

LES MANNING

in memoriam

HEIDI MCKENZIE



Les Manning speaking at the ceremony for the opening of the Canadian Museum at FuLe International Ceramic Art Museums project, Fuping, China, 2007 *photo - Grace Nickel*

I had the immense honour of taking Les Manning's Aesthetics of Ceramics summer course at Metchosin International Summer School for the Arts on Vancouver Island in the summer of 2011. Sadly it was the last formal multi-day workshop Manning ever taught. I was between my second and final year at Sheridan College in Ontario. When I left Toronto for the west coast of Canada, I had no idea that I was a sculptor. I had no idea that I had my own and my ancestors' stories to tell through clay – and yet, thanks to Manning's gentle guidance and what seemed to be the wisdom of a sage and the patience of a saint, for the past decade my practice has come to be centred around issues of identity, race, migration and ancestry.

As a testament to his selflessness as an artist and internationally renowned ceramics advocate and facilitator, I wanted to collect a few first personal stories from some

of the literally thousands of people that Manning coached, coaxed, mentored, taught, worked alongside, befriended, and with whom he generally shared his life.

I spoke first with Ann Mortimer, Manning's contemporary – the two often-cited as the "king and queen" of Canadian ceramics. Mortimer had many shared initiatives and extensive international travel with Manning over the decades in efforts to move the ceramics movement forward. What stood out was their reciprocal respect for one another's craft. Mortimer told me that when she heard about Manning's opening in the spring of 2011 in Medicine Hat, Alberta, she didn't hesitate to jump on a plane from Ontario to be there. According to Mortimer, Manning's exhibition *Common/Opposites* was a complete departure from the thrown abstract multi-clay mountain vessels that had emerged as his signature work from his time at Banff. The colourful hand-built low-fire work stemmed



PINK STONE, Les Manning, 2011, 42 cm x 43 cm x 23 cm, exhibited in "Common/Opposites", 2011, The Esplanade Gallery, Medicine Hat, Alberta.
 Photo - Dianne and Cecil Finch

from Manning's deep sense of dismay at the world's devastation of its forests and ecosystems. The next year, Les made a surprise appearance at the opening night reception of Ann's 80th birthday retrospective at Jonathan Bancroft-Snell Gallery in London. He flew in from Calgary for the night, escorted by friends and collectors, to be there for her big moment.

In 2007, Mortimer and Manning were asked to select the ten ceramic artists who would create the work for the Canadian exhibition hall of the Fuping International Ceramic Museum Project in China. Manitoba-based ceramic artist and educator, Grace Nickel, recalls Manning's steadfast leadership and dedication. Manning created works capturing the socioeconomic condition of the local factory workers, who surrounded the contingency. A complete

Les Manning working in the International Studio at the FuLe International Ceramic Art Museums project in Fuping, China, 2007. photo - Grace Nickel





Cypress Basin, Les Manning, 2011, 22 cm x 39 cm x 30 cm, exhibited in *Common/Opposites*, 2011, The Esplanade Gallery, Medicine Hat, Alberta.
Photo - Dianne and Cecil Finch

Ice Tower, Les Manning, 2005, 29 cm x 21 cm x 21 cm, from the permanent collection of The Esplanade Heritage Gallery, Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada



departure for him. On the day the before the Canadian gallery was to open, the work already installed, the organizers decided to create a double-door entrance with a battering ram. According to Nickel, Manning stood like a sentinel safeguarding the work, adapting to the surreal nature of events in a heartbeat, with the art and the artists' interests guiding his every move.

Manning made a difference in people's lives directly and indirectly. His leadership in the field within the International Academy of Ceramics led to Canada's first hosting of their annual congress at the Banff Centre for the Arts, where Les was Director of the Ceramic Studio for over two and a half decades. It was at that IAC congress that the seeds were planted for the growth and flourishing of both the Alberta Potters Association and the Alberta Craft Council, Manning being a founder of both bodies. Concurrent with the congress was a pivotal exhibition of international ceramics in Calgary. Celebrated Canadian ceramicist, Greg Payce was in high school at the time. His art teacher showed his class slides of the exhibition and its catalogue. He can still see the catalogue images in his minds' eye nearly half a century later. The possibilities they presented to Payce were pivotal in cementing his future in ceramics. In the early 1980s, Payce worked two winter terms as an artist in residence at Banff under Manning's mentorship. Payce recalls Manning organizing field trips to New York City for his residents, opening the doors to studios and possibilities that were otherwise inaccessible to a whole generation of his peers. When Payce had his major 2015 retrospective, *Palimpsest* at the Esplanade Gallery in Medicine Hat, Alberta, he mounted *Continuum* at Medalta's gallery space, an exhibition of early works from his formative years. Payce dedicated *Continuum* to Les Manning.

Trudy Golley has been teaching ceramics at Red Deer College since 2000. She is one of Canada's bright lights on the international ceramic circuit, but she might not be doing what she's doing or creating what she's creating were it not for one small gesture of kindness on the part of Les Manning. Golley had not even met Manning in 1986 when his handwritten letter arrived in the post. Manning had written to let Golley know that he had purchased one of her pieces (a blue and yellow mask). He was very impressed with her work. He had hung it up by his back door so he could see it as he left each day. He went on to say that she should drop in at the Banff Centre sometime. At the time, Golley was struggling with self doubt, and was considering registering for courses in the sciences that would lead to a career in medicine. After reading Manning's note, she flipped the pages of the calendar to Fine Arts, and the rest is history. Golley met Manning in 1988 as an artist in residence at Banff. Much later, Golley told Manning what his letter had done for her. She continues to use Manning's selfless act as a model in her own life, teaching and mentorship, and "pays it forward" when she can.

Elaine Henry is an American ceramic artist, writer, critic, editor, curator and convenor. She met Manning in 2002 at a 25-artist international symposium in Foshan, China. They happened to be assigned adjacent work-stations. The two developed a lasting, close friendship. Later, when Henry became President Elect of NCECA (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) she created an advisory board and invited Manning to play an integral role in developing

NCECA's first artist residency programmes. Later, Manning asked Henry to write the catalogue essay for the exhibition of the new body of work that he created at Medalta during his time as a Senior Artist in Residence. This was a first for Henry, and proved to be the "nudge" she needed to delve more deeply into her writing. At 75, Henry has just graduated with a Master of Arts in English from the University of Wyoming. Her thesis is a major contribution to the field: *Comparative Analyses of Contemporary Fine Art Criticism and Contemporary Ceramics Criticism*.

For many, Harlan House is synonymous with high-fired porcelain, both functional and sculptural, in Canada and abroad. House was one year Manning's junior at the Alberta College of Art in 1966. He remembers Manning as "a hard-working potter, and a quiet thoughtful soul as a young man". He describes him as a cowboy in dress and in spirit. He had his own ideas, and when everyone else was firing high temperature gas kilns, Manning was tinkering with oxidation and the chemistry of his own glazes. But most of all, House remembers his generosity in lending a helping hand – to everyone and anyone who needed it.

Jim Marshall is a living legend in Alberta. He is a visual artist and possibly most well-known for his over three-hundred sculpted brick murals. Marshall, himself a member of the octogenarian club, was pivotal in the resurrection and founding of Medalta Potteries along with Jack Forbes. When Manning was casting about for his next major move after he left Banff, it was Marshall who invited him to Medicine Hat to set up what is now the Shaw International Centre for Contemporary Ceramics that is part of Medalta Historic Clay District in Medicine Hat, Alberta. Manning worked tirelessly to launch the residency programmes and stayed on as a Senior Artist in Residence with his own studio in the new Centre for over a decade. It is there that he created the work for *Common/Opposites*. Marshall recalls that even in his declining years, Manning would walk to Medalta every day, like a homing pigeon. Clay was his centre. One of Marshall's fondest memories of Manning was the day in the fall of 2016, years after not having worked with clay, Manning sat down at the wheel and started throwing "waxing philosophical about pots as if it were 30 years ago". Marshall calls Manning one of the best wheel men ever.

Les Manning leaves a gaping hole in the ceramic landscape on so many levels – mostly, he was just a gentle cowboy with a huge heart and a whole lot of talent.

Heidi McKenzie

is a ceramic artist and arts journalist based in Toronto, Canada.

www.heidimckenzie.ca or [@heidi_art](https://twitter.com/heidi_art)



Millwell, Les Manning, 2005, 16 cm x 27 cm x 27 cm, from the permanent collection of The Esplanade Heritage Gallery, Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada

Les Manning (right) and **Ann Mortimer** (left) attending the opening of the Canadian Museum, FuLe International Ceramic Art Museums project, Fuping, China, 2007
photo - Grace Nickel

