

Guiding the Spirit Through Clay: The Lineage of Robbie Lobell *by Kathryn Hall*



Robbie

Lobell's aesthetic flair for making kitchen-to-table flameproof

cookware has potters, ceramists, and American craft aficionados buzzing about the revival of classic cookware made in the studio.¹ With her partner, Maryon Attwood, Lobell owns a successful independent business in Coupeville, Washington, called Cook on Clay. Their ceramic cookware appeals to both those who enjoy the pleasures of a home-cooked meal and those who appreciate and collect studio pottery. Every detail is essential, as Lobell's cookware is the perfect amalgam of form and function. The low-expansion clay and glazes that Lobell uses allows her flameproof pots to transfer easily from oven to refrigerator and back without cracking. As the primary designer, Lobell creates expressive sculptural forms. Her tall casseroles are at once voluptuous and maternal. Big thick lips fan out around the rim as each vessel swells upwards from its base, beckoning to be filled with savory food. Lobell accentuates the curvaceous forms by applying glazes engineered for soda firing to some areas and leaving other areas unglazed.²

Lobell has worked as a studio potter since 1986. Early in her career, she lived in California, devoting three to four days a week to making glazed stoneware pottery. Her desire to find a way to support herself as a full-time studio potter led Lobell to connect with two pioneers of the twentieth-century studio craft movement, Karen Karnes, and Mikhail Zakin, Karnes's former student and the founder of the Art School at Old Church. Lobell credits her two mentors with helping her find her voice in clay. The time she spent living and working with Zakin and Karnes laid the groundwork for her career, and her experience with these two women as well as her later success underscores the importance of the apprentice-style model.

Lobell's relationship with Zakin and Karnes is that of an extended family. She describes their relationship with one another as *mishpocha*, a Yiddish term meaning kin.³ All three women are of Eastern European Jewish descent. Their stronger connection, though, is their love of clay. Karnes believes, "Clay formed by the hands of conscious, caring potters imparts a spirit to the work that resides in the fired piece."⁴ This belief grounds all three women, who channel their inner voices through the clay and use form as a vehicle for self-expression.

The three also value community as necessary to working full-time as a potter. Lobell learned just as much from each of these women through their discussions around the dinner table as she did in the studio. Often working independently, these women came together over meals to share their day's experiences.

While Karnes prefers to work on her own, she has always been a part of a community. The child of Jewish garment workers from Russia and Poland, Karnes grew up in the Bronx, living in what she calls a "cooperative colony." Within this working class community, residents pitched in to raise their children together and put food on the table.⁵ As an adult, Karnes gravitated to communal living. From 1952 to 1954, when she and her husband, David Weinrib, as potters-in-residence taught at Black Mountain College in North Carolina, they lived in an artists' collective. From there, they moved to the Gate Hill cooperative in Stony Point, New York, where Karnes taught Mikhail Zakin and others.

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OVERLEAF: Karen Karnes (left) with Mikhail Zakin (right) on Cape Cod.

ABOVE: Mikhail Zakin. *Untitled*, 2009. Stoneware, 13 x 5 x 3. A gift to Robbie Lobell from Mikhail Zakin.

BELOW: Karen Karnes. *Casserole*, 1968. Glazed stoneware, flameware. 8 x 16 x 16 in. collection of Zeborah Schachtel. Photograph by Anthony Cunha.





Oval Roaster with food by Robbie Lobell.

Karnes's class opened Zakin's mind to the possibilities of working with clay. Before she met Karnes, Zakin had worked in metal, making jewelry and site-specific sculpture; from then on, Zakin spent several years by Karnes's side working in clay and would eventually help Karnes build her first salt kiln.⁶ This salt kiln played a great role in the development of Karnes's and Zakin's work as they used salt firing to emphasize the formal attributes of their sculptural vessels.

An extrovert, Zakin enjoyed fostering fellowship amongst friends and colleagues. She brought people together to discuss their love of making and to learn about the history of clay from around the world. According to Zakin, "The process of making is, after all, a celebration of life."⁷ As a mentor to many flourishing studio potters, she devoted her life to helping others find their voice through clay. Earlier in her career, she taught at Greenwich House Pottery School and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. Later, she became chair of the Visual Arts Department at Sarah Lawrence College.

In 1973, she helped found the Art School at Old Church in Demarest, New Jersey, which continues to serve as a cultural center and art school for her community today.⁸

Lobell first met Mikhail Zakin at a workshop Zakin taught at the Mendocino Art Center in California in August of 1992. In the workshop, Zakin recognized Lobell's creative potential and her dedication to working in clay. According to Lobell, Mikhail first recognized Lobell's talent after Zakin had the group complete a basic exercise. Zakin asked the students to take a clay form, slice it, and position the sliced component in relationship to the solid form. Drawing from her background in sculpture, Zakin emphasized the articulation of form in both her work and her teaching. In this exercise, she challenged her students to move beyond the functionality of clay into the realm of sculptural expression.⁹

The assignment challenged Lobell, who had only ever focused on making functional wares, to express



Robbie Lobell, Cook on Clay Casserole, 2012. High-fire flamework, 9.5 x 7.5 x 10 in. Photograph by Michael Stadler.

herself sculpturally. In her composition, Lobell created a triangular form that grew upward in volume. She then scooped a section out of the side of the form and placed the wedge on top of the original solid so that it balanced gracefully. Lobell's composition suggested a lineal connection between the two components, and the wedge's placement conveyed a supportive relationship between the forms. Lobell has described feeling an immediate sense of excitement upon completing her composition. The assignment marked the beginning of a strong progression in Lobell's work as she began to use form as her primary outlet for expression.

Lobell's contemporary cookware embodies a similar yin and yang in both balance and strength. A thick handle on a lid complements the concave interior of her tall casserole, harmonizing the interior and exterior space. Her square baker sets nest inside one another as do her oval roaster sets; each set captures a direct relationship from one form to another. As a result of Lobell's unique consideration of form and func-

tion, each baker, roaster, and casserole embodies Lobell's spirit and the influence of Zakin and Karnes.

From the workshop, Zakin invited Lobell to move to New Jersey to live and study with her. What Lobell expected to be a three-month residency turned into one that lasted a year and a half. Zakin gave Lobell space and time to work while encouraging Lobell to incorporate sculptural elements into her functional wares.¹⁰ She taught Lobell to consider the interplay between interior and exterior space, line, and volume.

In an essay written for the *STUDIO POTTER* journal, Karnes describes this approach to design: "My changes in form often occur through a process that might be described as kinesthetic; that is, through the body feelings rather than through the mind."¹¹ As a result of this process, Karnes's vessels demonstrate a tension between internal and external space, giving her vessels breath as they swell outward. In his 2004 catalog on Karnes, Garth Clark describes Karnes's work as "biomorphic," a term which may be extended to Zakin and



Robbie Lobell (left) and Karen Karnes (right), in Karnes's studio in Morgan, Vermont, marking the completion of Lobell's six-week apprenticeship with Karnes, 2001.

Lobell.¹² Zakin's ceramics are architectonic; her clay structures resemble the exoskeletons of arthropods, fossils, and earth tectonics, calling attention to clay's primordial nature and timelessness. Lobell's vessels exhibit a striking familiarity to Karnes's casseroles, conveying a tension between interior and exterior space, but with greater curves, rounder edges, and larger features.

Inspiring Lobell's advocacy for studio-based wares within a culture that values cost-driven factory-based products, Zakin provided Lobell with opportunities to broaden her understanding of studio pottery in other cultures. With Zakin, Lobell gained firsthand knowledge of different pottery traditions and practices. The two women visited New York City once a week, stopping by open markets, galleries, and visiting Zakin's friends. In 1993, Lobell traveled to China where she visited Shanghai, Yixing, and Beijing, and took a hands-on workshop in Jingdezhen with Zakin and a group of students.¹³ When asked about her experience living with Zakin, Lobell recalls Zakin hosting a diverse group of people at her dinner table – Zakin frequently arranged for her friends and students to meet one another. Lobell remembers potters from Scotland, England, and Korea stopping by Demarest while passing through New York City.¹⁴

Zakin first introduced Lobell to Karen Karnes at Karnes's studio in Morgan, Vermont, during Lobell's residency with Zakin. Zakin warned Lobell not to be offended if Karnes ignored her. Karnes could be very

selective in choosing her friends and colleagues. However, Lobell says that she and Karnes quickly bonded over their passion for clay and their similar ancestral roots. After a few days, Karnes asked Lobell to choose a cup from her cupboard for Lobell to take home as a token of their friendship.

Some years after that initial visit, in 2000, Lobell had a six-week intensive residency with Karen Karnes. Lobell's residency with Karnes was much more hands-off than her time spent with Zakin. The residency was a privilege afforded to Lobell as Karnes did not often work with others and allow them to share a studio space with her. After just the first week of her residency, Karnes brought out the flameware recipe, gave it to Lobell, and told her to see what she could do with it.¹⁵ It was an act of great generosity, as Lobell is the only person with whom Karnes shared this recipe.

In 1957, this flameware recipe had represented a special career transition for Karnes. With Zakin and another friend and colleague, M.C. Richards, Karnes developed the flameware recipe with the help of a material engineer at a clay mine. M.C. Richards, Ron Probst, Bill Sax, Mikhail Zakin, and Karen Karnes all experimented with this recipe, but Karnes had the most success with it.¹⁶ She used it to make cookware, specifically, casseroles that served as her bread-and-butter product: with this recipe, she achieved the financial stability she needed as a single mother to raise her son as well as make her sculptural vessels and perfect the use of her salt glazes.

Karnes's act of generosity contributed to a pinnacle shift in Lobell's career, as it had for Karnes forty-three years earlier. Unlike Karnes, Lobell's focus as a potter is her flameproof pots. For Lobell, designing cooking vessels presents a challenge in working both functionally and sculpturally. Lobell has moved beyond Karnes's limited use of the flameware, by designing a variety of forms in addition to the casserole that evoke her own signature style. With some modifications to the color, Lobell uses Karnes's "Y" glaze on the exteriors of her cookware. She altered the glaze chemistry to yield a beautiful golden titanium yellow that in certain instances produces a blue drip.¹⁷ For the interiors of her pots Lobell uses the "Kaki" glaze of Karnes's partner, Ann Stannard, which gives the interior a rich Bordeaux color.¹⁸

While Lobell recognizes Karnes for her success with flameware, Lobell refers to Zakin as her "creative

mother” and credits Zakin for helping Lobell find her identity.¹⁹ In her reflection included in Zakin’s retrospective, curated by Karen Karnes, Lobell wrote, “One of the most precious gifts we are given in life is that of a teacher – someone to guide us to the core of ourselves.”²⁰ Zakin taught Lobell how to learn. She taught her how to ask herself the right questions about her own studio practice and her connection with the material, and how to be inspired by the world around her. Zakin’s enthusiasm for clay was infectious. She taught Lobell and many others the importance of paying it forward and creating an environment in which fledgling potters could grow. In living and working side-by-side with Zakin, Lobell adopted Zakin’s philosophy as a maker and educator: learning to learn, learning to see, and learning to teach.²¹ Through this model, Lobell hopes to inspire others to develop their own passion for clay just as Zakin inspired her.

Rivaling academia as the prominent structure for ceramics education in America, the apprenticeship model that defined Lobell’s educational experience is a testament to the value of that model, and she is committed to keeping it alive. In Zakin’s memory, Lobell and her partner, Maryon Attwood, started the Zakin Apprenticeship Program at Cook on Clay for women in art, business, and manufacturing, offering one- and two-year apprenticeships. Lobell notes, “[The program] is for young women to help find their way on their own time.”²² The program is a contemporary adaptation of Zakin’s apprenticeship model, as it teaches contemporary business practices. It is designed for dedicated women and relies on a competitive application process. Lobell and Attwood provide two apprenticeship tracks: one for those who desire to learn more about a start-up manufacturing business – mold-making, hydraulic ceramic pressing, and business relations – and another that caters to those interested in learning how to be successful as a full-time studio potter.²³

Lobell wrote in Zakin’s eulogy, “Her voice is in my head, her spirit in my soul every day, as I work and engage with the world.”²⁴ In carrying on the tradition, Lobell intends to keep Zakin’s mission alive by welcoming emerging female potters into her extended family and giving them the tools that they need to find their own spirit through clay. Through Lobell, Karnes’s and Zakin’s legacy will continue.

NOTES

¹ Andrew Zoellner, “Flameproof Beauty,” *American Craft* 74.1 (February/March 2014): 18-19.

² Robbie Lobell, “A Flameware Journey,” *STUDIO POTTER* 36.2 (Summer 2008), 84.

³ Robbie Lobell, telephone interview with author, 1 July 2014.

⁴ Karen Karnes, “Choosing Another Path,” *STUDIO POTTER* 15.1 (December 1986): 19.

⁵ Karen Karnes, interview by Mark Shapiro, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 9-10 August 2005; See, Christopher Benfy, “An American Life in Seven Contrasts,” in *A Chosen Path: The Ceramic Art of Karen Karnes*, ed., Mark Shapiro (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press: Chapel Hill, 2010) for a contextualization of Karnes’ biography in American history.

⁶ Karnes first witnessed salt firing at Penland in 1967. It was after this, that she and Zakin built Karnes’s first salt kiln. See, Karnes, interview by Mark Shapiro, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, 9-10 August 2005.

⁷ Mikhail Zakin, “Zakin, Mikhail,” AKAR Design, www.akardesign.com/creators/moreinfo.aspx?iCreatorID=260, accessed: 09 August 2014.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Robbie Lobell, telephone interview with author, 11 August 2014.

¹⁰ Lobell, “Robbie Lobell,” in *Mikhail Zakin: The Artist as Teacher*, 14-15.

¹¹ Karen Karnes, “Vermont Potters: Karen Karnes,” *STUDIO POTTER* 18.1 (December 1989): 54.

¹² Garth Clark, “Karen Karnes, Retrospectively,” *Karen Karnes* (New York: Garth Clark Gallery, 2004), 29.

¹³ From Robbie Lobell’s resumé, <http://robbielobell.com/artist/resume.html>, accessed: 15 September 2014.

¹⁴ Robbie Lobell, telephone interview with author, 27 August 2014.

¹⁵ Robbie Lobell, telephone interview with author, 11 August 2014.

¹⁶ Lobell states the material engineer lived in Pennsylvania. See, Robbie Lobell, correspondence with author, 22 September 2014; Clark notes that Karnes received her flameware recipe from a man working in a clay mine in New Jersey. See, Clark, “Karen Karnes, Retrospectively,” 30.

¹⁷ Robbie Lobell, “A Flameware Journey,” 84.

¹⁸ Lobell credits this glaze to Angela Fina, who worked closely with Karnes to develop Karnes’s glazes. Robbie Lobell, telephone interview with author, 27 August 2014.

¹⁹ Robbie Lobell, telephone interview with author, 11 August 2014.

²⁰ Robbie Lobell, “Robbie Lobell,” in *Mikhail Zakin: The Artist as Teacher*, ex. cat. Krikorian Gallery, Worcester Center for Crafts, Worcester, MA, October 12 - December 17, 2001 (Worcester: Worcester Center for Crafts, 2001), 14.

²¹ Robbie Lobell, telephone interview with author, 1 July 2014.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ “Apprenticeship Details and Applications,” *Cook on Clay*, <http://cookonclay.com/Details/>, accessed: 9 August 2014.

²⁴ Robbie Lobell, quoted from Mikhail Zakin’s eulogy, 2012.