Kurt Weiser crouches like a bird of prey on a stool in his studio, the dark of night slipping in through glass. Fellini film scores jostling his mind. His right hand guides a tiny paint brush, dappling thin strokes of green paint that merge into sensuous ferns. The surreal scene takes form on a porcelain pot.

For a man who has spent the past three decades in the physical dance of throwing clay, Weiser finds the serenity of painting a particularly cathartic escape. By day he teaches ceramics as a Regents' Professor in the Katherine K. Herberger College of Fine Arts' School of Art at Arizona State University. His own work claims the night.

"Ceramics in the beginning was quite a bit of a sport—how facile you are, how good you are with your hands," he says. "I was good with my hands and could make just about anything. That was almost a handicap because I ended up performing as opposed to digging. You have to do something with the material."
As a child, Weiser lost himself in the illustrations of children’s books as his parents read to him. As he grew, he realized he could capture dreams and nature in his own drawings. He thought he would be a painter, but while still in high school he was seduced by the element of earth and the performance of molding that earth into art.

"The head of the art department was a potter. As a consequence, students were required to take ceramics. So I took it and I thought, this is kind of a messy recall. "But I did it and it was so interesting to watch that progression from dirt to an object that I just got hooked."

The seduction continued through undergraduate and graduate school. When Weiser left the University of Michigan, he was appointed resident director of the prestigious Archie Bray Foundation-a ceramics workshop and residency program in Helena, Montana. He stayed for 12 years, directing the program and working in clay.

His responsibilities also included fixing roofs and plowing roads, paying bills and fundraising. In 1989, he accepted a position in ASU’s School of Art and realized he would be able to pursue what he had been looking for all along.

"I thought, ‘I no longer have to be responsible for the roads and the pipes and the roofs. I can think about the students and what they do. And I can think about what it is I do and that’s considered my job.’"

For more than a decade, Weiser has shared his vast knowledge of ceramics with students and pursued a bold, new direction in his work. His appointment as the first Regents’ Professor in the School of Art honors him as a distinguished artist and a teacher of exceptional ability.

His years of experience working in clay, tangling with temperamental kilns, and developing his own art both stimulate and inspire his students. Bob Wills, dean of the Herberger College of Fine Arts, places Weiser in the very upper echelon of faculty members who through his own well-established and internationally recognized work serves as a real model for students,” he says. ‘By all indications, he’s also a terrific teacher in the classroom who has untold hours to spend mentoring students.”

First year graduate student Kaori Fujitani was attracted to ASU because of Weiser’s reputation as an artist and educator. “I knew his work. I knew his reputation as a person who know a lot and was connected with other people internationally. That brought a lot of insight into what he could offer,” she says.

After spending her first semester working with him, Fujitani is not disappointed. "Professor Weiser is so much about detail. He can pay attention to detail because he has such command of what he does. His effortless throwing and the fact that he fights that and works in a more demanding way, I think that says a lot about him."

When Weiser isn’t working with his students he spends lots of time in the studio he built behind his home just blocks from campus. After settling into that space, his work began to evolve gradually-from formal, abstract forms into sensuous, magical realism.

"I was sort of frustrated about the formality of what I had been doing. It wasn’t personal enough. There were things I was interested in and wanted to say, right out,” he explains. “The work needed to be much more literal. I sort of went back to that. I went back to children’s books, those illustrations that said so much to me. I thought, what could be simpler than that?”

When a New York gallery invited him to participate in a group show, Weiser used the opportunity to develop a narrative in his work. He painted a black glaze over teapot forms and scratched away at the darkness, revealing stories that seemed to form in moonlight.

“All the things that actually interested me. I could actually do something about,” he explains. “I could say things I wanted to say. I didn’t have to say them too clearly because the images were interesting enough. When you looked at them you could make up your own story.”

Weiser returned to his beginnings in drawing and painting. He softened the porcelain forms, rounding the edges of the molds. He experimented with the white clay, testing its ability to endure repeated firings.

A trip to Thailand was inspirational. Weiser was compelled to introduce the kaleidoscopic splendor he had experienced in the Thai countryside. He added color-the rich, true colors of china paint—gazes that have been fired in a kiln and ground into a fine powder. His stories began to emerge from the images. Seductive figures and faces, birds and butterflies, lizards and canines, pulsating flowers, and teeming seed pods vibrate in the richly colored vessels.

“They’re mostly about man’s relationship with nature, people’s relationship with nature, just how strange it all is—male, female, it’s all so different and fascinating.”

"It’s 30 years of what I’ve wanted to say. The only reason people do things, make things, paint things is because there is something pushing them to do it,” Weiser says. “It’s self-expression; something you want to get out. If you can make art out of it, well, what could be better than that?"
Kurt Weiser was named as ASU Regent's Professor of Art in 2000. His work is represented in many international collections including the Smithsonian Institution, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the Museum of Contemporary Ceramics in Japan, the National Museum of History in Taiwan, and the Arizona State University Art Museum.

Biographical notes:
NATURALIST, 17.5 x 10 in., 1996
VIRTUAL REALITY, 12 x 10 x 5 in., 1996
BIONEMA, 12 x 10 x 5 in., 1994
UNTITLED PORCELAIN, 12 x 10 x 5 in., 1998
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