

Artist Statement

Bitsy Joy (she/they/joy) is a prodigal daughter of Red Wing, Minnesota. They left Red Wing in 2000, vowing never to move back. In 2022 they felt the call to return to He Mni Can, drawn back by the cultural reconciliation work of the Honoring Dakota Project and the spiritual generosity of Nicky Buck. Nicky's stories of Dakota resistance to forced removal and the role of settler collaborators occupied joy's thoughts as she scraped can'sa'sa and considered her responsibilities to the land where they were born.

As a clay artist, Bitsy has never felt an affinity with the heavy wheel-thrown and slip cast pottery that Red Wing is currently known for. Although she was told at the Red Wing Pottery Museum that there were no local clay traditions before European settlement, her discussions with Dakota culture keepers refuted this obvious falsehood. A conversation with language and culture educator Barry Hand at an Honoring Dakota event inspired a visit to the Goodhue County Historical Society. Bitsy was blown away by the refined Late Woodland, Oneota, and Silvernale ceramics on display, as well as a map from 1903 marking an ancient kiln surrounded by burial mounds on Prairie Island.

The city of Red Wing was built on top of the city of He Mni Can, a vibrant community with highly sophisticated clay practices. He Mni Can pottery was made from local clays mixed with shell temper, featuring rolled rims and incised designs. Exceptionally thin round-bottomed pots made by Dakota ancestors were used for cooking and storage for millennia before the arrival of European settlers. At Hand's invitation Bitsy was honored to share her knowledge of pinch, paddle, and coil handbuilding techniques used by He Mni Can potters with Dakota youth at Prairie Island Indian Community's summer culture camp in August 2023.

The line between appreciation and appropriation is exceptionally thin. As a third-generation Catholic settler on Dakota land and a student of embodied social justice, Bitsy feels it important to name this tension in their work. Exploring ancestral Dakota craft traditions must be approached with great care, especially given the criminalization of Dakota cultural practices from 1883-1978 and the cultural trauma of attempted ethnocide perpetrated by Catholic boarding schools to generations of Dakota families.

In their work as the first Clay Artist in Residence at the Red Wing Arts Clay and Creative Center, Bitsy is exploring the concept of Land Back in the context of local clay. In addition to the diaspora of Dakota people, there has also been a diaspora of Dakota land in the form of Red Wing pottery and industrial sewer pipe. The omission of Dakota clay traditions from local pottery narratives is a cultural injury that deserves remediation. Inspired by the recognition and ongoing repatriation of He Mni Can, Bitsy is committing their residency to bringing greater awareness to He Mni Can pottery practices through work in community. Her dream is to re-build a kiln at Prairie Island for future generations of He Mni Can potters.