

Making It with Mud at Gualala Arts

When the Gualala Arts Center was designed it was planned that the lowest floor, which at the back of the building opens out at ground level, would contain classrooms and studios. They put in windows and lights and made several rooms with the idea that the various groups could establish a workshop or home for themselves. The rooms have been used by the photography group. They even set up a darkroom and later computers to handle digital photos. Many of the rooms ended up, however, simply as storage space while the interests of the members took their time in coalescing.

Last winter, wanting to make a space for her classes, Zola de Firmean cleared one of the rooms, painted a wall a warm yellow, put in shelves and set up a clay studio. Over the years members of Gualala Arts had donated a wealth of clay materials and equipment, even a couple of kilns. Sharon Porter was able to use one for firing the clay in the large mosaic mural in front of the Chevron gas station in town.

The room, now called The Clay Studio, came in handy this summer for Darshan Hodges as the place to teach the kids in the Summer Arts Program for Youth. It still lacked inside water, but they used a hose outdoors, which while not ideal, worked. Fifteen kids formed clay animals, cups, and glazed them in eight days.

Earlier in the year Jan Maria Chiappa had come up with the idea of building a community of persons working in clay around the facility. She offered, instead of a workshop, the concept of an open studio. She simply wanted to open the studio so anyone, of any skill or experience with clay, could come and get their hands on the mud. Her project was well attended and garnered a lot of interest and activity. She was even able to hold a "bridal party." Instead of buying shower gifts for the bride, friends and family rented the studio and Jan Maria's time, and under her direction, made the bowls, cups and birdhouses to directly carry their best wishes for the new couple.

From these activities we have seen that there is plenty of interest in our having a studio where anyone can come to work in clay. Jan Maria is committed to making a community. The phrase has been used before, but she is very firm in her idea that the space should foster a togetherness built around an interest in working with clay. She envisions the rooms – the space has already expanded into a second room, as forming the nucleus for a group of persons who will come here for inspiration and education before fanning out across the cliffs and ridges.

In the last fifty years the driving forces of the art world have concentrated on making art a commercial success. This meant filling bigger museums with larger artworks, higher prices, and star-quality prestige. One is not against this development if one misses and discusses a facet of art that was once our country's focus. That was folk art. In some circles folk art is almost a pejorative word, but one must understand that if the only acceptable kind of art is the commercially available art, the masses of the people will be cut off from a vital component of their lives.

Yes! all of us need art to inspire and to feed us with vision, and one can get this from commercial art, but we also need to make art. And we do make art everyday with way a table is arranged for a meal, a new rug is put down on the floor, flowers are put into a vase. For a number of people this is not enough. They desire to make something more lasting, more special, more out-of-the-ordinary.

As Jan Maria said yesterday at we sat on the fog-filled porch with her dog Bear, "We need art to do; not just to view." She would like to work to make one of Gualala Arts directions a support of folk art – the art being made by the folks of this time and place who are connecting to the nature of this world. She also said she wanted to see, "everyone doing art and appreciating everyone's art." This concept is already happening with the quilt guild and even now, woodworkers are organizing and planning to turn another of those downstairs classrooms into

place where people can carve and build sculptures.

Now we need some help with establishing a proper place for people to work in clay. A sink is needed, space outdoors needs to be leveled and protected from sun and rain. Tools have already been ordered, water containers and jars with screw-on lids are being collected from kitchens, and more shelving has been added. Tables have been arranged so there is room for up to twelve persons to work at once. On the wish list for the studio is a floor-model slab roller, an extruder, an outdoor covered area for the kilns, and the crowning jewel – a water recycler.

Ceramicists, check out your studios for things you are no longer using and see if they can be donated so others may make good use of them. Anyone with grant-writing skills would be welcomed as there are several available grants that could be helpful for this type of program.

Jan Maria Chiappa, who has taught for many years and has a degree in Fine Art, is herself an artist of many talents including ceramics, painting, and drawing. She has developed a program of focal points for the fall Wednesday Clay Studio activities. Anyone can come and make anything they are interested in doing, but she will be guiding those who want it, with instructions and examples. In September the focus will be on making bird feeders, bird houses, and bird baths. In October there will be hump forms available so people can hand-build plates and platters in time to display them at their Thanksgiving dinners. In November preparations for the holidays will continue with menorahs, nativity sets, wreaths, and figures.

The Clay Studio will be open for the Wednesday program beginning on August 23. Classes are held from 10 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Drop-In-Open Enrollment means you only pay when you come. For Gualala Arts Members the single session \$20, or you can purchase a six-session Card for \$100. For non-members the single session is \$28. Call Jan Maria Chiappa at 884-3825 or the office at 884-1138 to make sure there is a place for you in this exciting new venture. You can purchase Jan Maria's work at her booth in Art in the Redwoods or see it in the fine art exhibit.

