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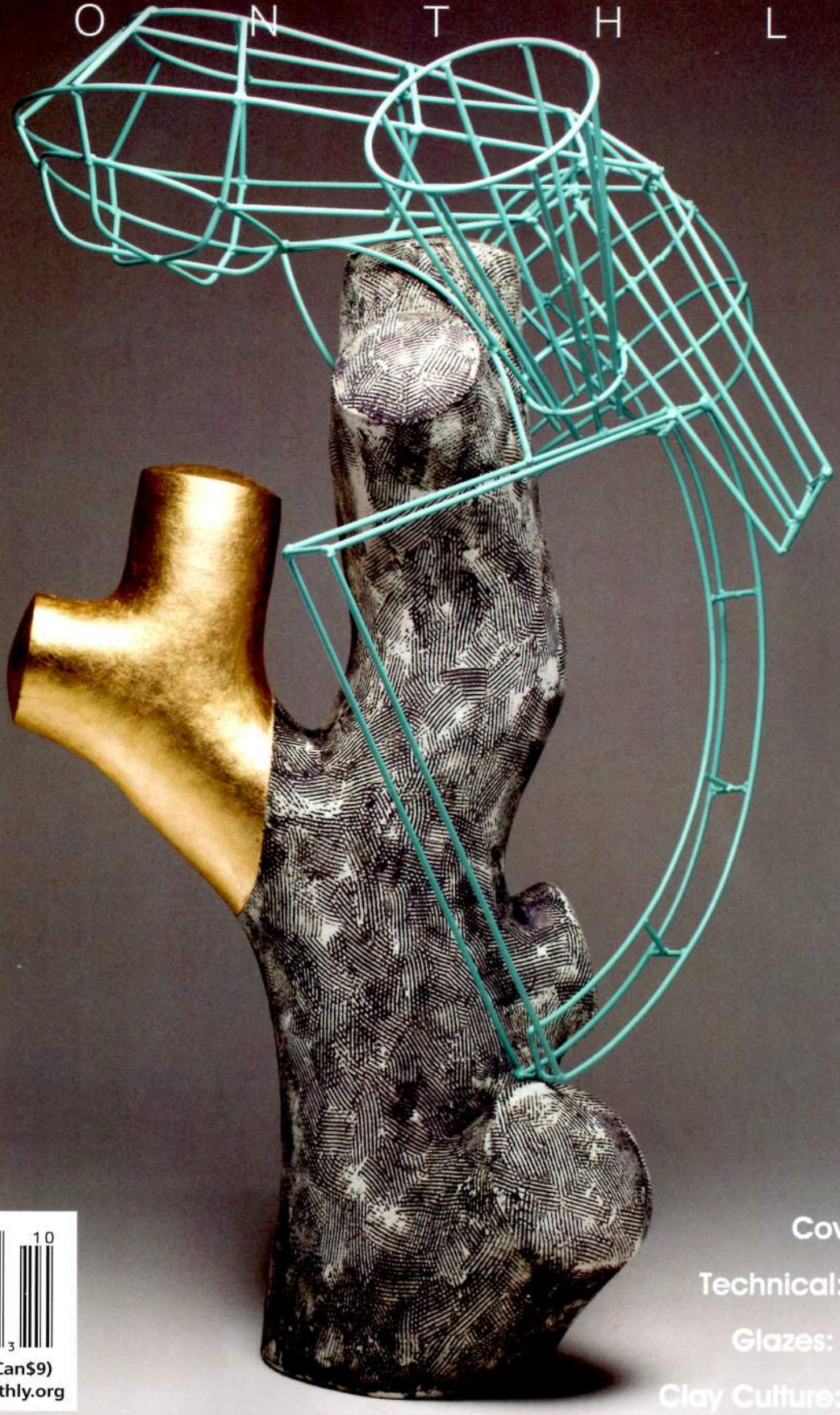

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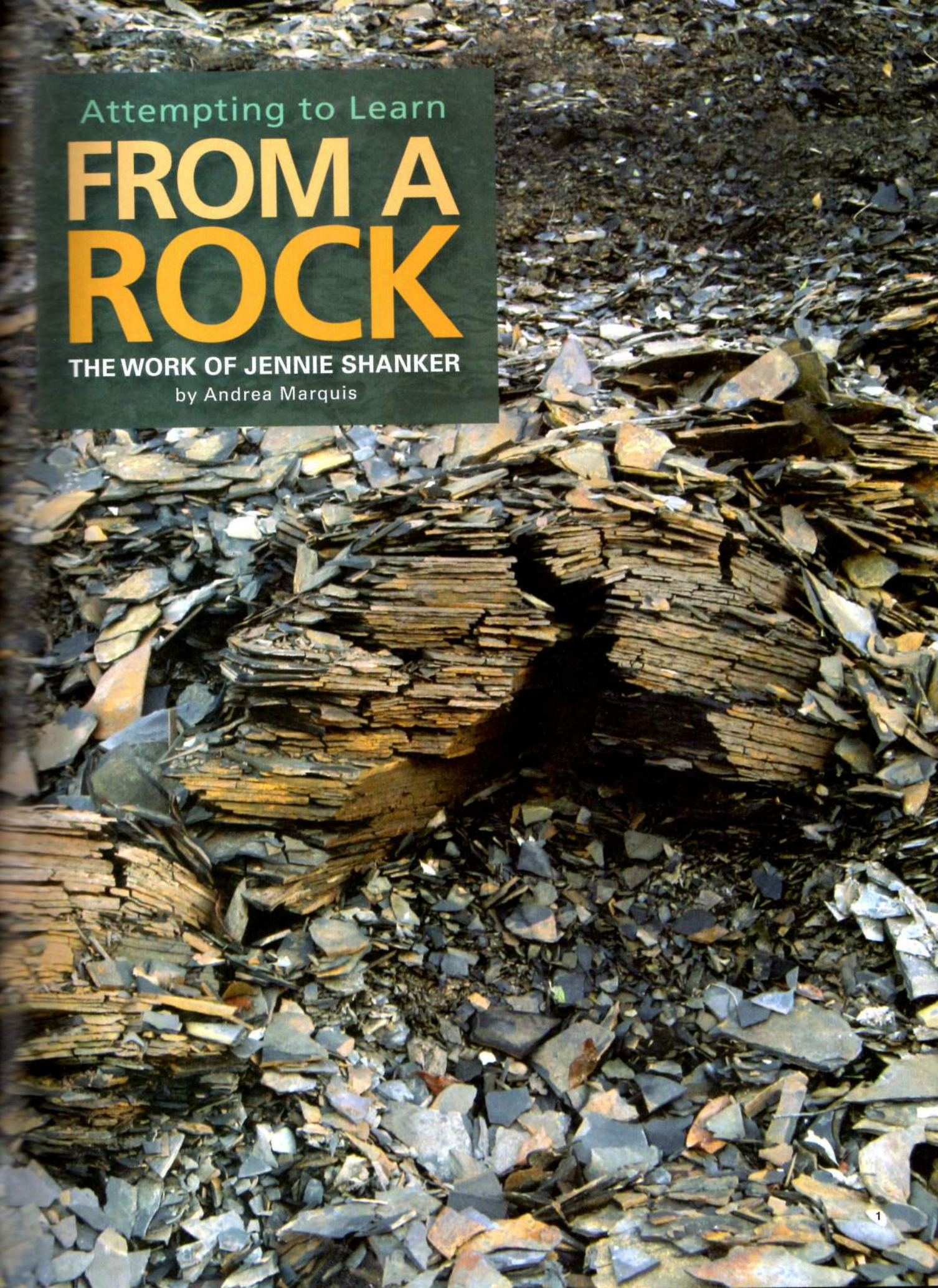

Attempting to Learn

FROM A ROCK

THE WORK OF JENNIE SHANKER

by Andrea Marquis

2

3

Jennie Shanker makes cups. They are dark red cylinders lined with a muted gloss glaze; they sit elevated off of the table with a small foot ring and continue to open upward with a gentle flare to a stepped, banded lip. Her cups are cast from a mold of the ubiquitous white Styrofoam coffee cup, a form and material now loaded with environmental and political un-correctness. They are free of decorations and embellishments and have an egalitarian quality about them. Shanker slip casts the cups in simple one-part molds without fuss, and she intends their imperfect moments to showcase the clay's natural qualities.

Like most potters, her studio practice is a laborious process. To make her casting slip, she locates and digs her clay, then drives it to her studio hours away from the clay deposit. She slakes it and sieves it, then she fires tests for maturity and inconsistencies. But the way that Shanker became a vessel maker is perhaps a very different story from that of other potters.

Jennie Shanker is an artist and teacher living in the Fishtown neighborhood of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She received a Master of Fine Arts degree in sculpture from Yale in 1992 and, since then, she has been an integral part of the vibrant art community in Philadelphia. For two decades, she has worked as an artist, in addition to a variety of creative roles: art handler and preparator, fabrication specialist, founding member of the artist collective Vox Populi, co-curator for the project CENTERpieces, and a blogger. She started making cups in 2011 while working on a project in the Catskill region of New York. Noticing the lovely red shale at her feet, she suggested to friend, ceramic artist Shay Church, that he use the shale clay for a piece. Shanker writes on her blog, "It wasn't clear what type of shale we were walking on and passing by regularly, and it was impossible to not wonder: Is that the Marcellus shale? What is this stuff? Could it be made into a clay? Is it safe to be near or handle? If it could be made into a ceramic product, how would I know if it was safe—especially food safe?" Shanker meditated on these questions and with her project mantra, "attempting to learn from a rock," set to work to find out about shale.

Shale to Clay

Shanker's work usually begins with an inquiry, and her questions from the Catskill shale resulted in *The Marcellus Clay Experiment*, a project that is named after the Marcellus shale. This is the infamous bedrock that spans from western New York down into Pennsylvania that entombs large natural gas deposits. In most locations, the Marcellus shale is buried deep below ground,

1 Detail of a Marcellus shale outcroppping where Shanker collects materials for her work. **2** Marcellus shale clay cups on display at The Clay Studio in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. **3** Marcellus shale cups, detail of bottom stamp. **4** Performance and installation at Temple Contemporary, detail of cups, cup molds, clay and glaze tests, and raw shale clay materials. **5** Performance and installation at Temple Contemporary, image of Jennie Shanker slip-casting cups during the exhibition.

trapping the natural gas in tiny pockets. Until relatively recently, the process of extracting this gas was prohibitively expensive. New developments in the hydraulic fracturing process, also known as fracking, have made harvesting the natural gas possible and indeed lucrative. So lucrative, in fact, that fracking created a boom in rural Pennsylvania and New York that conjures images of the California Gold Rush. For the people living above the Marcellus shale, the word fracking and the process it refers to have become a complex soup of patented chemical fluids, quick money, overburdened infrastructures, seismicity, and legislative de-regulation. The process has also created a ripple effect, a messy web of actions that have been linked to everything from an economic boom to methane-laden well water.

The word shale is not new to a potter's vocabulary and many of the places that we think of as ceramic hubs come from humble beginnings and close proximity to a shale outcropping. If you have visited Alfred, New York, (not far from the fracking boomtown of Bradford, Pennsylvania) you may have seen the lovely terra-cotta roof tiles made of Alfred shale clay. Alfred was once the home of the Celadon Terra Cotta Company[1] and thanks to the abundance of shale clay, the pottery that later became the ceramics program at Alfred University is still dedicated to art works made of clay.

Oxford Online Dictionary defines shale as a "soft finely stratified sedimentary rock that formed from consolidated mud or clay and can be split easily into fragile plates." The Online Etymology Dictionary traces the origins of the word to the late 14th century, linking it to fish scales and things that divide or separate, a visual link to the way the layered rock breaks apart.

With the help of two geologists, Shanker located a rare Marcellus shale outcropping and began to tackle the technical ceramic frontier. After much experimentation, Shanker concluded that slip was the preferable stage to manipulate the shale clay. Supported by the help of the geology department at Temple University and the ceramics department at Tyler School of Art, she began to learn about the working properties of her rock. She made porcelain dishes to use as saggars and fired samples at different temperatures.

With the help of the geologists, Shanker learned about mullite formation and began to decipher the changes in her shale. Unfired it was a bluish gray. Bisque fired to cone 04, it turned a brownish orange with varying degrees of rust color. At cone 4 some of the pieces took on a creamy white hue while others turned brick red as they matured and fused together. At cone 7, the shards started to vitrify, and began to show signs of bloating and expanding, while at cone 10 the shards had devitrified, expanding and bloating into bulbous, red, brittle pieces and hard, white mullite shards.

Since Shanker was working with the shale clay in slip form, it required additives to improve its working properties. The shale clay is processed and homogenized with the general clay body additions, depending on the working properties each batch has at the start. Some are short or brittle and nonplastic, others less so. To date she has made four batches of Marcellus shale clay slip, each with different shrinkage rates, but the final pieces shrink approximately 25% from beginning to end. After testing, processing, mixing, and slip casting the shale clay into cup forms, Shanker fires them to cone 6.

The Safety of the Material

Shanker chose the iconic Styrofoam cup to recreate using her Marcellus shale clay because this particular form is a potent conceptual vehicle for the countless safety issues that surround the origins of the shale clay and some question the safety of the rock itself. In October 2013, *The Atlantic* published an article titled, "How Fracking is Bad for our Body," and noted that the psycho-somatic stress of living close to a gas field is often much more detrimental than the physical harm that can come from actual gas exposure. The Marcellus shale is a material full of questions, especially if you intend to drink from it. Shanker writes on her blog, "The safety of using this material as a clay body is in no way related to the safety of hydrofracking. This needs to be said since there are blogs, aiming to convince people of fracking's safety, which are starting to mention this project. They use very sloppy logic."

Unlike artists who work with clay, most people don't think much about leaching and the safety of their preferred drinking vessels. With the Marcellus shale clay there is an intrinsic questioning; geologists identify shale by a slight radioactivity, the result of potassium in the rock (Shanker likes to compare it to the radioactivity emitted by a cell phone). Among ceramic artists, the term food safe, has an ambiguous and debated definition, but Shanker's cups go through an extensive test for leaching, much more intensive, in fact, than the cadmium/lead detecting that the FDA's basic test uses to qualify dinnerware as safe, more information can be found here (http://marcellusclay.blogspot.com/p/chapter-5-big-shale-teach-in.html). With the mineral leaching limits thoroughly vetted, Shanker

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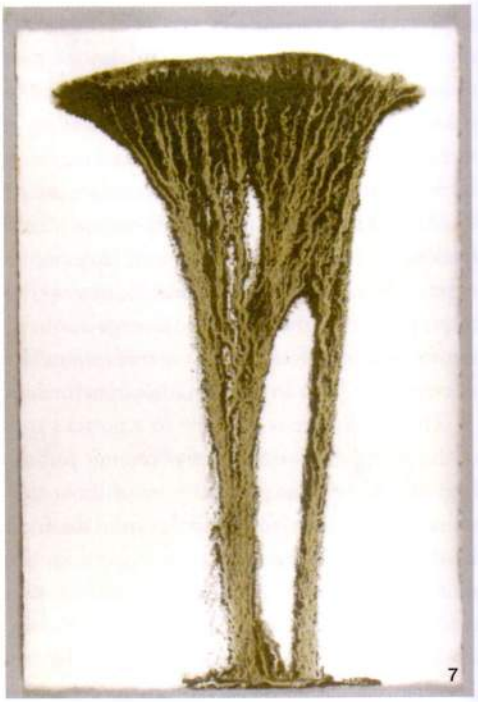

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6 Marcellus shale bowl created by lining a bisque fired, kiln-wash coated bowl with shale shards, firing this to cone 4, then spraying it with a flux and water solution and refiring it to stabilize the form. **7** *Dirt Washes*, Marcellus shale clay slip washes on paper, 2012. **8** Marcellus shale clay bowl, wheel-thrown, kiln-altered due to outgassing of moisture or impurities in the clay. **9** Kiln-fired Marcellus shale clay sculpture. Heat caused the iron in the rock to migrate to the outer layers. The shale also bloated, delaminated, and fluxed out in areas.

is completely confident in the safety of her cups and likes to tell her audience that they are the safest cups they will ever use.

The Object

The shale-clay cups are in high demand. She says that for some, especially folks in the drilling business, they are a novelty, but to others they are symbolic objects that act as the catalyst for meaningful conversations. The vessel shape does more than hold liquid, and Shanker plays with this notion as content in her social practice. She is adamant that the objects are not biased; she is not trying to create a politically charged dialog. She is however, acutely aware of the way that her understanding of the Marcellus shale communities grow, change, and evolve. Shanker embraces the work as an exploration of geography, politics, business, industrial processes, and legislative regulation.

Shanker continues to explore the physical and conceptual properties of the Marcellus shale clay. A series of two-dimensional studies includes pieces like *Dirt Washes*, which consist of slip made from Marcellus shale clay applied to Fabriano paper to create compositions that resemble distant, Google-maps photos of silty waterways. Shanker utilizes the high-iron content of her clay body like ink; making muted, watercolor-like paintings. The pieces are simple yet perceptive, playing with the phenomenology of unfired clay, a liquid that dries to a powder—the slip is a viscous material that behaves differently than ink or paint.

Shanker's cup form has now morphed into a bowl shape that uses the shard fragments of the shale as brick-like pieces. The sculptural bowls are fused together in the kiln with the addition of a little flux. They are small in scale and extremely fragile. Shanker's configuration of the flaked shale is a poetic reiteration of the natural deformations of the rock, which, in nature, quickly deteriorates once it is exposed above ground. The formation of Shanker's bowl form also plays with the idea of the brick, a reoccurring theme in some of her other sculptural work.

The variety of Shanker's work is vast and there is so much to look at and think about; there is always a subtle thread or commonality that links one piece to another. With the *Marcellus Clay Experiment*, she applies her perceptive exploratory nature, highlighting the science and labor of the ceramic process, as she mines her material for conceptual content. For Shanker, the work is all about the inquiry, and ultimately she hopes that the objects she creates are challenging to the viewer and that in return, the viewer asks questions.

For more information on Jennie Shanker's investigation into Marcellus shale clay, visit http://marcellusclay.blogspot.com. To see more of her work, visit http://jenniershanker.com.

the author *Andrea Marquis is an artist living in South Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She teaches Ceramics and 3D-Design at the Community College of Philadelphia.*

1. http://masonrydesign.blogspot.com/2011/03/masonry-in-alfred-ny-celadon-tile-works.html