

Out of the Floodwaters

A Retrospective Exhibition of Ceramic Art by Robert Green

Saved, rescued, redeemed, recovered. These have always been words that have deep meaning to people of faith, but they have also been words that resonate with anyone who has suffered a tragedy.

Over a four-day period in August of 2017, Hurricane Harvey dumped 60 inches of rain on the greater Houston metropolitan area. As the floodwaters engulfed homes throughout the region, two among that number belonged to the artist's father, R. C. Green, Jr., and in-laws, Joe and Jean Worley. Water levels reached a peak of 3 and 5 feet respectively in these homes, submerging and ruining nearly everything on the first story. Because the Worley's house happened to be immediately below one of the reservoir spillways, 5 feet of water remained in the home for over two weeks. Among the many possessions swamped by the contaminated floodwaters at both homes was a large collection of Robert Green's ceramic art. Pieces in the collection of his parents and in-laws numbered in the hundreds and represented 40 years of creative work in clay. As family, neighbors, and numerous complete strangers sifted through the debris to throw out piles of rubbish that had once been family possessions and heirlooms, the artist and his wife worked diligently to recover as many of the ceramic pieces as possible. While a few works were irreparably damaged, the majority of the pieces remained intact. Nevertheless, the works were filthy and contaminated, having been submerged in polluted water for many days.

The recovered works from each home were set out to dry, then boxed up and carted back to Abilene. Some weeks later, when the cleanup efforts in Houston came to an end and fatigue dissipated, they turned their attention to dealing with the rescued pots. Robert and his wife took them all into the backyard and commenced submerging, scrubbing, and thoroughly washing each one with a Clorox solution followed by soap. Once the pieces dried completely in the full sun, the two of them moved them into their house and began to wonder what in the world to do with them all.

Several fall days later, when Robert Green returned home from his teaching job at ACU, his wife Jo Ellen greeted him at the back door and said she wanted to show him something. She took him into their foyer. There across the hardwood floors were hundreds of pots neatly grouped for display. "These are all your pots," she said. His first thought was that these were the recently rescued pieces. "No," she said. "These are ALL of your pots. This is your retrospective." Besides carefully moving all the rescued pots into a meandering trail through the foyer, she added all the pieces displayed throughout their home, as well as the many others that were put away in cabinets and attic boxes. There on the floor in front of Robert sat a majority of the best works he ever created, a consistent sampling of work from every decade going all the way back to his very first ceramics course in 1977.

It was hard to explain his swirling thoughts and the emotional impact of that moment. Her surprise was such a thoughtful and creative gesture, but it was also a kind of reckoning—like attending his own funeral to hear an account of his life. On such an occasion, there is no disputing the contents, the arc of your life. The evidence lies before you; it stands in testimony against any protestations. Of the many things learned that day, the most important to him was that against his better judgment and intentions, his strategic avoidance, he had become—he was—a ceramic artist.

The idea for the exhibition arose for him at that moment. Harvey's devastation—the personal and the universal—called out for something hopeful, a story of good news that emerged from beneath the waters.

Exhibition brought to you by Hurricane Harvey

An exhibition functions as an acknowledgment, a coming to grips with and owning, of what one is and has been.
And an exhibition makes that a public declaration, a confession.

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