

# The Firm

by Sarah Rossiter



Left to right: Details of works by The Firm partners Michael Schmidt, Brian Jensen, Stephen Heywood and Shane Christensen.

When it comes to planning, promotion and professional success, four heads are better than one.

The Firm doesn't want to tone your abs and thighs, or push Tom Cruise to the edge of reason: it has other ambitions. The art collective founders, Shane Christensen, Stephen Heywood, Brian Jensen and Michael Schmidt, share a common medium, profession, graduate school and grounding in functional ceramics. They founded The Firm as a way to formalize their professional relationship, secure a support network and provide for economy of effort. They would have "more feet on the street" (as Geraldo would say) scouting venues, promoting their work, networking and otherwise sharing the burdens of the business side of art, which, however essential, takes away from studio time and energy. But what each partner seems to value most is the camaraderie and strength he finds in the shared experiences and challenges; the things that define their community.

### Common History, Common Purpose

Communities form from the bonds of shared place, history, environment, challenges, purpose, blood, economics, religion, ideology and values. Three partners in The Firm grew up in Utah, were Eagle Scouts and graduated from Southern Utah University (SUU) with degrees in Art and Education. The fourth, Schmidt, took a different path, from Wisconsin with a B.F.A. in Art and Graphic Design, to the same graduate school. Christensen, Schmidt, Heywood and

Jensen—in that order—earned their M.F.A. degrees in ceramics at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania (EUP) in overlapping years, and all were studio technicians in the program.

Consequently, they share the experiences, capers and particularities of grad school at EUP: kiln loading at five below zero, post-critique potlucks at Professor Lee Rexrode's house, the big salt kiln that couldn't (and now can), a 5:00 A.M. "Unloading-a-Semi-Truck-of-Clay-Materials" seminar and breakfast with Professor Chuck Johnson, Thanksgiving and Spongebob at the Jensens', firing the soda kiln together into the wee hours of the morning—shared challenges, places, experiences. Years later, the stories rejuvenate feelings of connection and belonging.

In the book *Community on the American Frontier: Separate but Not Alone*, Robert V. Hine concludes that, "The essence of community may be in doing something, not in being something; the community then should conceive of itself as an active team, not as a passive set of colleagues." The rewards of community industry are certainly at the heart of a kiln's charisma. We are drawn to what Heywood describes as "togetherness and a sense of unity around some cause."

The rapport Christensen, Heywood, Jensen and Schmidt found with each other evolved in the industrious culture of the university ceramics studio, in working and creating together. Pooling expertise



**“Teapot and Cups with Base,” 9 in. (23 cm) in height, thrown stoneware, fired to Cone 10 in reduction, by “Mr. Fantastic” Stephen Heywood, Jacksonville, Florida.**

## Stephen Heywood

As Schmidt describes him, “Steve is our Mr. Fantastic,” finding, submitting to and coordinating the exhibitions, such as a show at The Real Mother Goose gallery in Portland, Oregon, during NCECA 2006. Prolific and methodical, Heywood enjoys working in a vein similar to Jensen’s, throwing suites of forms to assemble into more complex architectural constructions.

Heywood’s utilitarian sculpture represents industrial and agricultural structures, reflecting in their beauty a certain post-industrial romanticism. “Many of these buildings are used for containment and are in essence vessels of function,” he writes. The physical experience of his work—of filling, pouring, transferring, emptying—reflects the physical labors of use of the structures he represents. Use of his work draws other objects on a table or counter into an interactive landscape.

Earth, sky, harvest, new growth, architecture and landscape blend in the forms, lines and glazes of Heywood’s work. Combed lines suggest both ploughed fields and corrugated aluminum. An earth-toned storage form suggests both barn and landscape. He combines near and far in single objects: the vent on the roof of a large silo canister suggests a tiny silo on the landscape of a canister lid. Like Schmidt, he incorporates numbers as design elements—barn hexes, building and bin numbers, boxcar identifiers—and nichrome wire as ladders and rails. “Continual experimentation is the key in keeping my work from becoming stagnant,” says Heywood. The component parts of his work and the designs which stack, assemble, open, nest and interlock provide for experimentation with infinite combinations.

and dividing labor made their experiences not only easier but more enjoyable. The Firm serves both to perpetuate this model and to replicate aspects of the structure, challenges and accountability that made graduate school such a constructive time. Founding The Firm also helped insulate the partners from the cold plunge many people experience after graduate school, whereupon leaving a high-energy, closely knit, art-enthusiastic studio community, graduates find that few people in their daily lives share their passion for making, looking at or discussing art.

Mobility, distance and time often challenge and disrupt community, particularly in a country as vast as the United States; in this case, however, separation from graduate school and from each other spurred these artists’ desire to form an exhibition collective. Although the partners have scattered in teaching positions around the country, in Florida, Georgia, Texas and Utah, through telecommunications and digital technology they stay connected as friends and artists in a way that would have been more difficult in another era. They also gather yearly at the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference, host each other as visiting artists, cross paths at wood firings, meet for lectures and rendezvous whenever possible at openings for their exhibitions. Despite their distance from each other, the partners remain connected and help each other evolve professionally, personally and artistically.

### The Scouts

In his first semester at Edinboro University, during one of many conversational marathons on all things great, small and technological with Professor Steve Kemenyffy, Christensen once mentioned that

he was an Eagle Scout. Nearly a year later, Kemenyffy arrived in his studio with the 1966 *Boy Scout Merit Badge Book of Pottery* folded in his back pocket. “There’s some crazy stuff in here!” Kemenyffy announced, and left it for Christensen’s edification and amusement.

The merit badge book resurfaced after graduate school when Christensen, then teaching at Western Texas College, was invited to lecture to Art majors at SUU. He included in his presentation this Boy Scout advice: “You may enter the field of ceramics without attending college, but college training will give you a much better opportunity to advance. If you find that a college education is

impossible, you may get employment with a ceramics concern and show an interest in your work so that, in time, you will become of real value to the firm.”

Jensen attended Christensen’s lecture at SUU, and afterwards the two discussed the optimism and opportunity presented in the merit badge book. It resonated with the paths they had chosen in ceramics and the art collective idea they had been considering for several years with Heywood and Schmidt. So the four friends decided to formalize their fellowship in goals, art, profession and media (and a certain entrepreneurial panache). The result: The Firm.

## Brian Jensen

Jensen is known to The Firm as the glaze innovator and entrepreneur (see “The Quest for the Glowing Glaze,” CM June/July/August 2004) and as the partner whose work changes most dramatically and frequently. His style nevertheless remains identifiable and consistent: architectures softened by construction from wheel-thrown elements and charcoal-glazed or washed surfaces, which, even when occasionally contrasted with bright, crystalline or glossy glazes, seem to exist in perpetual twilight.

The Gothic and the Art Nouveau captured Jensen’s interest while living in France; although he does not reference them directly, he has assimilated elements and aesthetics of the architecture and furniture from these styles—the intricate constructions, the fine detail, the unexpected elements of the macabre. Jensen also identifies with the fine design and craftsmanship exemplified in these periods. Paraphrasing a statement he encountered at a recent art exhibition, Jensen said, “The difference between mediocrity and excellence is the attention to detail.”

The drawers, niches and compartments of Jensen’s current work hold not so much secrets, closely held private information, but mystery, the intrigue of the unknown. His current objective is to design objects in such a manner that “years later someone might discover new information, a new chamber inside a chamber inside a chamber.” Part of this plays with viewers’ expectations of functional objects: floors where we expect voids, openings where we expect none, false floors, doors that slide sideways instead of pulling open.

“I want to present information that I find funny or mysterious or contradictory and let people find connections and meaning for themselves,” says Jensen. His pieces house organized collections of ceramic objects in multiple drawers—acorns, VW Bugs, severed fingers, scrolls—each part of a puzzle or riddle with no correct solution. What do we collect? What do we keep? How do we choose from among these things those which are most special? The storage, grouping, categorization and protection of these apparently disparate objects is reminiscent of the Wunderkammer (“Cabinets of Curiosities”) collections in vogue during sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe.

“Five-Drawer Chest,” 20 in. (51 cm) in height, porcelainous stoneware fired to Cone 10 in reduction, 2006, by “Glaze Guru” Brian Jensen, Springville, Utah.



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#### The Power of Four

The partners bring complementary strengths to The Firm and have found, similarly, that their ceramic work makes a complementary gallery representation. All four artists are prolific. All are attentive to detail and craftsmanship. All prefer vapor firing. All make work that maintains or refers to utility. All have developed a level of complexity

in their integration of form, line and surface that comes with experience and an intimate knowledge of clay, glazes and firing.

The partners share a tremendous respect for each other, artistically, personally and professionally. They also share the belief that they can accomplish more together than they can individually. In *Community on the American Frontier*, Hine also concluded, “a

## Shane Christensen

As its official Entertainment Chair, Christensen brings to The Firm spontaneity and a willingness to pitch in wherever needed; the partners particularly appreciate these qualities as a cohesive element in the collective. Now established in St. George, Utah, as a high school teacher and studio potter, Christensen has been creating work for wood firing and for Cone 6 oxidation while he finishes building a soda kiln at his newly completed home studio.

He characterizes his work as a modern interpretation of traditional American folk pottery forms fused with elements of the Korean pottery tradition he absorbed while living in Korea. He prefers the simplicity of traditional ceramics, and his work serves as foil to the more complex constructions of his counterparts in The Firm. In keeping with his influences, economy of motion and materials drives his approach to ceramics: forms thrown and finished on the wheel, designs created with “wax resist and a big brush,” glazes made of four ingredients or fewer.

In Christensen’s work, as in Schmidt’s, we see a distinctly graphic element—repeated dots and lines, high-contrast slip and glaze, positive/negative. He sometimes uses the vessel form as a framing device for surface patterns mapped in fundamental geometric shapes. In other pieces, concentric bands or painterly parallel lines reflect the streamlined flow he enjoys in his process of creation. In either case, he shies from ornate decoration, instead weighting the surface designs to match the simplicity of his forms. Soda firing, Christensen’s preferred firing method, casts an atmospheric veil over the graphic elements, softening lines and haloing dots, creating a bridge between the geometric surface patterns and the gentle aspect of thrown forms. In the absence of a soda kiln, however, he has been using terra sigillata to provide a subtle flash where exposed clay abuts glazed surfaces.

Christensen remains resolutely committed to the true functionality of his thrown forms. He realized his calling to ceramics while taking a class with Professor Mark Talbert at SUU. “His simple functional objects—mugs, bowls, pitchers—are so beautiful, so functional. It opened my eyes to the fact that being a potter was a legitimate living and lifestyle.”



“Bean Jar,” 15 in. (38 cm) in height, stoneware with wax-resist pattern, soda fired to Cone 10, by “Entertainment Chair” Shane Christensen, St. George, Utah.

The Firm characterizes Schmidt, with his graphic design background, as Tech Wizard, solving problems or questions of megapixels, compression format, CMYK or RGB and ftp uploads. His ceramics have run the gamut: from thrown and assembled to press molded and handbuilt; from glazed with crusty lichen to glossy red; from strictly functional to large-scale figurative work. But since taking a ceramics teaching position at Valdosta State University in Georgia in 2001, Schmidt has returned to making forms that at least reference utility. His graphic design background remains the unifying current in his work, manifesting in his use of line, repetition, letterset, positive/negative images, numbers, symbols and decals.

Not surprisingly, his forms reflect an attraction to the clean geometries of industrially designed objects and structures—oil cans, silos, factories, refineries and, occasionally, porcelain cups or tumblers—which in form and weight suggest mass production. He also includes nichrome wire loops, hooks and rungs on his structures and frequently groups his ceramics on “concrete” platforms (made of a gypsum/perlite plaster), furthering their industrial aspect. The clean lines of the industrial forms, however, contrast with blushed and pitted vapor-blasted surfaces, suggesting objects weathered by time and the elements. Schmidt remarks, “I find old signs, advertisements, schematic plans, numbers and typography quite beautiful.” He occasionally leaves the marks of construction on his work, giving the impression of corrugated metal joined with raw welds or an errant drip from the spout of a neatly shelved oil can—suggestions of the matter-of-fact use of the containers represented in his work.

Schmidt’s design often reflects a subtle element of humor—mugs bearing petroleum company decals with interiors glazed in crude-oil black; arrows helpfully indicating the direction of throwing marks; an image of a manufacturing plant smokestack pointing upward to a three-dimensional representation of itself.

**“Kendall Teapot, Funnels and Base,” 12 in. (30 cm) in height, stoneware soda fired to Cone 10, and slip-cast porcelain, nichrome wire, laser print transfers, cast Structo-Lite base, 2006, by “Tech Wizard” Michael Schmidt, Valdosta, Georgia.**

## Michael Schmidt



community might be seen as a plane where individual needs and desires are resolved in group action and, conversely, where group needs are furthered by individual behavior.” Forming a small, close community—a nuclear exhibition group—has enabled the partners in The Firm both to advance individually and to contribute more effectively to the ceramics community. The Firm and other groups such as AKA 92 (in jewelry/metals), the Winnipeg-based Royal Art Lodge, and Club Mud on the West Coast have all benefited from the combined strength of motivation, accountability, division of labor, networking and opportunity discovery—the gestalt—of exhibiting as collectives.

United not by the geographic proximity or aesthetic agendas that have defined many art collectives, the partners instead share a love of

clay, a connection to functional forms, careers in education, a commitment to professional and artistic advancement, and a desire to achieve balance in their lives. “I think we are successful because we are all friends,” Jensen commented. “Although we want this project to be successful, we realize that it’s more about our friendship than it is about ceramics and shows and success.”

*“The Firm: Inspiration and Evolution,” an exhibition of works by members of The Firm, will be on display at Jefferson Community College during NCECA 2007 in Louisville, Kentucky.*

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