

One day, one life: Work of a Needham potter



Potter Steve Branfman works on a piece in his Needham studio. Wicked Local staff photo / Kate Flock

of a vessel into a tight circular ring, the whirl-whirl-whirl of his potter's wheel the only sound in this white-lit, rectangular studio. He thumbs off the clay from the chuck and smooths it out with a wet sponge. Gray shavings roll off his right index finger like leaves in autumn, tumbling down the side of his jeans and gathering in a loose pile beside his feet. The clay grows tall, bends, fattens and uniforms itself to his strong and gentle touch. It is an easy thing, it appears-a natural physical relationship established in 40 years of experience.

Steve Branfman's career has blossomed ever since he decided to switch majors in college, from the sports industry to ceramic art. Now he may be among the most important working artists in Needham. He is a prominent Raku artist and scholar who holds seminars and whose pieces are displayed in galleries around the world. Locally, he is the founder and manager of the town's only artists' studio, the Gorse Mill Studios-a project that once stood on the brink of bankruptcy for years-as well as the

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It's a recent Wednesday afternoon, and Steven Branfman is sitting in his studio with an air of quiet intensity. His shoulders are hunched up, his back up right as he thins the bottom



Some of the pottery made by Steve Branfman, on display in the bookstore and gallery at The Potters Shop and School.

owner of the Potters Shop and School, located in the basement of the former 19-century knitting mill.

Besides his main vocation as a Raku artist, Branfman is also a talented biker, teacher, carpenter, writer, guitarist, and businessman. He has a muscular build and speaks to his assistants and students in short, gruff commands.



Steve Branfman has dedicated a space in his studio to display the artwork created by his son, Jared, who passed away.

But behind the sinewy confidence is an inner life, filled with tragedy and sensitivity.

It is no secret that, in 2005, his son, Jared, an aspiring potter, succumbed to a two and a half year battle with spinal cancer. You can tell just by looking at Branfman's studio that he holds Jared's memory close to his heart. Childhood drawings, photographs and a display of a joint gallery they put together, titled "Father-Son Student-Teacher," are among the organized clutter of his studio. Branfman says personal tragedy inevitably affects and transforms one's artwork-but in what specific way this applies to him he cannot say.

"There's a personal connection that I form with the objects that I make. There's a bond between me and the clay. It's a very strong emotional bond," he says. "There's a spirit that I try to pass on to the objects that I make. The bond through clay that

Jared and I shared is always in my work. It was probably in my work earlier, and since Jared passed away and I've continued to make pots, his spirit is all over. Because he was a potter, I can't help but evoke his spirit, his memory and his presence when I'm making pots."

A practical man, Branfman does not linger on hypotheticals. After all, he says, this life is the only life he has known, and it's impossible to know what would have been, or who would have been if Jared, 23 at the time of his death, were still living today.

"I'm sure it's changed my work. How it's changed my work, I don't know, because this is the path I took. I don't know the other path," he says. "We get up each morning and navigate the day, and whatever we experience that day affects our lives. Of course Jared has affected me and my work. It's harder to define what would have changed. Maybe we would be working side by side together here. It's hard to know."

Branfman rarely looks back and wonders about the road not taken. He has always pursued his

dream. He quit a full-time teaching job at the Thayer Academy in Braintree. He knew he had to go part-time in order to be able to make meaningful art. He risked time and money to create and operate the Gorse Mill Studios. It's all worked out. He is grateful for the life he has carved out for himself. He is serious, content, and always working at a quick and steady pace.

"There's no time to eat," he says. "I'll only ever eat if my assistant brings me something and forces me to."

In the morning, Branfman had opened up the studio, fixed a socket in the wall of the potters' room, cut several white wooden planks into long rectangles, took out the old display shelves in the entrance of his studio and nailed the three boards into the wall.

Now it's afternoon, and time for work that could almost be more relaxing, but not quite.



Needham potter Steve Branfman builds new shelving to display his work at his Needham studio, The Potters Shop and School.

Branfman finishes the trims on the first piece and begins to create a new pot from the chuck-the clay base that stabilized the piece being trimmed.

The chuck starts off a clump of gray mud in a plastic bag and is soon pushed and pressed into a cone. He uses a sponge to pour water over it and begins to shape the clay. Unlike others in the studio, his potters' wheel is operated on a lever. He cranks it to the slow setting first. He drives two fingers into the cone. The hole widens with his touch until it is no longer a hole, but the empty space inside the pot.



Potter Steve Branfman works on a piece with Sarah Fuhro. This is when Branfman diverges from other potters' methods. He takes a steel wire mesh and raps the side of the clay with it, producing uniform slashes around the body of the pot. The marks look like an alligator's skin, or the imprint left by a snake in the desert sand. The pot is nowhere near its desired shape of a small base, wide body and thin tapering neck. Because the exterior of the pot is designed before throwing is complete, Branfman must complete the pot using only one hand, pushing it into shape from the inside.

Spinning a wheel requires intense concentration, balance and coordination. A potter manipulates a wet, thin, spinning piece of clay into various shapes with his or her hands, and it's almost too easy for the structure to collapse. Most students would consider one-handed throwing nearly impossible, or at least unnecessarily difficult. Some tutorials have been offered for potters who are forced to use one hand because of an accident or illness. But for most, students learn, throwing should be done with both hands pressed firmly against the inside and outside of the pot, guiding the shape with a single smooth upwards motion.

Branfman stands up from his stool and reaches into the pot with his left hand. The wheel is spinning slightly faster now. Dried clay clings to his arms, his clothes-his entire alcove in front of him is lined with tools caked with a layer of brittle grey-white mud. Gently but firmly, he pushes out, creating a bulge in the bottom of the pot. Slowly, he pulls the bulge upwards until it disappears into the rim. The pot has now been widened. Its walls are thinner. When he does this again, and again, to produce that elegant jar-shape Branfman is famous for, the walls become thinner and the risk of collapse becomes higher.



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Those jagged mesh lines have been stretched to Branfman's will. Now they seem to cling more loosely to the pot, their edges softened by the widened walls. Branfman has said that these markings, a trademark of his, are inspired by geology and natural terrain.

Branfman ends his day filling out orders for his bookstore. Located next to the Potters Shop Gallery, it is one of the most comprehensive bookstores dedicated solely to books on pottery and Raku.

The finish piece now spins quietly on the wheel-so it dries evenly, explains Branfman.

Today's throwing is, of course, only a snapshot of the ceramic-making process. Before throwing, Branfman custom mixes his glazes. The glaze room of Gorse Mill Studio is stacked with white plastic jars of sediments, minerals and other chemicals, including volcanic ash from the Mount St. Helen's eruption. After throwing, the piece will be fired in an outdoor kiln, then, in Raku tradition, tossed in a garbage pail filled with sawdust. Hot out of the kiln, the glowing molten clay sets fire to the dust, and the clay turns granite-black from the smoke.

The finished piece is way too elegant to be mistaken for practical pottery, yet it's imbued with a rustic, earthen aesthetic that gives it a prehistoric look. Indeed, the shape-globular, with a ribbed body, a tapering neck and a splayed rim-is similar to that of Hellenistic-period jugs, found in archeological sites like the Qumran. The colors are wild. Some of his pieces resemble a beautiful, perfectly formed alien/dinosaur egg.

What do these pieces mean to Branfman? Although he is not religious in the traditional sense, the process of making pottery suggests that, in pressing his energy and history into the clay, he imbues part of his son's memory into each piece.

"Other potters tend to treat the surface of their work as a canvass," he says. "They'll make their piece and decorate it, either with glaze or with drawings. I see the surface of my work as the skin. So the texture is meant to express and exaggerate the volume and pressure of what's inside here, what longs to come out."



Steve Branfman signs a piece of his work.

He adds: "It's not a debilitating connection. For some artists, it's absolutely conceivable that when faced with something like this, they can just be frozen and not able to incorporate the tragedy in their art."

In the description for Branfman and his son's joint gallery, Jared wrote that he shared a deeply personal relationship with the clay he worked with.

Echoing Branfman's words, Jared said that each pot is the mark of an artist as a human being.

"In making things I am primarily interested in what the material has to say, that is the physicality of it. I strive for a relationship with the clay in which my response to it is as important as its reaction to me," he wrote. "Pots serve as the best way for me to express this dialogue. It is both the exercise of making clay things-handling and firing them, as well as the intimacy of touching, living with, and using them, which drive me to make more. I hope also that my pots talk about me, not just about the way I handle clay, but about my personality and interests."