900 pounds of clay for 1 work of art for 60 years of ceramics

Artist Robert Rose constructs commemorating vessel in honor of the Archie Bray Foundation’s 60th anniversary
On a brisk October morning Robert Rose cradles a mug of coffee while he warms himself in front of a wood stove's crackling fire in the Archie Bray Foundation summer studio. He faces a 20-hour day as he completes sculpting a large commemorative vessel he's created in honor of the Bray Foundation's 60th anniversary.

In a few days, Rose will catch a plane for California, then Chicago and later to Thailand, which he now calls home. He returns in May for the final finishing touches to prepare the urn for installation prior to the Archie Bray's gala celebration June 23-25.

Rose's work celebrates the Bray's moving spirits—a brick maker, a lawyer and a salesman—who came together to create the Archie Bray Foundation in 1951, which would grow to become a nationally renowned center for the ceramic arts.

Story by Manga Lincoln   Photos by Dylan Brown
As Rose pulls back plastic sheets that keep the terra cotta clay moist and malleable, he points to the lively relief sculptures animating its surface. His inspiration in creating the imposing work—measuring nearly 4 feet high and 5 feet across—is the larger-than-life spirit and energy of this amazing place. “It took just about two or three days,” Rose says of his arrival, “and then it just hits you. There’s this energy. The bricks just exude some kind of energy. You can’t not pick up on it.”

His commemorative urn is a gift from the heart in return for his opportunity to be a resident artist at the Bray. And through fortuitous timing, the Bray just recently installed a Bailey Car Kiln, perfectly suited for firing such large sculptural works.

Creating the work has taken two months. The first was devoted to shaping it. Its scale has surprised even him—starting out at 300 pounds of clay, then 600 and finally 900 pounds. In a few days, a forklift will move the urn into the kiln, where it will air dry two months, before it’s slowly fired, taking more than a week. “This is just solely me giving something back to the people here,” Rose says of his gift.

He hopes it sparks folks’ interest to learn more about this fascinating place. “There’s a story here—the history of the Bray. Anyone who comes out here to visit can check this out and be drawn into more of the history.”

Peering out of one side of the vessel is a relief portrait of Archie Bray, Sr., who loved the arts and dreamed beyond the brickyard to creating a center for the ceramic arts in the wilds of Montana. To either side of him are the whimsical and winged spirits of Peter Meloy and Brandon Stevenson, friends who joined Bray in bringing to life his dream. Woven into the urn are other visionaries who came through the Bray and shaped it to what it is today. One of these, Rudy Autio, peers out from a window. “And to exemplify his passion for everything he did,” says Rose, “I put a little sacred burning heart.”

Both Autio and fellow Montana artist Peter Voulkos labored in the brickyard and worked for years to launch the Bray as a center for ceramic arts. Also pictured are ceramic luminaries of the day—Bernard Leach, Soetsu Yanagi and Shoji Hamada, who traveled to Helena in 1952 and gave the first Bray workshop. There are also tributes to such former directors as Josh DeWeese, Kurt Weiser, David Shaner and prominent MSU ceramics professor Frances Serska.
But there's much more dancing across the surface, as well—
mountains and forests and Mount Helena; a giant coffee cup floating
through the air, beehive kilns, pizzas flying from an oven—all snap-
shots and highlights of Rose's summer at the Bray. Fellow resident art-
ist Kensuke Yamada rides by on one of his artistic elephants and nearby
peeks Kevin Snipes. You'll also spot Robert Harrison's iconic Bray
sculpture, a Richard Notkin tea pot, and Steven Lee's hare's parading
through a Chip Clawson arch. Large flying fish with muscular arms,
climb up each side of the urn and cling to its rim, creating two flam-
boyant handles. Along one side of the urn is a Latin phrase, honoring
"art for art's sake." The other side reads "art is how we see ourselves."

Rose's gift has grown in ambition, as did Archie Bray's dream. What
he thought would take a few weeks to complete, became a two-month
all-consuming project. And in a summer of living on the edge, con-
suming prodigious amounts of ramen soup and peanut butter and jelly
sandwiches, he's dedicated countless hours for this tribute.

But it's been worth it. Part of Rose's deepest joy, he says, has been
pushing his art to a new creative level and being surrounded by crea-
tive spirits who are doing the same. Rose hopes his gift inspires others
to give back to the Bray. He's been delighted with the sculptures he's
discovered on the Bray's grounds left by former resident artists—while
some were accidents or afterthoughts, others are gifts.

His vessel couldn't have better company, he says. It will nestle next
to one of the beehive kilns and Susannah Israel's "High Tea at the
Bray."

"I'm hoping what this will help do... will instill in the future... for
people to make something really special and just leave it. Sure I made
it—but the whole world owns it." [1]