

Joanne O'Sullivan

Asheville, NC

American Craft Week Essay Contest

If you could go to dinner with any traditional American craft artist, living or deceased, who would it be? And what would you like to talk about?

My Dinner With George (Ohr)

When I reach out to shake his hand, I notice the Tchoutacabouffa River clay still under his fingernails. But mostly, I can't keep my eyes off his moustache. It's like a small, furry beast nesting under his nose, completely obscuring the bottom half of his face. Two stiff strands separate out from it, thinning out and threading their way around the side of his head to the back. He knows I'm staring it. He turns around completely to show me that the two extensions are square-knotted together behind him. He turns back to me and shrugs as if to say, "What can I say? I'm a showman."

"How do you eat without getting food in it?" I didn't mean for that to be the first thing I said to him.

He reaches up and parts the mustache in the center, like Moses parting the Red Sea. There's a chin, a mouth under there.

"What are you serving?" His voice is like a bark. Calamity Sam-style, just like his moustache.

"Gumbo. Since you lived in New Orleans for some time..." I picture the spoon disappearing into the forest of hair on his face. Maybe I should have served crawfish to honor his Louisiana connection.

I'm self-conscious about my dinnerware: thick North Carolina stoneware. He picks up a bowl, snorts derisively. He examines the slim-handled water pitcher with a crimp-lipped mouth. "They got that from me," he says, placing it back on the table with a thud.

I serve the soup.

There is, it appears, no such thing as small talk with George Ohr. While I continue to be mesmerized by the spoon disappearing and reemerging from under the moustache, he recounts his record of accurate predictions about his own career. "Unequaled, unrivaled, undisputed: I said it didn't I?"

And now they're all saying it! Said I'd give my whole collection away to one creature or country and I did it, didn't I?" He enthusiastically bangs the table with his fist to underscore his point. There's something endearing about him that makes his braggadocio bearable.

His mud babies now have a home, he says. They're loved and cared for. They're celebrities. Every one of them stars. If he'd just given them away cheap, where would he be today?

"What do you say to those who say you sabotaged your own career with your behavior?"

He laughs and his eyes twinkle. "I am the apostle of individuality," he says. "I gotta be me."

"But you never made any money..."

"Who needs money when you've got a reputation like mine?"

Finally, I ask the only question to which I really want an answer. "Why did you stop making pottery?"

I see a smile in his eyes even though I still can't see his mouth. He shakes his head. "When you start out as far ahead of the pack as I did, sometimes you just gotta stop and wait for the rest to catch up."

*My favorite American Craft Week participant is hard to pick, but I think I'll have to go with the Grovewood Gallery, Asheville, North Carolina.
www.grovewood.com.*