

The Pinch Potter of Phoenix

Unhappy with boring store-bought pots, Mike Cone took the clay into his own hands

by SCOTT CALHOUN

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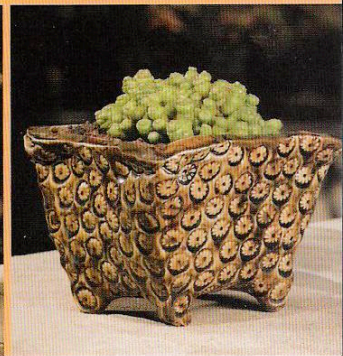
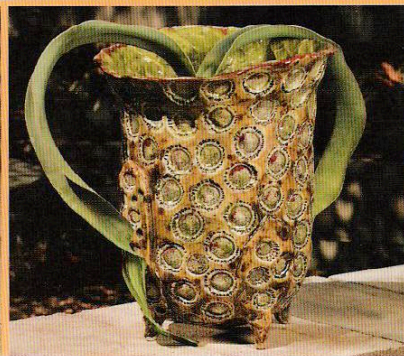
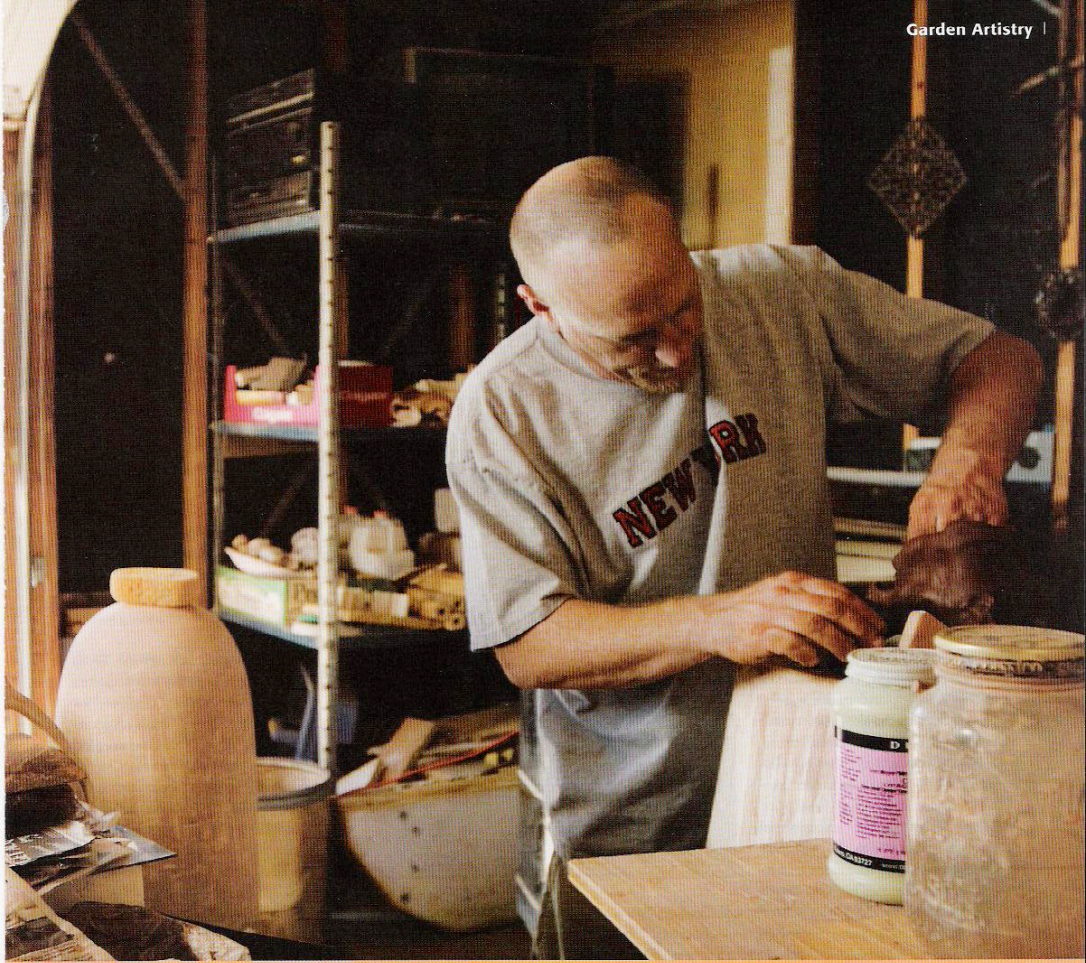
Calling Mike Cone's pottery distinctive is beyond understatement; vessels this otherworldly look as though they were collected by the Mars lander. But considering that Cone's early work consisted of ceramic monsters, his wildly stylized pots come as no surprise.

A Bay Area native, Cone has been working with clay since he was 14, when he began hanging around a San Francisco studio until the owner decided to pay him to pour molds. Years later, after moving to the Arizona desert to escape long commutes, Cone turned his artistic focus to the botanical. "I began making flowerpots when I couldn't find anything I liked locally," he says. "I wanted to find something functional I could use in gardens."

Cone's pots are entirely handmade. His pinch pots "are based on one of the first things you learn in ceramics: to stick your finger in a ball of clay, then shape it, like a piecrust, through pinching." Because all of his pots are high fired, they are up for long life in the garden. Although he uses commercial glazes, he tweaks them to achieve richer colors. "I use low-fire glazes and I burn them to get different effects," he explains. His favorite pot, an earthy brown wavy box imprinted with celadon rectangles, is demure compared to some of his brighter takes. "I don't mind bold color, but I prefer the

Mike Cone's use of found objects and high-fire glazes makes his pots distinctive and beautiful.





natural clay," he says. "With their strong shapes, my pots often don't require the embellishment of color."

Although his pots border on the fantastic, they are not without design and repetition. Using found objects and handmade clay stamps, Cone imprints patterns on his pots. His favorite stamping tools include deer antlers, fish and dog bones, and a stamp adapted from a floral button. "I'm a modern fanatic, and more than anything, I like simple repeated designs," he says. "I moved to the desert and adopted a clean sparse desert aesthetic. I'm basically fighting Southwest kitsch."

A PLANTSMAN-POTTER

A plantsman in his own right and a self-described "species freak," Cone spent several years dividing his time between working at a Scottsdale cactus nursery and making pots. Currently, Cone makes pottery and tends to his own plants full time. His backyard acts as a luscious display case of potted succulents happily situated in his high-fired pots. His collection is exceptional enough to likely raise the eyebrows of discriminating succulent admirers such as Thomas Hobbs. Cone's favorite plant, *Pachypodium lamerii*, "was the first plant that got me turned on to succulents. From there, I was hooked." Sitting at a patio table under the dappled shade of an army surplus camouflage shade cloth, he elaborates on his latest passions, including South



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African bulbs and arid orchids, which have staked claim to a good portion of his patio, kitchen, and dining room.

At Plants for the Southwest, a nursery outlet for Cone's work, owner Jane Evans enjoys combining Cone's brightly finished pots with complementary succulents. A striking studded purple pinch pot houses a silver-margined purple *Dyckia* hybrid. The plant looks as though it were made to be placed in just such a pot. In one of Cone's pink and red polka-dot creations, Evans has artfully arranged a tiny *Crassula* × 'Morgan's Pink' in such a way that the pink flower seems to gain energy from its container. "Mike's pots create stunning staged plants," she says.

Tera Vessels, owner of Tera's Garden in Phoenix, loves Cone's pots because they are "designed for succulents. Since Mike is a succulent-plant grower and has studied them, he knows what colors in the pots will bring out the colors in the succulents." She also likes Cone's pots because although they are contemporary, they "work in both modern and old homes."

Looking at Mike Cone's pots lined up on a shelf, it is easy to see that each piece is an individual work of art. Even his signature has a certain offbeat flair: if you turn over one of his pots, you will see "kōn," the phonetic spelling of his name, imprinted with gusto on each work of clay. **H**

Where to Find Them

<p>California Cactus Center 216 South Rosemead Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91107 626-795-2788 www.cactuscenter.com</p>	<p>Plants for the Southwest 50 East Blackledge Tucson, AZ 85705 520-628-8773 www.lithops.net</p>	<p>Mike Cone 1414 East Topeka Drive Phoenix, AZ 85024 623-715-7692 www.mikecone.com www.baobabpottery.com</p>
<p>Sticky Situation 4545 West Camino Pintorescu Tucson, AZ 85745 520-743-9761 www.stickysituation.com (open by appointment)</p>		