CLAY : EHREN TOOL

HANDWORK Celebrating American Craft 2026

MEET Ehren Tool. **WATCH** a video that features the artist at work.
MAKE an artwork inspired by the artist. **REFLECT** on your finished artwork.

MEET

MEET Ehren Tool and his "War Awareness Art."

"I hope that some of the cups can be starting points for conversations about unspeakable things."

—Ehren Tool

Top: Ehren Tool's cup installation at the Museum of Craft and Design, courtesy of the Museum of Craft and Design, photo by Noel Bass. Above: Ehren Tool, cups, courtesy of Craft in America.

ARTISTS SOMETIMES MAKE ART as a form of social commentary. They create responses to experiences and communities in which they live. In doing so, they raise questions about political, social, economic and/or environmental issues. Pottery can serve as a catalyst for social justice issues and can take form as symbolic and communicative artworks.

Ehren Tool was in the Marine Corps and fought in the war, Desert Shield. When he returned home, he used the GI bill to go to school. He says he wanted to talk about war because it weighed heavily in his life. He found that ceramics, particularly ceramic cups, were the perfect vehicle to address the issues about war. Tool became invested in the material (clay) but also socially invested in what the message of his ceramic cups was going to be. He shared that the cup is a little thing and not confrontational, it's just a cup. "The cup is the appropriate shape and scale and feels good in my hand."

Tool is greatly influenced by American expressionist ceramic sculptor, Peter Voulkos. Tool says of his own work, "The images on the cups are often graphic and hard to look at. You may be for or against a particular war but I think it is too easy for us to look away. I think we as a country and as humans should look at what is actually going on. ... I would like my work to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the world. That is a lot to ask of a cup..."

Tool believes clay can have functional value as well as an artistic narrative. He uses lots of different molds and insignias and decals to create images and patterns on the cups.

He says the cups are best when they spark a conversation between people who know the images and those who do not. He says he feels

compelled to make cups and give them away. Currently he has given away about 14,000 cups. Tool states that his cups are "war awareness art" and he is not concerned if someone is for or against war, only if you are ignorant of what is happening. His cups can be functional or not and perhaps thought of as beautiful in the messages they convey. He hopes his cups spark conversations between veterans and the people who are close to them as well as the general public.

Ehren Tool is a ceramic artist and Senior Laboratory Mechanician at the Ceramic Department at University of California, Berkeley, and Marine Veteran of the 1991 Gulf War.

WATCH

SEE and listen to Ehren Tool talking about how ceramics has allowed him to express himself make a difference in the world.

https://youtu.be/A9Gpr7mjCnE

After viewing the segment, consider the following:

- Why do you think Tool made and gave away 14,000 cups?
- Name some of the different kinds of designs and insignias on the cups you saw in the video.
- Describe what you saw as the artist worked with the potter's wheel. How does one make a cup using a potter's wheel?
- According to Tool, what is a benefit of making art that is socially invested?
- Tool says that he wants his cups to spark a conversation. Do you think his cups spark conversations? Why or why not?
- In what ways does the artist communicate with the viewer?

MAKE

Make a clay vessel using a Social Justice topic. Think about an issue/topic you care about and how your vessel may address it. Your clay piece can be hand-built using slab, pinching, or coiling methods. If you have access to a pottery wheel, you may be able to enlist someone to teach you how to use it to create a functional or non-functional vessel.

- What kind of vessel will you make?
- Consider the kind of message it might convey. For example, think about a cup or a bowl. How will you represent your topic with your clay vessel? How large (or small) should a vessel be? What would you need to think about if you decide to make a bowl, a pitcher, a vase, or a mug? What would a vessel need to have so that it is functional?
- Will you use the slab, coil, or pinch method to create your object? Refer to the CLAY: MEDIUM & METHODS sheet in your packet for instructions.

Ehren Tool, cup, photo by Madison Metro.

- Think about how your piece will be used. Will a person hold it? What do you have to think about if the answer is yes. How important is it that your vessel reflects a personal story, social issue or activist scene? What will you need to think about in order for it to do so?
- How will you finish your vessel? If possible, have it fired in a kiln. Will you decorate the surface? Will you use glaze or paint?
- 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.

- Were you able to "spark" a conversation with your vessel?
- Are you pleased with your finished vessel? Why or why not?
- What will you do the next time you make a vessel? What message do you hope to share? Will it be functional or non-functional?
- What else would you like to make out of clay?