



GRINNELL, IOWA

Bikes to You

The Grinnell Magazine

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The 2009 President's Report
and Honor Roll of Giving
Plus: No Place Like Home

Housecalls

This is the next in a series of profiles designed to reacquaint us with some interesting Grinnellians who haven't been seen on campus much since graduation. They're still out there, though, and more interesting than ever. So we've decided to make a few housecalls to get reacquainted.

Being There

Story and portraits by Dan Weeks '80

Artist **Bennett Bean '63** has been surfing the crest of the American aesthetic for nearly a half-century. "It's more interesting to be where it's happening," he says, "than where it has happened."

Bennett Bean has had a knack for being where it's at. He spent the late '60s in California, the '70s and '80s in New York, and the past 30-plus years creating his own aesthetic retreat on a former dairy farm in rural New Jersey. These days his hands are at work in his barn/studio, and his imagination knows no bounds.

He's been a potter, a sculptor, a painter, a teacher. The ideas just keep coming, and his varied experiences only seem to have honed his judgment in deciding which to work and which to shelve — not to mention his technical skill in executing them. "Hey, when you get to be my age, you've got moves," he says with a shrug. Three years past the typical retirement age, he recently started what may be his biggest venture yet — custom-designing and marketing handmade Tibetan rugs.

The Matrix of his Mind

And to hear him talk about it, he owes it all to dyslexia. Or Buddhism. Or travel. You pick. "I tend not to make distinctions between aspects of my life," Bean says. "They all exist together. They all contribute to one another." In Bean's mind, a single creative idea can and frequently does arc across multiple contexts and media, spinning off art objects, lifestyle adjustments, and philosophical revelations.

If Bennett Bean sounds like he has the archetypal liberal arts mind, it did not so appear to him when he entered Grinnell in 1959. He was fresh out of high school in Iowa City, where his father taught medicine at the University of Iowa. Shortly after arriving at Grinnell, he determined he wanted to be an art major. Although he transferred to the University of Iowa, with its hundreds of art students, halfway through his third year, Bean says he still values his time at the College.

"Grinnell pushed me into places I wouldn't have gone," he says. "At the time I thought I had better things to do, but I'm very pleased now that I went there. The best example was a biology class I took with Professor [Guillermo] Mendoza.

I never would have taken that class on purpose, and it was great. All the historical and cultural studies — it was a wonderful, solid, real traditional education and it has been a great thing to have had. It taught me how to learn, and that is invaluable."

Invaluable, perhaps, but not easy. "I have dyslexia," he says. "It wasn't at all stylish back then. Exams were bad, because my thinking isn't linear. But give me a piece of random information that fits the matrix of my mind and it goes in like an arrow.

"I have near perfect visual retention," Bean explains, "and I think in a visual field instead of sequences. I've practiced Buddhism for decades, but I still have trouble remembering the four noble truths, the eight-fold path — linear stuff goes in one ear and out the other.

"But concepts, experiential stuff — I can see relationships between things in a visual and temporal field that Aristotelian thinking will miss," he says. "For instance, the letters 'p' and 'b' and the numbers '6' and '9' are all the same thing to me, the same shape — they're just arranged differently. But I see them as the same. And interrelationships and pairings are what creativity is all about. Make an alignment between two things that wouldn't naturally occur, and you come up with something totally new, something no one has done before. I'm so lucky to have found a career that allows me to be really functional. Actually, I pity artists who aren't dyslexic."

What a Strange, Nonlinear Trip

But again, the process was not at all linear. After earning a B.F.A. from Iowa, Bean did the classic '60s trip: he got a VW bus "into which I could pack everything I owned, including my potter's wheel"; he did "figure eights across the country," exploring the geographic and cultural landscape.

Eventually Bean found himself in Seattle at the University of Washington's M.F.A. program. It was not an auspicious time. "I broke my ankle, my best friend married



my fiancée, and it rained for 45 days straight," he recalls. "As soon as I could walk, I left for Southern California."

He ended up getting an M.F.A. in ceramics at Claremont Graduate (now Claremont Graduate University) studying under Paul Soldner, founder of the California School of ceramic art that combines Western materials with Japanese aesthetics. Bean has fond memories of that time.

"California people seemed gentle and sweet and darling, and everyone was a little stoned. We thought we were inventing the way the world was going to be, and that it was going to be handmade and beautiful and 'Eastern,' although we didn't really know a lot about what that meant. Someone would make a mistake throwing a pot and say 'Look! A Zen mark! That's so cool!' But no one practiced. They were 'lifestyle Buddhists.'"

Bean's experience in Eastern thought and culture went deeper than most: when he married Cathy Bao in 1966, he gained an extended Chinese family. Bao recently spoke at Grinnell on race and ethnicity; she is a philosophy professor and author of *The Chapstick-Fork Principle*, a memoir and manual. Bean started practicing Tibetan Buddhism in 1974, something he believes has had a significant influence on his work.

"The Buddhist thing has to do with figuring out how your mind works," he says. He was inspired to start sitting when he walked into his studio one day and saw a pot completely differently than he had perceived it the day before. Which perspective was real?

"If I'm going to make this stuff, I need to be getting accurate sensory information," he explains. "If you practice Buddhism, you deal with reality in a less filtered way. What you do is, you sit and observe your mind. Endlessly. Eventually, having seen the same thing again and again and again, you get bored with yourself and take a heightened interest in everything 'out there.'"

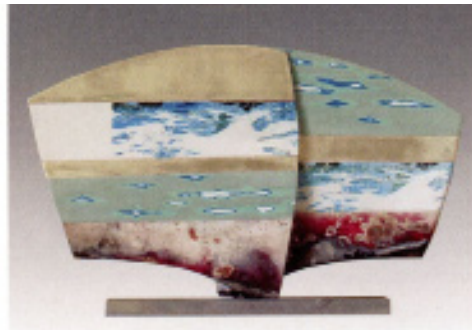
He also gives some credit to Buddhism for his terrific ability to work in a wide variety of media and succeed in a range of environments and situations. He doesn't try to impose a fixed persona on a new situation, he says. "I just show up, look around, and think 'who do I need to be and what do I need to do to work in this situation?'"

Potter, Sculptor, Non-Aristotelian

His work spans such an astonishing trajectory, it's difficult to imagine it coming from one pair of hands. Initially a studio potter and an art professor at Staten Island's Wagner College, he veered into sculpture when the island's fire department wouldn't let him build a kiln in his backyard. Six months later, he sold a sculpture to the Whitney Museum of American Art, which catapulted him into the thick of the '60s art scene. But he quickly became disillusioned with that art world, moved to the country, and went back to making pots.

"I discovered decorative pattern two weeks ahead of everyone else," he jokes. "I started painting on pots when no

Bennett Bean says he doesn't distinguish between his art and the rest of his life, noting that he puts as much creative energy into renovating, decorating, and landscaping his old farmhouse as he puts into original artwork.



Samples of Bennett Bean's pit-fired, painted, and gilded earthenware (clockwise from top left): *Pair on Base*, 23" wide by 18 1/4" tall by 8 1/2" deep; *The Bay* (The New Wing Series), 24" wide by 14 1/2" tall by 2 1/4" deep; and *Open Pair*, 60" wide by 12 1/2" tall by 19" deep.

one else did. Back then, it was practically illegal: everyone wanted to know if your work was dishwasher safe."

Bean still calls his objects "pots," although they've gotten less and less pot-like and more and more abstract over time. At first, he says, "I was making enclosed pieces — they have a space inside, a decorated skin outside that was glazed and painted."

Much of his work experiments with breaks, tears, or folds in the rim. "I was throwing a pot one day, and the rim tore. I looked at it and thought: Look at that! If I violate the rim, it changes the speed at which the eye goes from the inside to the outside. That nick in the rim changes the distinction between the two surfaces."

For Bean's non-Aristotelian mind, that alteration of distinctions was the portal to another world. He started gilding the insides of the pots, for one thing. "It's a kind of spacey, indeterminate surface," he says, "a sort of golden space inside that has no specific dimension. It's kind of infinite."

Meanwhile, the painted outsides of the pots were getting more elaborate. The harmonic visual and conceptual reverberations set up by the combination of inside and outside, the eye flickering between the two — was and is hypnotic in a way that beggars explanation.

Next came a commission from a couple who had lots of money but not a lot of collecting space. "They wanted a little bowl for each of them," Bean recalls. "I kept thinking about them. They were great people, happy people, they had a great marriage. ... So I made a pair of bowls that interlocked, the same way I thought they did."

DNA in red and cream is a handknotted Tibetan wool and silk rug designed by Bennett Bean.

That breakthrough resulted in several series of interlocking "bowls." Each piece included either two or three parts. The parts sit on little slab bases. The piece's owners can feel free to move the vessels around on the slab as they choose. The slab defines "as far apart as I want the vessels to be, and as close as I want them to be to something else," explains Bean.

Those vessels were followed by a series of what Bean calls "wings" — flat pieces of abstract ceramic artwork that are not vessels at all. "That phase only lasted for about six months. I decided that if I'm going to make something that flat, I might as well just jump off the edge of the earth and do a painting."

The one he was working on recently filled a fair-sized room in his barn, and was executed in encaustic, a technique using colored beeswax that "lasts forever and smells — oh my God, it smells like ambrosia," says Bean.

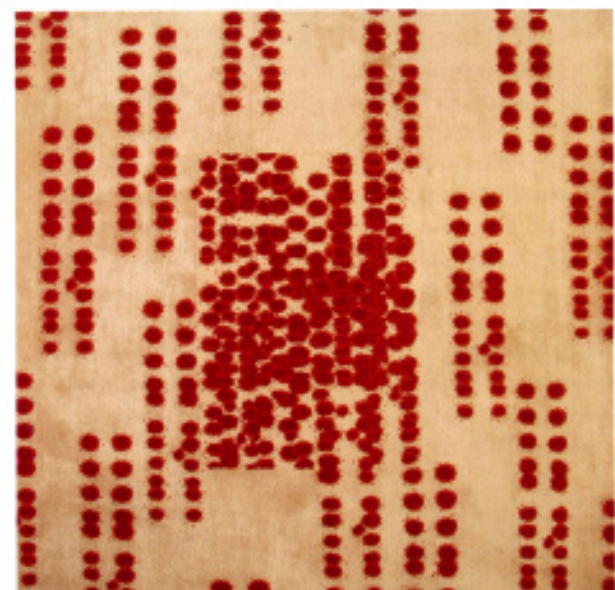
A Fabulous Chicken Frieze

It all happened over four decades, in a much less linear fashion than this story implies. Early on, Bean got fired from his teaching job three times ("My diplomatic skills were not highly polished then"), reinstated twice (once as a student-strike demand), bought and rebuilt a dairy farmhouse and barn in rural New Jersey, and created an elaborately landscaped retreat on the surrounding six acres, all while making and selling art through a network of galleries and shows to collectors at the highest level.

"How much for that pot?" I ask as we walk through the studio. "\$24,000," says Bean matter-of-factly. "During the '80s, I couldn't make stuff fast enough. The market for crafts was going straight up toward heaven. At the end of the '80s, it fell in a hole," and it's been up and down ever since."

The ups and downs — and the evolution of styles of work he saw — got him thinking: what's the next aesthetic movement? The answer, at least for mainstream culture, came back "design."

"Architecture is the point now," he says. "Not what's in the house. We've moved from handmade and handcrafted



to designed and produced. Everything is very elegant now, very slick, very Bauhausy-crisp. And you can buy great design at Target! Most people don't care that nothing's handmade, that there are no thumbprints on things anymore. Although there is an almost parallel '60s-type do-it-yourself movement, too — people selling on etsy.com, rediscovering work of the hand."

This may sound like the lament of an aging hippie potter except for one thing: Bean is delighted. "I know how to do this life," he says of his art and pottery. "I know every part of it. There's nothing new in it the way there used to be. It's time for me to do something different."

A few years ago on a vacation with Cathy to visit their son William, a venture capitalist in Shanghai, Bean bought a Tibetan rug in Bangkok. He became quite interested in these rugs and started looking at the one he had purchased. "I can design a better rug than that," he thought, and did.

Fast-forward about 10 years, and Bean's e-mailing elaborate color-coded bitmaps of rugs gridded to 100 knots per inch (for wool rugs) or 200 knots per inch (for silk rugs) directly to Tibetan weavers, who hand-knot every thread and deliver a finished 4-by-6-foot rug in 8 or 16 weeks, depending on the size and material. He's hired Elizabeth Rand, a fiber artist fresh out of art school, and made her a partner in the rug business. She collaborates on the design and computer work, and the two are already filling orders. Bean prices the rugs by the square foot — "like a commodity," he says.

"The craft galleries say, 'Send us rugs when you send us pots,' but the craft world is a small, charming, mildly dysfunctional place. We're more interested in seeing what happens if we go into the design universe. I'm 68; by the time I'm 70, I'd like not to have to go to Nepal a couple times a year, and instead could spend my time designing rugs and coming up with more new ideas.

"I have a lot of ideas. [My] mind makes an endless amount of ideas. That's what it's in the business of doing. There isn't enough time or money to make all of them. I want to make, for instance, the most fabulous chicken coop in the world with a frieze like the Parthenon, only with chickens on it. I'm afraid to tell my wife about that one. I'm not quite there yet.

"But I have so much more to do. I just need to live longer. It would be so annoying to die."

For more information on Bennett Bean's artwork, rugs, and other projects, visit: www.bennettbean.com or www.bennettbeanstudio.com.

Bean decorates a pot in his paint-spattered, clay-dusted recliner, surrounded by mementoes of travel, friends, and artistic inspiration, and with the amiable feline companionship of Polyfix (or "Poly" for short).

