

# rat trap clay club

by Brian Benfer

Brought together by collaborative work—and its ensuing camaraderie and conversation—this collective of artists ranks shared time and experience over finished, fired products.

With collaborations of physical work becoming more prominent in recent years, there seems to have been a surge in the formation of collectives and communal studio environments. One such group, known as the Rat Trap Clay Club and based in Bozeman, Montana, has married its ideological efforts as a means of establishing a community that truly focuses on collaboration. Some kind of funky hybrid between Veterans Affairs hall, barn raising, and a library story-time session, they view the physical product of their efforts as secondary to the actual experience of working. This environment, better described as a happening, reevaluates the notion of community and collaboration, while allowing a platform for unabridged thoughts, conversations, and making work. It is about people coming together and sharing time and space with each other in a judgement-free environment denouncing any and all labels. This group isn't working together as a means to create revenue or gain accolades, they simply enjoy sitting around together drinking, smoking, and engaging in conversation.

## The Beginning

The club initiated as an offshoot of The Cottonwood Club, a free art school/drawing club/DIY artist space in downtown Bozeman, and it wouldn't come as any surprise to note that a few of the core members are also affiliated with the group Paintallica.

Their collaborative process entails passing around numerous drawings; each person adds, erases, and at times covers over preexisting imagery until the work is deemed finished by the group. The inevitable transition to working with clay happened primarily because of the region's deep-seated roots in ceramics. With the help of a few in the local clay community and group members, the club began to transition their two-dimensional imagery onto ceramic forms and from there, officially launched the Rat Trap Clay Club (RTCC).

## The Core of RTCC

Meeting weekly, they have maintained the same approach to their ceramic pieces as they do in the other groups; works are continuously passed around among participants until agreed upon as being complete. The beauty of this process is that nothing is precious or necessarily permanent, and there can be up to a dozen pieces being worked on at any given time. In addition to the core members, there is also an influx of visitors who collaborate on the pieces, often upwards of two dozen, changing both the dynamic of the group as well as the imagery.

The core members of the group are people with an array of backgrounds, from academics and trained craftspeople to musicians and self-taught artists. They are more concerned with the community



1 Rat Trap Clay Club's exhibition installation at the 2019 National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference in Minneapolis, Minnesota, variable dimensions, mixed media, 2019. 2 *Drippy Face Growler*, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, ceramic, 2017. 1, 2 Photos: Angela Yonke.



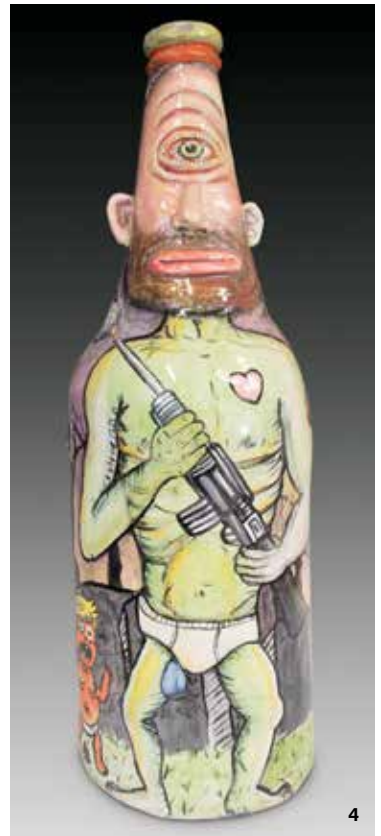
they encompass and the time they spend together as a unit, which itself is a term that has a deeper relevance to a couple founding members of the group as Jesse Albrecht and Dalton Brink are US military veterans. While some well known artists in the field (including Rudy Autio, Don Reitz, Paul Soldner, and Peter Voulkos, to name a few) have served in branches of the military, we see it less often nowadays; however, it is important to remember the impact these individuals continue to have both in our field and the larger communities in which they live.

### Speaking to a Larger Commentary

The imagery utilized moves between an array of techniques, styles, and representational depictions. Some of the motifs include eyeballs, fire, monsters, genitals, American flags, and, of course, rats. The foundation (i.e. ceramic object) for the pieces has taken various forms; however, the bottle form is a prominent, recurring theme. It is a vessel that brings with it a psychological weight—it can be either beneficial or the downfall of your existence, depending both on the individual as well as the contents. While many of the larger forms are handmade, the group has also embraced the use of smaller, prefabricated bottles as a way to neutralize the creation of the object. As a group whose creative expression and experience stems primarily from imagery—and for the most part, non-clay backgrounds—this makes a lot of sense, though it is very different from choosing a blank, bisque-fired pot to decorate in a paint-your-own-pottery studio (but I'd love to see that crew roll into one of those shops and start working). By choosing to use only underglazes and low-fire clay, the group eliminates variables that could easily stifle non-clay participants. While the imagery on the exterior of these forms always carries some kind of dialog, the object itself speaks to a larger commentary regarding escapism from real, everyday life. Referred to by one member simply as “the numb factor,” we all do, in fact, have our own bottle.

The Rat Trap Clay Club is antiestablishment and, at least in their infant stage, outsiders. Meeting some of the members and talking with them about their organization really helped to solidify the approach to communal working as something beneficial and outside of what we typically see in the field. It would be great to see the group remain what they are, true misfits getting together weekly to make work, drink, and discuss the rat race we are subjected to daily. True collaborations have no “I” and maybe that will help the RTCC maintain what has been their most appealing attribute—aside of course from their name, which is actually taken from a Tom Waits interview. Cheers to the race, the trap, the misfits, and derelicts keeping it real in Bozeman—may your bottle always be half full.

**the author** *Brian Benfer is an artist living and working in Southern California.*



**3** *Rat Nest*, 14 ft. (4.2 m) in diameter, mixed media, 2015–present. **4** *Uncle Cyclops*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, ceramic, 2018. **5** *R Mutt*, 20 in. (51 cm) in height, ceramic, 2019. **3–5** Photos: Angela Yonke.