

**Inside the Artist  
MK Monley  
November 2016**



**Tell us about your journey in art / as an artist.**

Well, my journey started in Ohio as a high school freshman with an art teacher that I had for only one year (who I am still friends with today). I enjoyed art and it helped me find people to connect with. My best friends through high school were kids I met in art my freshman year and we continue to stay connected. I went off to Hiram College in Ohio for a degree in Elementary and Special Education and that became my focus for a number of years here in Vermont until I decided to be an art teacher. I wanted to be able to work with all the kids in the school and I found pleasure in art. I always thought it was the coolest job at every school I worked at in the Burlington School District, so I went back to school and took a variety of art classes at St. Mikes, CCV and UVM. Being a special education teacher has allowed me insight into working with a variety of students at whatever level they are at. I can meet them where they are and help guide them through their own artistic journey.

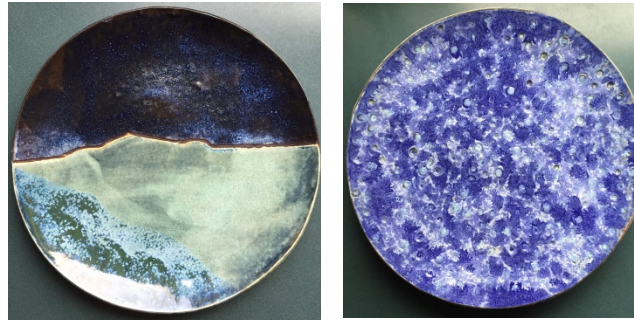
I have always loved art. I started working with Mama McKee in 1997 at Schoolhouse Pottery, learning ceramics. For myself, artistically, I love ceramics, pastels and bookmaking. I don't do enough of my own art these days. As far as teaching, I really value community based art for my students. Many projects that I have worked on in the community are mutually beneficial to both the community and my students.

**What is the medium you most like to work with/in? What draws you to this medium? What do you like about your materials?**

That is honestly an interesting question. I feel like the art I've done with the community is really my medium. I feel that connecting the school and community through art is something I enjoy and find passion for. Whether through my work on the River of Light Lantern Parade (with Gowri Savoor), the Irene Floodgates Art Exhibition (with other area artists and Revitalizing Waterbury) or working with my elementary students on different community focused pieces (like the Farming video the third and

fourth grade class in 2013 completed in partnership with three local farms and a local videographer, or the "A Walk Through Waterbury" book created by students to share the history of Waterbury through its' architecture), it is people and events that I am pulled toward. The lantern parade is as different each year (in theme and experience) as it is the same. The lantern making itself is a blast and although it is a heck of a lot of work, it is always enjoyable,

I haven't done ceramics enough lately but I really liked it and find success with it as a medium. The pure tactile nature of it is so inviting, as is the ability to make both functional and non-functional art with it. I believe that it is part of our human nature to be makers; to create something that we can both use and enjoy looking at and share as a gift. It is at our heart and at our core as human beings. My elementary kids love to make things for people. During my first 1-2 years working with Mame, I primarily made gifts for people. It was a bit of "look what I can do and look what we can do with it".



It is interesting to me how things evolve. There is a "makers" movement in our community and around the country in general. Makers spaces are popping up around the state, the biggest ones being in Burlington and Rutland. We've spent time at Thatcher Brook Primary studying about it and are developing a space for this energy. Both the Waterbury Public Library and Green Mountain Performing Arts have programming devoted to the maker's movement. I've been personally involved in a local group looking to develop a community maker's space downtown. As traditional "shop" and "home economics/consumer services" classes have faded away, the question we are asking is how to keep kids learning these types of hands on skills, incorporating technology that is developing at a rapid pace. These hands on skills are important and "Hands On" art and craft is one way to achieve this goal. It all ties back into the community scene and

how we keep it going strong.



**What most inspires your work - Has there been anything that has been life changing or that has influenced your practice?**

In looking at it as an art teacher, I have transitioned away from discipline based arts education (DBAE), where skills are taught to students by the teacher and the focus is product driven. Now I focus on a choice based approach to art known as Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB). When Nan Hathaway was hired at Crossett Brook Middle School, she came in with this expertise and style of teaching and she became my mentor.

I made this switch in my classroom in 2011. I had decided the year before to make the transition and had spent that summer setting up my classroom to implement it. When Irene hit in August that year, I had no time to plan skill based lessons. Having set up for choice based art that summer had allowed me to support the students during the aftermath of Irene. I believe it was serendipity and see the timing of the change as a true gift.



Choice based art focuses on process rather than product. The end result may not always be beautiful to look at from an adult perspective, but the thinking, processing and understanding that evolves during their time in the art room blows me away sometimes. To see how they learn and think and discover what is important to them individually in their artistic process; I feel like I am honoring them as little people, thinkers and do-ers. It gives them the opportunity to feel like they have a voice in their own learning. My hope is that I am teaching them skills both artistically and humanistically.



I took a class in two years in a row with teacher JoAnne Smith, “Building Learning Communities” at the November Learning Conference in Boston, MA. We attended twice (once in 2011 and again in 2012). The instructor asked “Who’s doing the work? If you do all the thinking and planning, where do kids have the chance to think, fail, struggle and try again. Kids need the opportunity to do this.” When I ask the question, “What do kids get out of choice based art?”, the answer is that they learn artistic skills and they do this working and problem solving both independently and together knowing that it is OK to fail and important to try again. True life skills.

#### What blogs or books are you reading or would recommend?

I’m not much of a blog reader but [Nan Hathaway’s blog](#) at Crossett Brook Middle School is great. I do follow TAB and am on a great art teachers group on Facebook; it’s a nice community. One of my goals this year is to keep a current [school blog](#) going. So far, I’ve tripled the number of posts from last year!

I’m reading *Make Space* (Scott Doorley and Scott Witthoft) about developing maker spaces. I’ve purchased but not yet read *The Third Teacher* (collaborative book, various authors). It is a book

about designing schools for learning and how physical environment is as important to learning as all the other things we focus on.

Join MK and her students in “Everything Botanical” at this year’s River of Light Lantern parade in downtown Waterbury on December 3<sup>rd</sup>. Visit their website at <https://ariveroflightinwaterbury.wordpress.com/> for details.

