, Ruth's work ranges from delicate porce-

*Ruth Duckworth poses with one of her large sculptures that is placed in the courtyard between her apartment and studio.*

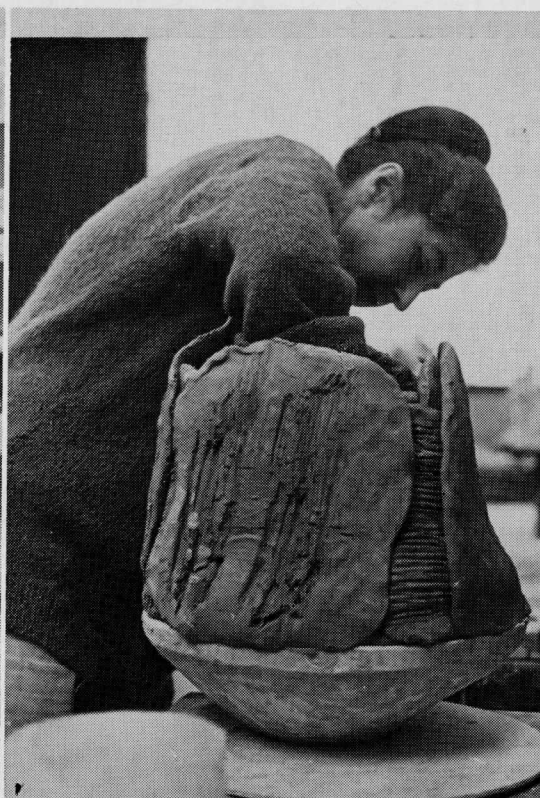
*The artist, pictured with "Zoe," chats with a student in her Chicago studio. Her work tables and kiln are seen in the background.*



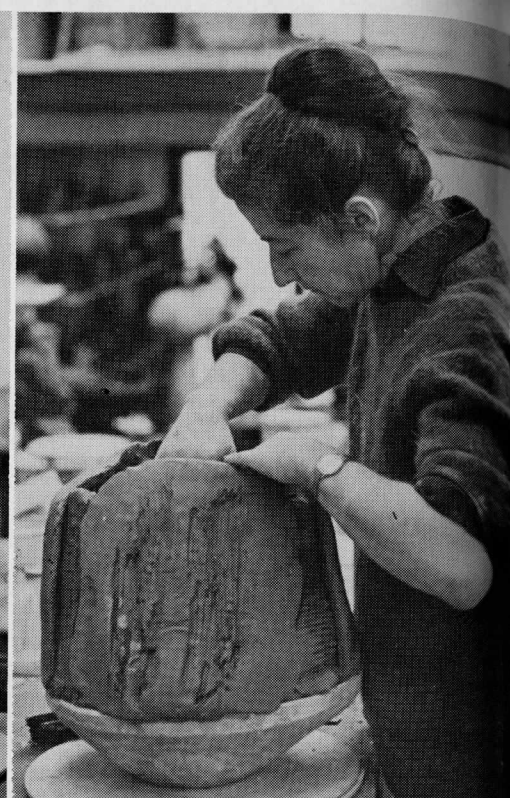




Base of the planter is started in a plaster mold, and textured slabs are added to form the walls. A piece of driftwood is used as a temporary support.



Work is done inside and out until the slabs are all in place and will support one another. It is at this stage that Ruth may change some of the slabs.



Ruth Duckworth welcomes some slumping of the clay slabs, but she perks up excessively lazy areas of the clay after the piece sets up a little bit.



When the height of the piece has been reached, she paddles and prods those areas of the slabs that seem to need it.



View from above shows how Ruth Duckworth adds small slabs at the top to complete the construction before the piece is allowed to dry.

lain to large grogged stoneware sculpture. No matter which size she uses, she delights in creating forms that have a monumentality of proportion and thus seems to overcome any limitation of size. Her small pieces are usually porcelain, pinched and beaten and shaped in a unique way that results in forms which combine, somewhat paradoxically, the spontaneity and freedom of clay with the restrained quality of porcelain. These tiny pieces, three to four inches, command attention and encourage a response from the viewer which is usually reserved for much larger pieces. White predominates as the glaze color for her porcelain; it results from the use of two ash glazes, matt and semi-matt. She uses casting methods for making porcelain *salvers*, small partially-covered table dishes used for dipping radishes, onions, etc. She does say, "That's my only production-line item."

Her medium-size forms are generally stoneware and are produced from pre-formed molds which allow her to build exceptionally bulky and often heavy, swelling forms. These grow out of small bases, giving primary importance to form rather than to the origin of the form—the base. Bases often tend to dominate in a way which interferes with the strength of the total form of many potentially good ceramic pieces. The sequence photographs show Ruth Duckworth constructing such a form. These pieces are usually rubbed with iron oxide to bring out highlights, and are fired in heavy reduction to Cone 9 or 10.

The result is sculpture possessing a rough, organic, weatherbeaten quality.

Ruth's large, grogged stoneware forms have been described as massive and timeless. They are easy to relate to and encourage a response simply because of their size. These are intended as outdoor objects. Their surface treatment is similar to the medium-size forms—iron oxide highlights and heavy reduction firing to Cone 9 or 10.

Tony Birks, in a recent book about modern English potters, claims that Ruth Duckworth was responsible, perhaps more than any other potter working in England, for the explosive charge which altered traditional thinking about pottery at the end of the Fifties.

Briefly looking ahead at her own work, Ruth predicts no new directions, but rather a deeper development of those directions with which she is presently concerned. "This would include," she has said, "a greater use of my work on a larger scale in architectural settings." She considers her mural to be such a work.

THOMAS COLLINS is a student at the Art Institute of Chicago, where he has one more year of work before finishing his M.F.A. degree. This past summer, Mr. Collins conducted raku demonstrations at Galena, Illinois.



A 25-square-foot section of the mural Ruth Duckworth made for installation in the Department of Geophysics building at the University of Chicago.