

CLAY : SYD CARPENTER



MEET Syd Carpenter. **WATCH** a video that features the artist at work.

MAKE an artwork inspired by the artist. **REFLECT** on your finished artwork.

MEET

MEET SYD CARPENTER, ceramic sculptor.



"I named the bowls in terms of the farmers and gardeners who have stayed on their land when the goal was to get them off their land. I'm talking about courage, I'm talking about tenacity, I'm talking about legacy."

—Syd Carpenter

SYD CARPENTER IS AN ARTIST who sculpts with clay. Her work is in museums and in private and public collections. Carpenter has also been a professor of art, encouraging her students to experiment with clay with confidence, and to not be afraid to make "glorious failures" as they try out their own ideas. When she got her own home and became interested in gardening, she visited the former home where her mother had at one time created a renowned garden. The visit made Carpenter curious about other African American farmers and gardeners, including those who had held onto their land during the hard times of the Jim Crow era. This inspired Carpenter to research farmers from the past, and to visit and interview present-day farmers to record their experiences. She then sculpted a series of clay works set in bowls that represent and honor these farmers and gardeners and their hard-won lands.

The series is called *Places of Our Own*. The bowls each contain various pieces made from clay reminiscent of farms, such as sections of a fence, a portion of a barn, vegetables, and farm animals. The sculptures are solid and strong looking, even as some of the objects are tilted or almost tipping out of the bowls. Of the sculptures, she says "A bowl is this receptacle... it's this vessel. It opens out, it doesn't close in. It reveals, it doesn't obscure, and so it becomes a canvas of a page. The roundness of it, the circular configuration of it, you have to move. You don't know it from all sides; it's always changing." Carpenter also talks



Top: Syd Carpenter, *Willie and Jelena Gray*, courtesy Syd Carpenter.

Above: Syd Carpenter in her studio.

Photo by Denise Kang.

about wanting to encourage people to find something in the bowls to connect to: “I’m working on a narrative that I want to make accessible to an audience, so I like there to be this almost musical, literary, scientific, botanical- all kinds of stuff that folks from different backgrounds and different experiences can bring to this when they visit this bowl...”

WATCH



WATCH Syd Carpenter sculpting clay pieces in her studio. Listen to her talk about working with clay, and the subjects she portrays.

<https://youtu.be/xSpVxbgjVNY>

After viewing the segment, consider the following:

- Syd Carpenter mentions that viewers “visit” the bowls. Visit some examples online. What do you think she wants you to see or know when you visit one of the bowls?
- If you had one of Syd Carpenter’s *Places of Our Own* sculptures, would you place it inside or outside (as in her garden)? And why?
- Find the quote from the video (in the section above) about bowls. In addition to her quote, a bowl can also be a valley (a piece of land.) And it can hold food. Does this give you more understanding about why she uses bowls?
- Syd Carpenter describes “this bowl, which is also a place. Which is also evocative of a person.” She also encourages her students to try out different ideas when making art. Try to imagine, and then draw, your own idea for a bowl (with objects placed inside) that is “a place” and also “a person.”

MAKE

WHAT WILL YOU MAKE?

Syd Carpenter uses the slab method for making her sculptures, rolling clay out almost like a pizza or cookie dough, and then cutting and forming it into what she needs. She also likely shapes some pieces by hand, such as the vegetables, the mule, and the cow. Refer to the **CLAY: MEDIUM & METHODS** sheet for helpful instructions.

- You could start with a slab, or a bowl, and fill it with something.
- You could create a sculpture that represents specific people, as Carpenter does. Would you make the shape of a person? Or would you represent them by placing objects on a clay slab or in a clay bowl?
- You could make something meant for outdoors, to sit on a stoop or in a garden.
- You can make a plan, or you can play with the clay and see what happens.
- If you do not have access to clay that can be fired, consider other kinds of clay—self-drying, plasticene, salt-clay, polymer clay, for example. Follow directions available with these products.

REFLECT

LOOK at your finished product.
Think about the process.



Syd Carpenter, *Ellis and Anna Mae Thomas*, Courtesy of Syd Carpenter

- Did you enjoy working with clay? What did you make? Would you say, as Syd Carpenter said, “Ooh! That worked!”? Or was it like, in her words, “a glorious failure”?
- Are you pleased with your sculpted piece? Why or why not? What do you like, or what would you change?
- Syd Carpenter made a *series* of sculptures that are different, but all with the theme of representing farms and farmers. Would you like to make a series of sculptures with the same theme as the piece you made?
- What else would you like to make out of clay?