

PAUL ANDREW

WANDLESS



Artist photo by Miles Andrew Wandless

“Clay has done a lot for me, and that is why I always try to give back.”

The Spider Woman is a powerful figure of knowledge and creation in Native American folklore of the Southwest. In his 1949 book, *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, mythologist Joseph Campbell writes her supernatural wisdom aiding characters on a dangerous journey deep underground. With eagle feathers and sage advice, she prepares the barely willing to confront the unknown. “... your hands are pollen; your body is pollen; your mind is pollen; your voice is pollen. The trail is beautiful. Be still.” Campbell explains that the power of mentorship is ... “a promise that the peace of Paradise ... known first within the mother womb, is not to be lost; that it supports the present and stands in the future as well as in the past.”

Mentors have been celebrated in all ages and in every field of endeavor. Many of us working with clay consider our lives and chosen paths the result of fortuitous encounters with mentors who changed or influenced our lives. Paul Andrew Wandless has been fortunate to build relationships with mentors like Victor Spinski and James Tanner, who guided and advanced his learning and career as an artist. Paul also came to value their commitment to the field at large in the time and service they dedicated to the creation and development of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA).

Paul met Victor Spinski when he enrolled in the BFA program at the University of Delaware after losing his parents shortly after high school and working odd jobs for several years. At the end of a freshman term, during which Paul took a beginning ceramics course that involved handbuilding and throwing on the potters' wheel, Victor said, "Hey ... I hope you sign up for class next semester!" and history began to unfold. Paul ultimately became Victor's assistant and acquired skill and knowledge in creating molds, casting, and surface effects for his professor's masterful trompe l'oeil ceramic sculptures. When the time came for Paul to move on with his career, Victor took him to a conference to meet artist, professor, and NCECA president James Tanner. Victor explained that Tanner could push Paul to dig deeper and develop his voice and vision. Victor also thought it was important to study with a Black artist to learn how to navigate the challenges of being a Black artist in clay and the art world.

Paul soon left his lifelong home of Delaware and relocated to Mankato, Minnesota, where everything was different, even the color of the earth. "Tanner was very serious and philosophical in his work as an artist and teacher. He had me develop the discipline of keeping a visual journal, ultimately leading to my interest in imagery on clay. When winter came, and I stayed in the studio to keep warm, Professor Tanner ensured I had my first real winter gear.



TOP:

Scribe, 2015. Clay Monotype; cast earthenware, underglaze, watercolor underglaze, wood frame, 13.25" h x 14" w x 1.5" d

BOTTOM:

Numo and Jem having a late breakfast, 2017.

Clay Monoprint; cast earthenware, underglaze, watercolor underglaze, lino cut, wood frame, 14" h x 14" w x 1.5" d

PERMANENT COLLECTION OF RACINE ART MUSEUM

All artwork photos by Paul Andrew Wandless.



Birth of Jemmah, 2014. Low fire clay, underglaze, underglaze pencil, glaze, 18" x 12" x 12"

“With Professor Tanner, you read your sketchbook to him in his office. We’d have a lot of one-on-one discussions during these times ... some dealing with grief and loss. I was in the studio early one morning when Professor Tanner came in and said, ‘Hey, what are you doing?’

“I’m glazing.’

“No, you’re not. When working on the clay surface, you need to think like a painter. You need to create the exact color and surface characteristics you want.’

“That’s when Professor Tanner started teaching me about glaze chemistry. One day, he gave me my first expensive squirrel hair brush and told me I needed to care enough about my work to invest in quality tools.”

Paul reflects, “Clay has done a lot for me, and that is why I always try to give back. I was fortunate to meet Victor early on. He saw me like a son, treated me well, and sent me to James Tanner.



Andora the Earth Mother, 2021.
Low fire clay, underglaze, underglaze pencil,
glaze, hard cut nails, 22" x 12" x 12"

Professor Tanner, who became a father figure to me, then sent me off to work with Randy Schmidt to explore low fire and work with other processes. Through all of this, I learned that you have to take solutions from other materials and apply them to clay to make your work unique and your own.

“One day, Professor Tanner called me and told me he recommended I become NCECA Director at Large before the Charlotte, North Carolina conference. ‘Don’t wait until you are ready; as long as you are prepared, you will be fine.’

The following year, I started producing the first films of NCECA’s demonstrating artists. I continued filming and editing when I rotated off the board role. Tanner always said that if you are part of something and have a seat at the table, you can make suggestions for change and help make them happen. My colleagues on the NCECA board helped me put ideas into action.

“Years later, when I received the Outstanding Achievement award, former Exhibitions Director Michel Conroy nominated me. NCECA has given me a chance to give back to the field that has given me so much, and I continue to send students to share ideas and meet people. There are ups and downs, but the mission is always important... striving for as many as possible. Clay is going through a lot as a medium right now... and it’s a very exciting moment. **What’s ahead of us won’t look like what’s come before.**”

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