Rudy Autio: How a Gentle Street Fighter from Butte Led a Hand-Built Life and Changed an Art Form

By Jeff Hull

Begin not with Rudy Autio, one of the world's foremost ceramic artists, but with Rudy Autio, sailor. We could just as easily begin with Rudy Autio, airplane pilot, or Rudy Autio, guitarist, or plumber, or car mechanic, but sailing lets us glimpse Rudy on the waters of Montana's susurrant Flathead Lake, an enormous basin of crisp, clear water beneath the granite snowcaps and pine clad slopes of the Swan and Mission mountain ranges. Rudy loved Flathead Lake, and Rudy loved sailing—eventually. His sailing career began on Flathead, where for decades he vacationed with his wife, Lela, and their four children, and where, in 1964, he bought a piece of land and started building a cabin, helped by friends. There he decided one day to be a sailor.

Rudy Autio sharpening a weiner stick by Flathead Lake, 2006

"That was the thing about Rudy," says Lela, who was married to Rudy for six decades. "He never stepped back from a job. If he didn't know how to do something, he'd go to the library and get a book and learn about it. He could teach himself how to do anything."

The first time he tried to sail, he launched his boat and raised his sails, puffed with expectation—and the wind blew him into the shore, into a tangle of shrubs and tree branches, which snagged his rigging and turned sailing into slapstick.

He kept at it, learned more, kept launching. Not much later, on an outing to impress a friend, a non-sailor, Rudy accidentally let his boat self-jibe. The boom swung around and konked his noggin, briefly dimming his lights. The boat careened before the wind, skipperless. Rudy's friend was peeling his boots off, ready to make a swim, when Rudy came to and took the helm again, guiding them safely back to the dock.

Still, he kept at it. And within a few summers, Rudy could sail his little boat before Flathead Lake's quickly tempestuous winds. He could navigate by starlight. He learned what the lines on the water's surface meant about what the wind was doing, learned how the lines of the rigging changed the shape of its sails to capture pieces of that breeze and render them into motion. Like everything else he did, Rudy made himself a master.

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A great many artists fear disappearing. Think of it as anxiety over becoming irrelevant, or of never having been relevant in the first place, of not mattering. Rudy never did. Perhaps because he and his good friend Peter Voulkos contemporaneously pioneered an art form, ceramics, that offered few previous masters against which to compare them—almost from the outset, Rudy *was* one of ceramic arts' early masters. Perhaps because, as Rudy himself suggested, people were bored with the emotional vacuity—or as Rudy called it, the "bombast"—of Abstract Expressionism, and longed for a more formal attachment, which his own work just happened to provide.

Rudy may have, from time to time in the early days, doubted his ability to feed his wife and four children. He may have wondered how on earth he would complete a massive mural project he had contracted for, the likes of which had never been attempted before. At the end, he may have feared not living to see the last beautiful thing he might make.

But Rudy did not fear for relevancy, because Rudy was, as Lela says, "a guy from Butte," and guys from Butte don't worry about intangibles like relevancy. Guys from Butte get their hands dirty. They play to the whistle and maybe a little bit past it. They go down swinging.

Rudy was born in Butte, Montana, in 1926, amidst a furious effort to pry metals from huge holes in the earth at the foot of the Rocky Mountains. His parents, Finnish immigrants, spoke very little English. His father worked in what was then among the world's most productive copper mines, and died of silicosis of the lungs—miner's disease.

One of the coldest and grittiest places in the Northern Rockies, Butte has always had a reputation as a tough town, and Rudy grew up during the Depression, when the grind of mine work was only slightly less oppressive than the desperation of so many recent immigrants who couldn't find work of any type. Even a slight, artistically-inclined boy like Rudy routinely felt pressured to prove his mettle. Rather than let bigger, stronger boys bully him, though, Rudy learned to fistfight.

He and his friends formed something like a neighborhood gang, albeit one as likely to cruise Butte's tenement alleys lost in imaginative games—pretending to marshal forces in pitched battles against the Kaiser, searching basements for lost worlds—as seeking out clashes with other young toughs. But they fought, frequently. They defended their turf. Years later, near death, Rudy remembered being in Helena, the state capitol, and a legislator from Great Falls who told Rudy he had grown up on the East Side of Butte. "He said, 'I remember you. You were part of that little gang. We called you Notso, Tabo, and Little Rudy Autio.'"

Butte was a cornucopia of cultures—perhaps not at their most florid, but always apparent. Slavs and Scandinavians, Italians and Irish, the mines drew workers from around the world, and each group brought their cultural vernacular,

their way of showing the world who they were. Rudy's own family practiced an austere sort of Finnish Lutheranism, living in clean, uncluttered space with only a family bible with dramatic illustrations by Gustave Dore for art. "My parents had no interest in art at all," he said. "I have no idea what they thought of it. They had no concept of culture in that sense."

"[Rudy's] mom was from the country and her understanding of the world was pretty limited," Lela remembers. "When his father fell down on some ice and broke his hip, Rudy's mother went out there with a broom and started hitting the broom on the sidewalk to punish it."

Still Butte and the Depression provided a golden opportunity for young Rudy, an artistic prodigy who, without some encouragement from skilled artists, would likely have followed his father into the mines. The Works Progress Administration hired artists to teach in communities like Butte. Rudy was exposed to people who recognized his preternatural abilities—he was drawing using perspective in the first grade—and pointed them out to him.

They also taught him exercises, step-by-step techniques for improving his drawings, which appealed to his natural inclination to put things together, to imagine something, tinker around and assemble it. "We were always inventing stuff, working in the shop with tools," Rudy said. His father let him construct a small house in the back yard. These experiences, the ability to spatially conceive the lines of some form, then create it, would prove crucial later in life, when Rudy helped imagine and construct a new art form—and was forced to invent new ways of assembling projects as he went.

"He was never afraid to take on anything," Rudy's wife, Lela, said. It was a quality that endeared her to him from the very beginning when they were students in the art department at Montana State University in Bozeman in the late 1940's. "I noticed that in a crowd, if there was something to be done, something we were all supposed to take part in, he would be the one to get the ladder and tools and get started. I thought, *That's pretty interesting. He really knows how to get started*."

Rudy didn't work with an assistant until he was in his sixties, but his youngest son, Chris, remembers him imagining processes to complete his bigger pieces. "He always figured out a way to put a vessel in the kiln that was too heavy for him to lift," Chris, who has himself become a photographer, said. "He'd figure out some way to do it without anybody's assistance. He would come up with some pretty amazing schemes. He'd become very facile at doing things alone."

Rudy often spoke of his art in terms of figuring things out. While talking about his early years as a student at the fecund art department at Montana State—heady times in the company of Voulkos and his young love, Lela (herself an enormous talent), and established artists like Bob and Gennie DeWeese, Jessie Wilber, and Frances Senska—he recalled a pageant of music and beer and late-night dialogues about creating things. But the words he chose to

describe those days emphasize the weight he placed on ingenuity: "We were constantly looking at problems [in art] and solving problems."

Rudy Autio, foreground, "teaching my good friend Peter Voulkos how to thrown small pots." New Jersey, 2000. Photographer unknown.

Voulkos, who did as much as Rudy to redefine how America understood ceramic arts, was a ringleader. "He was very charismatic," Rudy said of Voulkos. "The first time you met him you felt like you knew him all your life."

At the time, Rudy held a "fringe" interest in ceramics, driven mainly by what he saw Voulkos creating. There was not, in this country, the sense that great art could be made with clay. Ceramics in the early 1950's was considered a craft. How to make it an art was, to Rudy, a prosaic question. He finished his degree and took a job, with Voulkos, working for a man named Archie Bray at a brickyard in Helena, for $200 a month. Bray had the idea that young art students could help him transform brickmaking into a more aesthetically pleasing pursuit.

"At the pottery in Helena, I was confronted with the business of making art every day," Rudy said. "I never looked at it as a compromise. It opened an awareness I could follow. You kind of developed your own philosophy after a while. It happens because you build on what you know. You become possessed by it or it possesses you … You keep working within the parameters of what you know how to do."

Here Rudy's problem-solving skills flourished. Ceramics is a process that involves mechanical skills and technical knowledge—the ability to construct forms and get them into a kiln, an understanding of the composition of clay bodies and glazes and how they might react under fire. Rudy began to make large tile murals for churches and bank buildings, on a size and scale that nobody else was producing. There was no process, no instruction book to follow. Rudy imagined on his own what he'd need to do.

"There were times when I felt I wasn't as good an artist as I should have been. There were times when I ran out of the skills to do the things I wanted to do," Rudy said. But those were rare occasions.

"[Rudy] knew that failure was part of success," his son, Chris, says. "I know that sounds trite, but he knew that to solve a problem he had to go about it by making a few mistakes."

Rudy Autio, *Blackfoot River Pot*, ceramic, 1995. Promised gift to the Missoula Art Museum Collection, Kim and Ruth Reineking.

And the skills he brought to bear solved more and more problems. Even as the grand institutional works drew acclaim, Rudy turned his attention to making platters and huge pots that morphed into torso-like forms. These forms allowed him to express his love for beautiful flowing lines. He adorned the works with painted horses and nudes that combined classical Greek figures—"I like the old Greek art a lot," Rudy said. "They were masters of line"—with the liturgical art of his youth, and stirred in dashes of Matisse, Van Gogh, Dali and, later, Klimt.

"The thing that always amazed people was how well he drew," Lela said. "He'd build up a form and sit around and look at it, then he'd pick up his trowel and start drawing into it. A lot of people sketch things out first, but [Rudy's medium] was three-dimensional so he had to let the pot dictate what he would do. He had a lot of this information in his head.

"Not many people draw into a three-dimensional form without figuring out what was going to happen. He just drew into the clay with the trowel and then painted it. That was really an amazing feat."

Rudy suggested the process was a bit more fluid. "I have to fish around a little. I might have a vague notion of what I want to do, but it all happens in the doing," he said.

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If *imagining* launched Rudy's artistic career, and *doing* fueled its arc, love steadied his course. Rudy's love for art proved equal to his ability to make it, and his love for another artist, his wife, Lela, provided both the grounding and the challenge to inspire him to continually create what he envisioned. They spoke in one voice about her role in his career.

"She's a very strong-willed person," Rudy said of Lela, whom he openly believed was the stronger artist of the two. "I get a lot of criticism [from Lela], which I don't like. She'll walk into the studio and look at a figure I'm painting and says, 'Jeez, Rudy, that looks like George Washington. Change that face.' And she's usually right."

"That's true," Lela admits. "I'm a critic. He'd always finish a piece and say, 'What do you think?' And then we'd have a big fight."

Rudy and Lela Autio looking in the kiln, University of Montana, 1975. Photographer unknown.

But not really a big fight. Rudy was not an egoist, and not a man who allowed insecurity to feed temper. He did not imagine outrage, nor did he allow pride to chew away at love. He was not, Lela says, "all *famous*." Rudy remained throughout his career a humble potter, always approachable, always generous with his time and advice—always just a guy from Butte.

He could be made angry, but his expression of ire was sly. Once, after flying to Florida to teach a workshop, Rudy became angered by one of the workshop organizers. Rudy mentioned nothing, taught the workshop, made a beautiful piece of pottery in the process. On the last day, when the organizer asked him if he would consider donating the piece to the gallery, Rudy instead calmly cut it up into small pieces with his fettling knife and gave each piece to the workshop participants.

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A few months before he passed away, Rudy was in his studio, *doing*. He puttered about a three-sided piece that he was decorating. "I gotta get this thing out of the way. I'll try to make it more interesting, try to change the hair [on the female figure] and give it a directional movement," Rudy said. "Right now I have so damned many ideas. I just don't have the physical strength to do them. I wish I had more time and more drive."

By then he was 80 years old, and had been through his third bout of chemotherapy in two years, treatments for the leukemia that was poisoning his blood. He was depleted physically and mentally.

"There's a certain realism that enters into your thinking. You know you're not going to make it much longer … but you gotta see one more thing. You want to do things a little better. Or something that you haven't done before. Something really, really good. I guess that's all I think about, making something I really, really like."

Even though he had, by then, become very facile at doing things—great things—alone, he had also collected an enormous following of friends and admirers. "He was easy with people," Lela said. "He was good with the people he loved. The friends he made, he kept, and that's not always easy to do."

And still, suffering great physical exhaustion and pain born of leukemia, rather than resigning himself to the warm comfort of friends, Rudy shuffled into his studio to work by himself, to make one more thing of beauty.

"He knew that to stay at it was 98 percent of overcoming whatever he had to do," Rudy's son, Chris, said. "And he did stay at it. Even when he was sick, he was making his best work. I don't think it ever even occurred to him that he would stop making things."

Rudy has stopped making things now. He stopped on June 20, 2007, at the age of 80. His ashes have mixed with the clear waters of the lake beneath the granite peaks where he taught himself and his children to read the patterns of wind on the water, to adjust rigging and shape sails and turn that wind into an arc of motion across the blue surface.

But the things Rudy spent his life making remain with us, each work a small and wonderful monument meant to color our lives with Rudy's generous gifts: his industrious imagination, his fearless industry, his abiding loves, and those lovely, lovely lines.

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