

Studio Management Revisited: Reflections on Working in My Studio During the Last Twenty Years

by John Glick

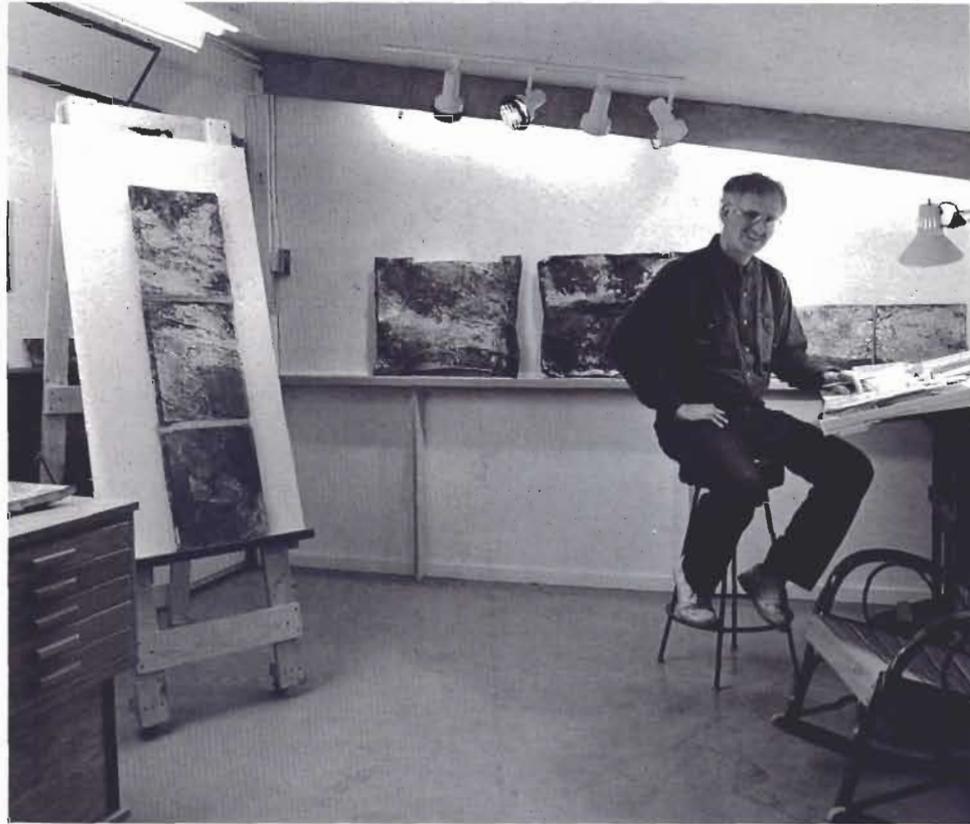
I think we have come to a time in the development of studio pottery when our primary focus should be placed less on the practical (and material and logistic) and more on the philosophical. Much has been written by me and others during the past twenty years on the technical aspects of studio pottery that has been constructive and timely and has no doubt helped motivate newcomers to our field.

My own enthusiasm for the joy of process—such as the challenge of getting the correct tool for the task at hand—has not diminished. If there is a notable shift, however, it is toward more thought-filled concerns. Where momentum once may have pushed me toward my work, now I find the need for more reflection. Studio management has a broader scope and deeper root than I once imagined. Today I am more connected to those concerns that anchor issues to the philosophical side of studio management.

The Economic Mix That Works for Me. The show room is still a viable and productive element in earning my living. Approximately seventy-five percent of my yearly income is still derived directly from our showroom activities. These involve direct sales to customers who visit the showroom for the first time, as well as those who have been customers for thirty years. Typically, this kind of enterprise involves dinnerware sets done on a commission basis: I sell eight or ten large sets over any given year.

I cherish this continued connection to my customers. They are appreciative users of my work, and the knowledge that they care for my work nourishes my soul. My relationship with them and the support it has given me have blossomed and grown warmer during the past thirty years. I am exceedingly grateful for that.

In 1989 I designed and built what we call the Upper Gallery. Here I show my best work in a simple, somewhat sparse but perhaps more dignified environment



than our regular showroom. It has been a place to learn, to see the pieces in a fresh light, to understand their impact in a different way and to absorb their presence as individual pieces in a manner that the showroom never allowed in its relative congestion. It is a great opportunity to evaluate the work with a new breadth of understanding.

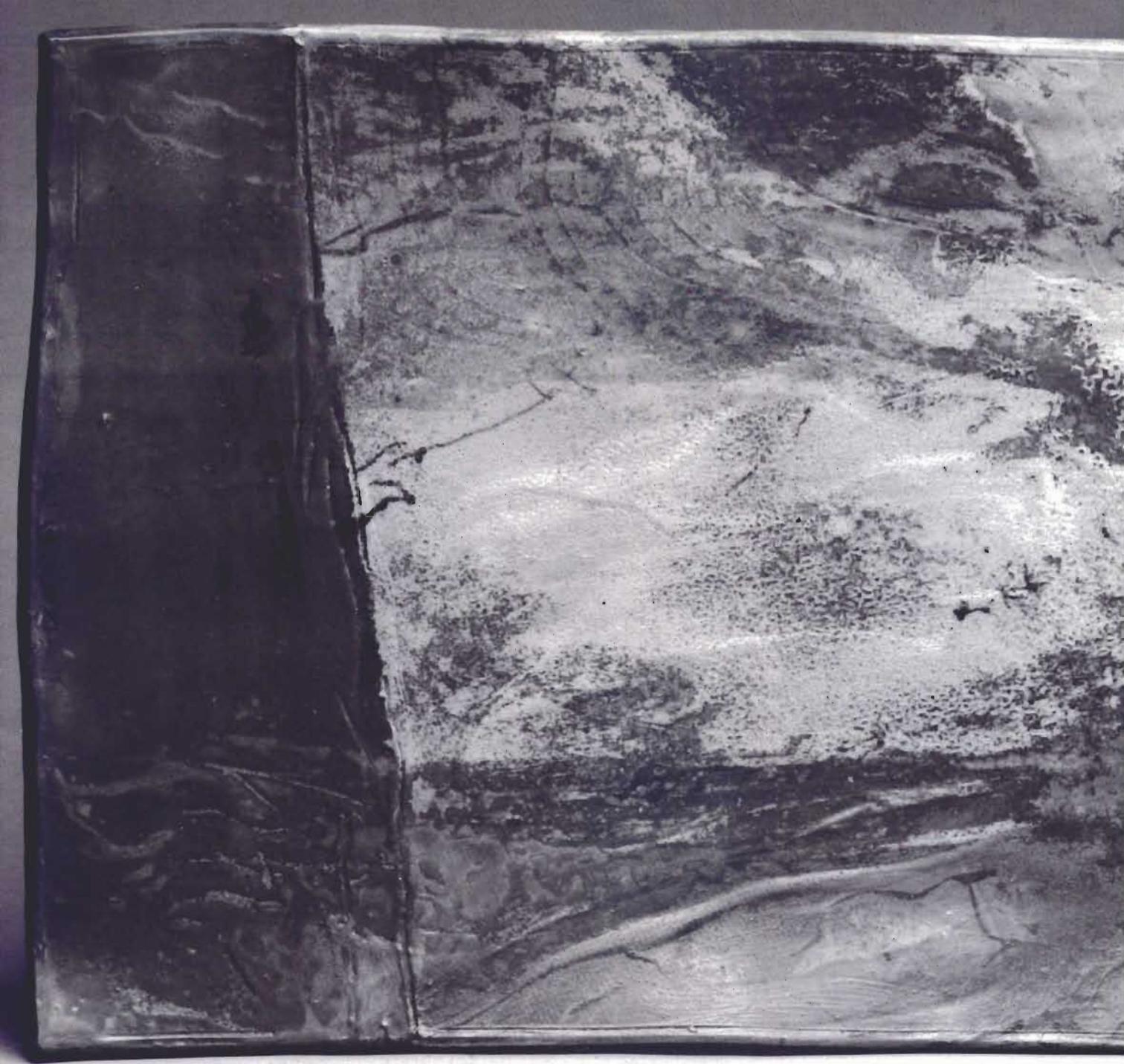
It is also a place to reflect on pricing. I have instituted a price change over the last few years by making a distinction between the larger, on-going body of work and those few special pieces that are “a gift from the kiln”. Frankly, there is not much difference in the way my work sells now from the way it did five or ten years ago; the most expensive pieces did not sell rapidly then and do not sell rapidly now. A few artists I know are comfortable

with this escalation of prices and are holding their own. I feel tentative about this upward scale of pricing but am inclined to be part of this evolution, learning as I go.

I conduct one or two workshops a year, both as an outreach in teaching and as a sharing experience. This is income-generating. I insist on being paid well for my workshops, because I put extraordinary effort into them and value what I do.

I never enter wholesale-selling events or participate in events of that type with large groups. They're prevalent, I know, but I don't want to become involved with them.

I realize more than ever that the vitality of my livelihood comes through a direct exchange with the customer in my own showroom and through a more sophisti-



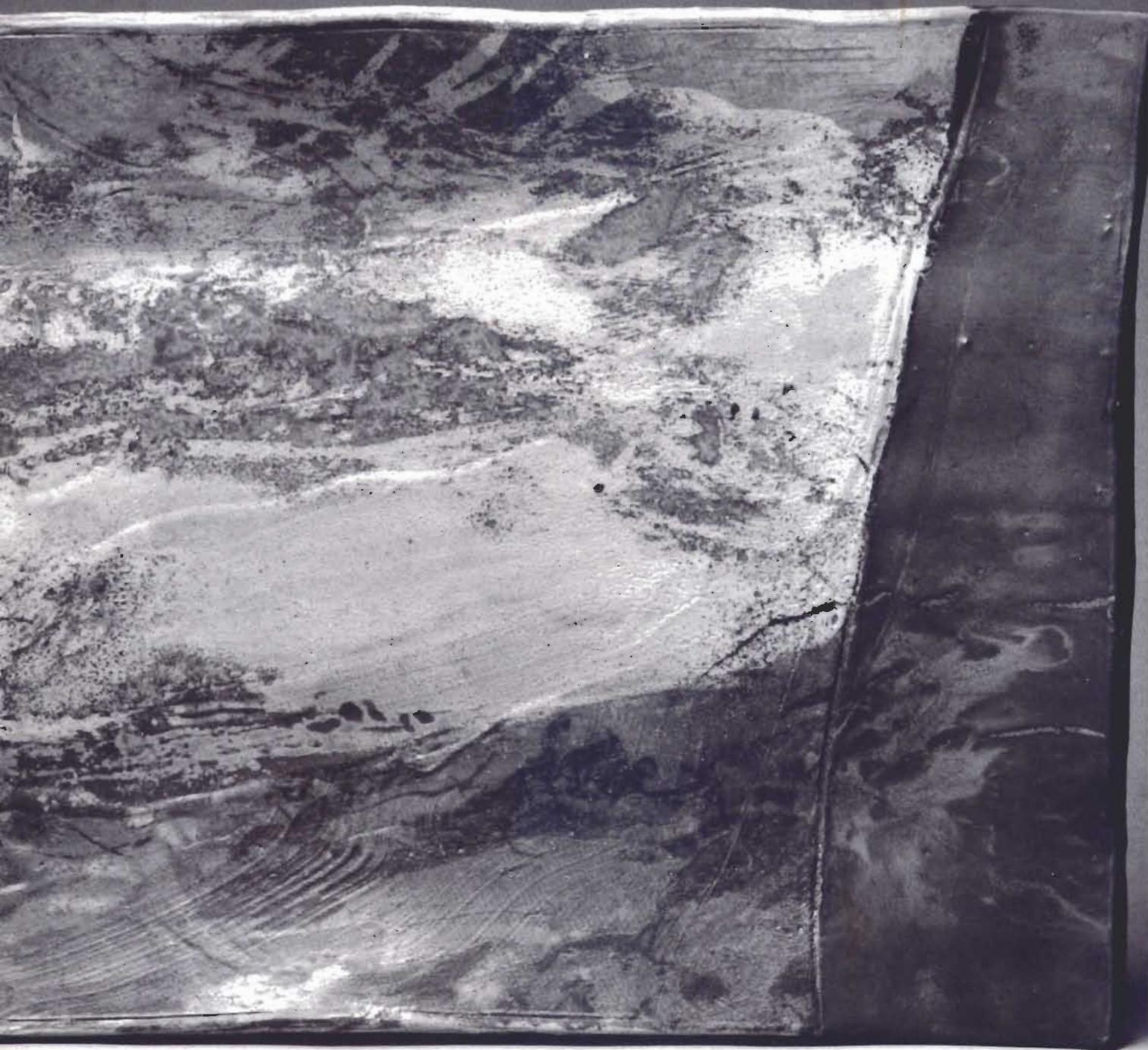
cated exchange with galleries, museums and collectors. Thus, as the economy fluctuates, I am more able to move with changing times and without a major disruption in my own income.

Galleries and Collectors. It is impossible to be involved with galleries and not encounter collectors as well. I certainly

meet collectors through my Upper Gallery. I had to become clear about giving collectors discounts. When is this appropriate? I've worked out different ways for different circumstances. Honor between galleries and myself is a major concern. My galleries know I will forward a sales commission to them if I consummate a sale to a collector who came to me via the

gallery. Should a gallery pay me a finder's fee for sending a collector to them who subsequently buys another artist's work and not mine? That might be a fair turn of events!

Increasingly, I insist on an open dialogue among collectors, galleries and myself. I have a history of nearly thirty years of accessibility to collectors. In recent



years, this access has increased as have my gallery involvements in the craft field at large. I countenance no back door sales; I operate above board. Since I cannot shut my door to clients who wish to see me personally, it is important that there be a healthy dialogue between the gallery and me.

It is no surprise, therefore, that the eco-

nomix mix best suited for me comes from a solid base in my showroom and a flexible channel for higher quality and higher priced work into the galleries I use across the nation.

On Working Alone in the Studio. The biggest shift in the reality of my studio is due to work-related stress on my body, back

and tendonitis problems in particular. Twenty years ago, when I first wrote about studio management for *STUDIO POTTER*, I was a good deal more cavalier about these problems. I thought I was superhuman and less vulnerable to physical problems. I now know differently. (Read my article, "To Sciatica and Back: A Potter's Journey," in *STUDIO POTTER* Vol. 15, No. 2.) 17

It is understandable, therefore, that there has been a gradual but inevitable shift toward a need to have a person working full time with me in the studio. I no longer call that person an apprentice but refer to her/him as my studio assistant.

Yes, I can and do work alone for periods up to weeks or even months, but I cannot do without someone to help with the big physical tasks. Wisdom has shown that one should not risk doing those jobs alone, such as kiln loading, clay mixing, truck unloading and the like. It just does not pay off. It must seem wonderful for those young enough to sustain it but, trust me, there is a price to pay later on.

This leads me to viewing the assistant in a most positive light. It's a real fellowship. It's a relationship that honors another person's needs in pottery and supports his/her growth. It gives a person adequate space to create a body of work that will propel him/her along on a career after the time with me. It is, I suppose, an indulgence to teach without being connected to the academy, but I enjoy it thoroughly and feel comfortable in giving and sharing that way.

From a practical side, since I do not offer pay during those two years of assistantship, I believe that what is given in the studio to my assistant more than compensates that individual for her/his time and commitment to me.

Technology in the Studio. Computers? Not yet. Maybe someday, but I'm not feeling that need or connection at the moment.

Tools and devices? Absolutely.

I have always enjoyed devising tools to suit the spirit of current work. Over the years this might have meant wooden hinged molds or templates. Extruded clay pieces became increasingly complex as time passed.

Recently, it meant building two hydraulic-powered extruders. "Trudy I" was built in a thrilling moment of need and was a design success. It has an extrusion capacity of 12 tons with a 27-inch width and 8-inch height potential in horizontal extruding. "Trudy II" has an 8-ton capacity with a 16-inch width and 6-inch height extrusion in horizontal format. These two devices have provided the technical needs for extruding large-scale, complex forms that have ushered in an exciting

phase of work—work I could never have undertaken by any other means. Ideas were transformed into reality with only a little pain (building the machines). This was the logical evolution of the work on extrusion begun in the mid-1970s (see *STUDIO POTTER* Vol. 9, No. 2).

On Remaining outside Academe. In spite of not teaching on an academic level, I've always nurtured the hope—if not intention—of heading toward some kind of teaching. And there have been tempting opportunities over the years. However I might have ideas and skills to share, my workshops and writing seem to be satisfying.

I have remained a studio potter because the challenges are deeply fulfilling. Perhaps it's fair to say that I have made them challenging. I have never experienced a prolonged dry period in the studio but always dived into new ideas and explored new techniques and processes. I simply felt strongly that the work needed to be done, and it flowed naturally from that excitement. As my thirtieth year in the studio approaches, I can look back and say there just hasn't been time to teach, but I'm not sure what the next thirty will bring.

How Work Remains Fresh in Spite of or Because of Production. It's deadly to do the same thing too often. Potters differ on this subject, but one person's repetition is another's difference. I like to become motivated through serial monogamy pottery relationships. I stay committed long enough to court, marry and love a series of works and often return to it for a fresh outlook that may bring a change of scale and form. I love the courtship. The spirit of each group of pots just jumps—well, perhaps sometimes lurches or creeps—forward.

I have learned to follow deeper, more instinctual urges that push me on—a little shocked, sometimes frightened, at least surprised at the new places I discover. In 1990 I followed such a trail toward landscape wall panels. This so motivated and enriched my soul that it has captured about twenty-five-percent of my current studio time, with no real resistance from me. It stimulated the design and construction of the two large-scale hydraulic extruders and resulted in a five-week residency in Watershed, Maine, in a beautiful

environment where I explored the potential. Two years later these landscape wall panels have evolved into free-standing sculptures that co-exist happily with the other work I enjoy.

In conclusion, I can say it has become clear to me throughout my life as a studio potter that my best work emerges when I am most motivated. Each day reinforces the belief that I cannot escape what I do; I cannot resist, indeed, I am driven to do this work. If it means tool-making, fine! And in truth, it also continues to mean many happy hours discovering the wonders of the wheel! Out of all this will emerge the final acceptance and respect that we all search for.

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