

From Glamorous Geek to Clay Bottress



Internet entrepreneur-turned-artist Lynda Weinman at Clay Studio in Goleta (photo by Edward Clynes)

Lynda Weinman's Next Act

by L.D. Porter

With her distinctive eyeglasses, Lynda Weinman has been a recognizable icon for two decades. It began with the brand identity for Lynda.com, the online subscription-based computer teaching platform she started with her husband, Bruce Heavin. The corporate logo, a black-and-white cameo portrait of Weinman sporting her signature specs, perfectly captured her trademark style. “My glasses are a symbol, I realize,” she says. “It’s your vision, it’s how you see the world, it’s your perspective.”

The world became aware of Weinman’s vision and perspective in 2015, when Lynda.com was sold to LinkedIn for a reported \$1.5 billion, and pundits dubbed her the “Mother of the Internet.” At the time, this “unicorn”-like success appeared instantaneous but was in fact the result of two decades of hard work by the couple, who revolutionized the way computer skills are learned worldwide.

Following the sale, Weinman’s focus shifted to philanthropy, and local nonprofits such as the Santa Barbara International Film Festival and UC Santa Barbara’s Arts & Lectures have benefitted from her largesse. But her lifelong goal was to return to ceramics, an activity she relished as a teenager but put off as something to pursue in retirement. As she and Heavin embarked on plans to build a new home (currently under construction), a clay studio was included – something Weinman calls “a big leap of faith,” as she had not touched ceramics since high school.

Waiting for her new home and studio to be built, Weinman enrolled in a ceramics class at Santa Barbara City College in 2018 and simultaneously searched online for clay workshops. An advanced class making ceramic molds from 3D software at Colorado’s Anderson Ranch Arts Center quickly caught her eye. “I was completely captivated by the description, because I had never thought to marry technology and ceramics,” she says, “and I thought, that’s really interesting because I know a little about 3D software from the past.” (This is an understatement from the woman who penned the international bestseller *Designing Web Graphics* – a bible for Mac users – and taught digital media for more than a decade at the ArtCenter College of Design.)



An interior view of Clay Studio in Goleta (photo by Edward Clynes)

It was easy enough for Weinman to finesse her way into the Anderson Ranch class, but the actual experience was profoundly humbling, as recounted on her ceramics-focused blog, *Claybottress*: “As I showed the image of the first pot to the class of far more accomplished potters, my eyes welled with tears, and my voice shook. I was no longer the person who had created a company, or taught computer graphics, or had earned awards or accolades. I was completely naked in my lack of knowledge. An abject beginner. I felt as if I was an imposter, and it was terrifying,” she says. However, the “learning new stuff part” was and continues to be exhilarating. “I was drinking from a fire hose of new knowledge and I loved it.”

Near the end of her Anderson Ranch stay, Weinman had an epiphany. Not only did she enjoy making ceramics, she enjoyed making ceramics with other people. “I loved the idea of having my own studio,” she recalls, “but I also loved the idea of having a community studio.” She immediately emailed the one person in Santa Barbara who could help make that idea a reality: Patrick Hall.

An acknowledged ceramics master, Hall is known for his impressive large-scale sculptural pieces. After taking ceramics in high school and working as a production potter in a commercial ceramics studio, Hall was drawn to Santa Barbara by UCSB’s now-shuttered ceramics program, where he earned both an undergraduate and a master’s degree.

He’s been in Santa Barbara ever since, but put his ceramics practice on hold for 30 years to helm a design/build construction business. He returned to clay in 2011, with his former UCSB professor, noted ceramicist Sheldon Kaganoff. Together they established the Clay Studio in Goleta in 2015, where the two taught classes and generated a loyal following of several dozen students. Unfortunately, after three years the land was redeveloped and the studio closed. At that point, Hall began searching for another location, giving his students and followers frequent updates. Weinman was on Hall’s contact list; she had visited the Clay Studio before its closure.

In her email to Hall, Weinman offered to provide financial support for a new Clay Studio. The two met for breakfast the morning after Weinman returned from Anderson Ranch. Hall smiles when recalling their meeting. “I told her what the small dream was, and what the big dream was, which was that I’d really like Clay Studio to evolve into an art center that supported the community. By the end of breakfast, she said, ‘Why don’t we just start big?’” His dream had come true.

Weinman’s dream had also come true. “I’m retired and I want to be retired,” she insists. “I loved the idea that Patrick already had a nonprofit, he wanted to run it, he had all the equipment, he had all the know-how, and I could basically fund it and show up and enjoy it. It was the perfect thing.”



An eclectic trio of Weinman’s pots made with 3D software and a clay printer (photo by Edward Clynes)

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– Lynda Weinman

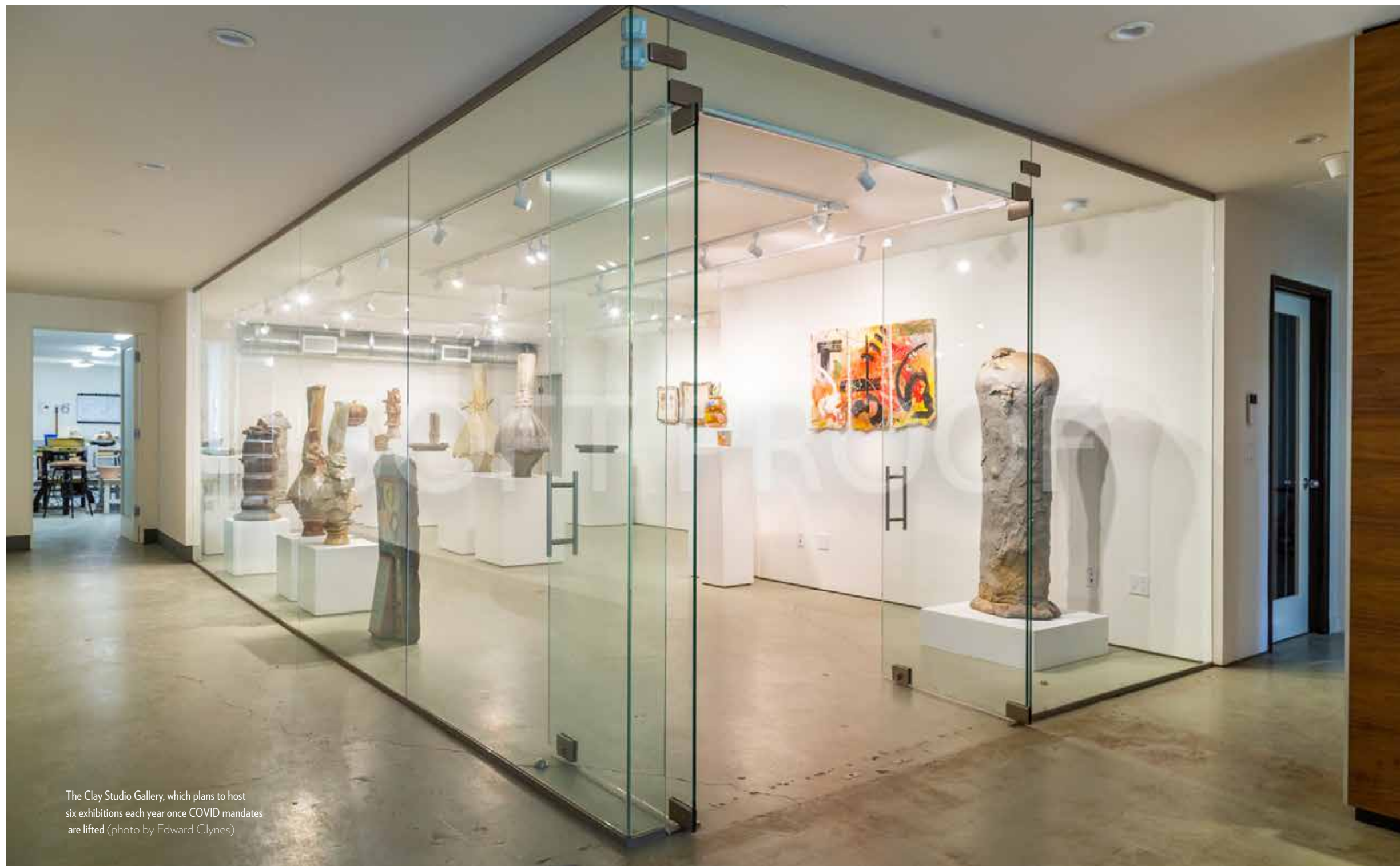


A close-up of Hall’s hand-made handles wait to be attached and (below) tools of the trade (photo by Edward Clynes)



Weinman’s whimsical 3D printed clay series titled Insecurity Awards





The Clay Studio Gallery, which plans to host six exhibitions each year once COVID mandates are lifted (photo by Edward Clynes)

The new Clay Studio is a 24,000-square-foot building surrounded by four pastoral acres in Goleta. Hall is its executive director. “We looked at quite a few properties,” Weinman says, “and when I saw it, I realized it was the perfect place for an art studio because it was a building that had been hit so hard with an ugly stick, it just had no redeeming qualities whatsoever, except that it was big and inexpensive [compared to] normal Santa Barbara prices. If it had been downtown, it would have been ten times as expensive.” Given Hall’s extensive construction experience,

initial renovations were completed in a mere five months, and the newly-designed Clay Studio opened its doors in January of 2020. (It closed seven weeks later due to COVID-19.)

One of Clay Studio’s recent acquisitions – courtesy of Weinman – is a 3D clay printer. “I didn’t want to get a kind of a ‘hobby’ printer here,” Hall says, “because we’re going to teach workshops, and it has to be able to do things at scale. So we bought a pretty ambitious piece of equipment. It can print out five-foot-tall things.” A technician from the

manufacturer was brought in to demonstrate the printer’s operation, but the COVID-19 lockdown forced him to leave after just one day. For Weinman, that single day of training was “enough to give me the right amount of knowledge to then figure out the rest myself.” Within a few months she was teaching the studio staff how to clay print.

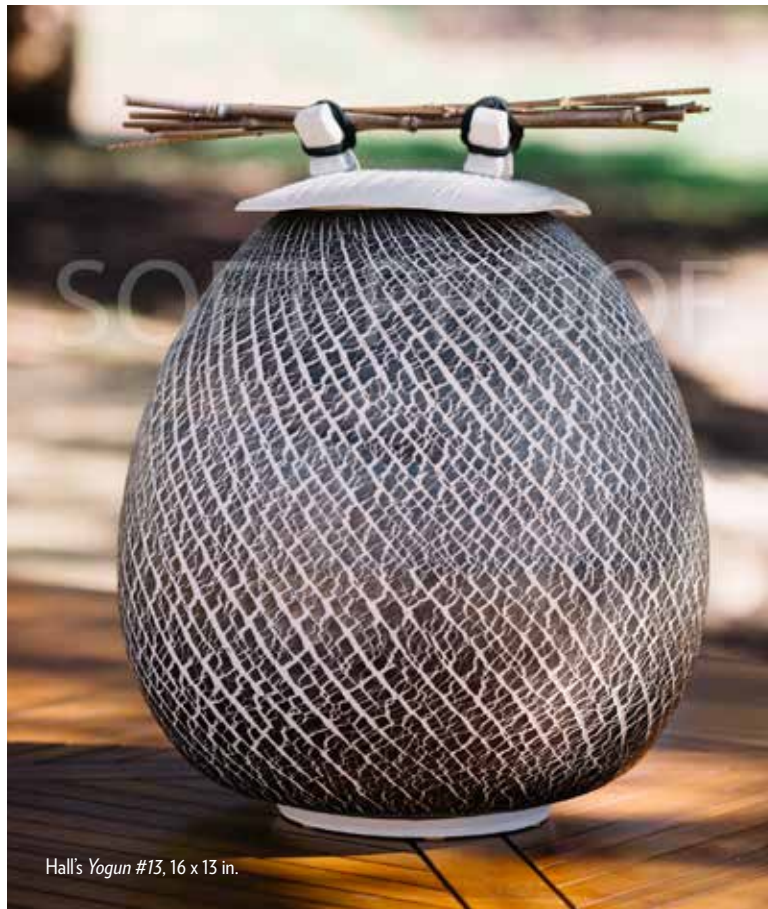
To the uninitiated, using a 3D printer to make a clay pot looks as simple as pressing the button on a coffee machine, because it’s easy to ignore the complexities behind mechanical technology. All digital fabrication



Hall with his beloved dog Tucker (photo by Edward Clynes)

– 3D printing included – uses software that translates into detailed code commands. But often a disparity exists between what the software can accomplish and the user’s capacity to make it happen. Weinman discovered this years ago after reading the manual for her then-boyfriend’s Mac computer, prompting her to write her groundbreaking book on Web graphics. She encountered a similar situation with the computer software visualizations of her clay designs; sometimes they failed to match what the 3D clay printer produced, or they collapsed during printing. At first, Weinman simply documented these “failures” on *Claybottress*, and even glazed some of the strangely beautiful pieces. But eventually, after being unable to locate any resources addressing the technical issues she was experiencing, she contacted the clay software company directly, and ended up working closely with the company’s programming team. She even co-launched a tutorial site on the company’s website with a fellow ceramicist. (She also posted instructional videos on YouTube.)

When the COVID-19 lockdown banished Weinman from Clay Studio, she installed a desktop clay printer in her existing dining room “since we weren’t going to be doing any entertaining,” she says. She insists the messy part – changing the clay – is done in the garage (after moving her car). She also took over the home’s entryway to dry her pieces. “Then I realized I really wanted a pug mill, which is what you use to mix clay, so you can use a lot of different types of clay,” she says, “and then I also decided I



Hall's *Yogun #13*, 16 x 13 in.



Lid detail of Hall's *Yogun #13*, porcelain with black bamboo and leather straps

*Patrick Hall's ceramics reflect an aesthetic honed over many years of practice. He generally works in multiples, which allows him to see the lineage connecting the first piece to the last, and how his expertise and eye for that particular form or proportion evolves. *Yogun #13* is a sodium silicate piece with a crackled texture that results from expanding the inside of the vessel after coating the outside with slip. The uniformity of the cracks is a testament to Hall's advanced technique.*



Collab #15 is an example of the power of collaboration, mixing Hall's thrown and hand-built work with Weinman's 3D printed clay elements. "We're really creating a new language in ceramics genre," Hall notes. More examples of these trailblazing works can be seen at Sullivan Goss - An American Gallery through May 24



Covid Vase is one in a series of 50 such works Hall executed at Clay Studio during the pandemic lockdown when no one else was around. "I had a very peaceful, calming time doing it, because I was just immersed in my work," he says, and the serenity of these vessels reflect Hall's attempt to find equanimity in throes of the pandemic



Hall detailing the contours of a large porcelain extended thrown vase

wanted a kiln, so I just said to Bruce, 'I'm willing to park my car in the driveway' and he said 'Ok.'" (Actually, he told her he hadn't seen her "this lit up" since they first met.) Ultimately, she confesses, "I've really turned our house into a clay studio, bit by bit, during COVID. Bruce will say to me, 'Were you doing something with clay? There's clay on the handle of the door...'"

News of Weinman's clay adventures reached the owners of Ojai's Porch Gallery, Lisa Casoni and Heather Stobo, who visited her dining room studio to witness the 3D printer at work. That visit led to Weinman's first public display of her ceramics for *The Ojai Invitational, 2020, The Ceramics Show* at the gallery last year. According to Stobo, the initial impetus for including

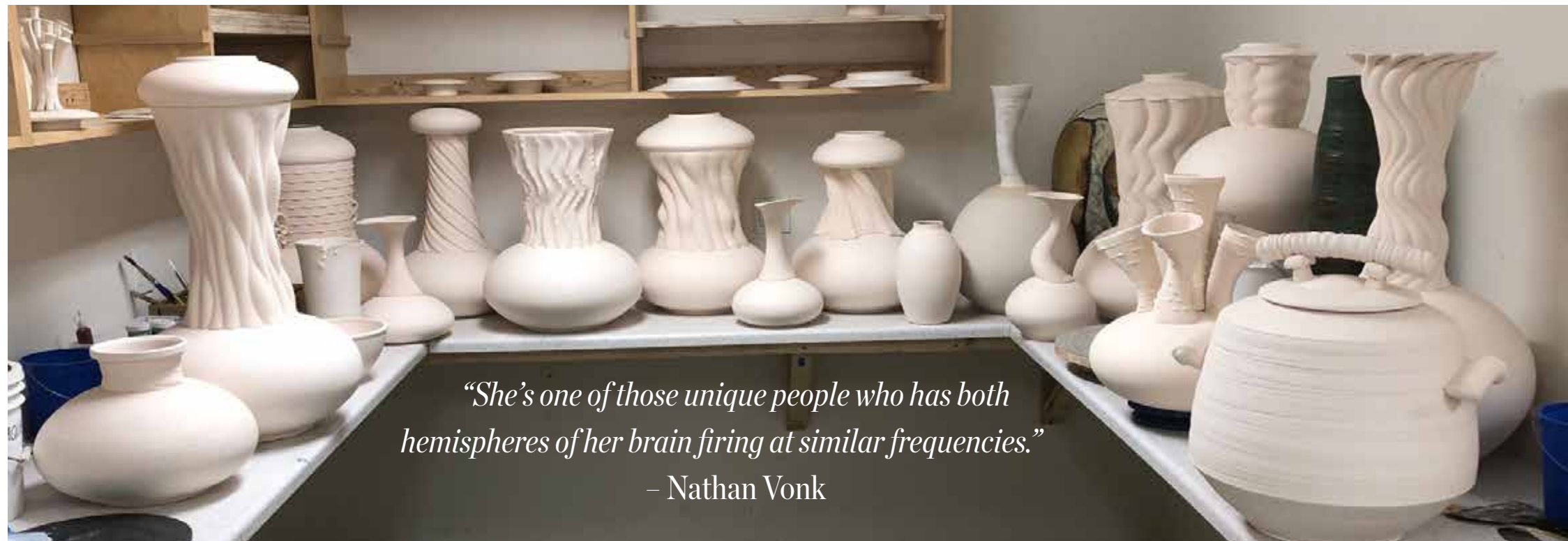
Weinman's work in the exhibition was to provide insight into the 3D printing process in contrast to the traditional methodologies of the other ceramic artists. "We assumed that her pieces would be meticulous and robotic in their precision," Stobo says, "and some were. But what really captured our interest was the way she embraced the outtakes. Adding gold leaf and glazing to collapsed vessels, Weinman embraced the beauty of wabi-sabi. There were no mistakes, just variations on the form." Even so, Weinman is shy about exhibiting her work. "It just doesn't quite feel deserving yet," she confesses. (Weinman's pottery is available for sale on Clay Studio's website; she donates the proceeds back to the studio.)

But the best is yet to come – namely the fruits of a collaboration between Weinman and Hall. While the latter admitted to "sitting on the sidelines" as the 3D printer was installed at Clay Studio, he soon hatched the idea of combining Weinman's printed clay with his own hand-thrown pieces. "I think the work is really promising," he says. "I think it's interesting – the wedding of art and technology." Nathan Vonk, owner of Santa Barbara's Sullivan Goss: An American Gallery, obviously agrees, having organized *Kindred Spirits*, a show of the duo's collaborative work currently on view at the gallery from through May 24. "I'm super excited," Vonk says, "because their two aesthetics are relatively distinct from one another; his are very round and organic, and hers are much more precise, analytical things. That juxtaposition is really, really interesting. It's a synergistic sort of thing where the sum of the parts is greater than the whole."



A fully loaded kiln of 3D pottery displaces Weinman's car at her garage studio

(photos by Edward Clynes)



“She’s one of those unique people who has both hemispheres of her brain firing at similar frequencies.”
 – Nathan Vonk

A collection of collaboration pieces by Hall and Weinman await color and texture



Two luminous pieces designed by Hall and Weinman demonstrate the power of their creative collaboration



Hall and Weinman with Scara, the sophisticated 3D clay printer at Goleta’s Clay Studio (photo by Edward Clynes)



Some of Hall and Weinman’s unglazed “collaboration” pieces





Weinman's 3D printed clay pieces on display at Ojai's Porch Gallery, part of "The Ojai Invitational 2020: The Ceramics Show"

Meanwhile, Hall and his staff continue their efforts to fulfill the ambitious vision for Clay Studio. Permits for a dozen studios, four workshop spaces, and two residency apartments are in process. "Our plan is to have two residencies taking place here at all times," he says. There's also the possibility UCSB students might access Clay Studio as part of their studies, and Hall is open to including photography studios at the facility in the future. Not to mention installing an outdoor screen for movie nights and tending to the refurbished orchard surrounding the building (whose fruits will be donated to the Food Bank of Santa Barbara County).

The potential impact of the Clay Studio on the arts community in Santa Barbara is not lost on gallery owner Vonk. "I think that the scale of the impact the institution can have is boundless," he says. "I think it won't be long before it will be a nationally recognized place." The primary reason for that, of course, is Weinman herself. "She's one of those unique people who has both hemispheres of her brain firing at similar frequencies," Vonk continues, "and what's really unique about her is that she's not just writing checks. She dove into the deep end and is creating a thing that is totally new and unique. We're extraordinarily lucky that it's happening here."

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- Heather Stobo



One of Weinman's Beautiful Disaster pieces in 3D printed clay



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