

Keep Those Pots Rolling

March 14, 2005 was a big day for potter Alleghany Meadows. His 30-foot, 1967 Airstream Land Yacht was parked on West 53rd Street in Manhattan, in front of the Museum of Arts & Design and across the street from the Museum of Modern Art.

This would normally be a hard place to park, even if you drive a Mini Cooper, but his brother was filming the whole thing for a documentary and they had a film permit which allowed them to park anywhere they wanted to (a little known New York City parking trick). At 6:30 AM he was interviewed live on New York One News. The station was



Alleghany Meadows at Penland, May 2005

so happy with the footage, they made a little spot which they played periodically all day long.

During the two days the trailer was parked there, more than 400 New Yorkers—from art patrons and museum board members to folks just out for a bagel—stepped off the sidewalk to take a look inside. Needless to say, this isn't just a nice old Airstream. This one has been remodeled to function as a traveling gallery for contemporary functional pottery; it's officially dubbed the *Artstream*. And the idea for this traveling show was hatched at Penland.

In 2001, Alleghany, who lives with his wife and daughter near Aspen, Colorado, had bought an old Airstream thinking his somewhat nomadic mother might be interested in it. It was in fairly rough shape and she declined to take it on. That fall, he was at Penland teaching a Concentration

with his friend Sam Clarkson. The school store was selling a postcard with a well-known photograph of the school's founder, Lucy Morgan, in front of a Model A pickup truck with a tiny log cabin on the back. The cabin was filled with Penland craft items and was headed for the 1933 Chicago

World's Fair where it was used as a sales booth.

"I had that picture of Lucy Morgan in my mind," he said, "My family had lived in a school bus for a while and traveled around the West Coast. And the year before, Sam and I had traveled in a big old Dodge van doing home shows and workshops. So, about halfway through the Concentration, Kim Ellington was here as a visiting artist. He and Sam and I were hanging out talking and it popped into my head that I should turn the Airstream into a gallery and we should take it to the NCECA conference as a venue to sell work." NCECA is the National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts, and Alleghany had felt for some time that studio potters—as opposed to ceramic sculptors and university educators—were underrepresented in the conference programs. He thought the mobile gallery would be a way to get their work and their ideas about ceramics to an important audience.

He set about doing a complete renovation of the trailer and outfitted it to display the work in a setting resembling a kitchen. "It's definitely not a gallery context where you view the work as sculpture," he said. "It has a cherry wood floor, wood counters and

cabinetry, and sort of apricot-colored walls that glow the way a kitchen would on a warm sunny morning. There are little cubby holes that fit the cups in grid patterns and nice track lighting that highlights everything. It's just chock full." He's now done five tours with the *Artstream*, most of them

stopping at the NCECA conference, where it has been very well received. He takes work by 18 - 20 potters and sometimes takes a few of those potters along with him.

The venues are generally universities, clay centers, museums, and galleries. Depending on the situation, the traveling artists will often do demonstrations and slide shows while they are visiting. Particularly when they are at universities, Alleghany has found the rolling gallery to be a powerful teaching tool. "Some places we stop, there aren't a lot of galleries around, and we give students a chance to handle work by twenty different phenomenal potters. When I put a show together, I look for a cross section of what's being made in clay right now—from wood-fired wheelthrown to handbuilt earthenware to slip cast—across the spectrum, but all functional."

When he's not on the road, Alleghany uses the trailer to sell work locally. Every Saturday in the summer, he and fellow potter Sam Harvey meet at the Aspen farmer's market and sell their work from the *Artstream*. Alleghany has discovered that the trailer itself is a special marketing tool. "As it has evolved, I've realized that it's a much more successful way of putting my work into the world than I ever could have imagined because it appeals to a broad spectrum of people. It's not just the people who would come to see the work in a brick and mortar gallery. It's people who are attracted to Americana, who may not be educated art viewers, but they come in and experience the whole thing. Often, the first question is, 'What year is your Airstream?'"

"We put art on such a high pedestal in our culture, especially when people hear about a few key sales that are highly publicized—van Goghs selling for millions of dollars—and the general public tends to think of it as something untouchable. But utilitarian crafts are one of the most accessible art forms. People will spend twenty dollars on a handmade cup and then have this piece of art they can use."

Almost unbelievably, the project has paid for itself. A low-cost loan financed the initial renovation, and when he tours,

Alleghany takes a 40% commission (a bit lower than most galleries) on the work he sells. In addition to driving and physically running the tours, he puts the shows together, schedules the venues, and does all the publicity, along with a considerable amount of work to make it all legal—parking permits, sales permits, sales tax reports, etc. "What tends to happen is that my commission covers the cost of the tour and then whatever work of my own I can sell is my



The interior of the Artstream

profit. Of course, I could have sold those pots at home in a couple weekends at the farmer's market, but the experience is incredible." The money he makes may not, however, quite pay him for the thirty hours he spends polishing the trailer before each tour. "Most people love the way it looks," he said, "but there are some people who get incredibly upset when you polish them. These are people who believe in letting things age and keeping them intact from another time, like antique collectors who feel that if you refinish a piece of furniture from the eighteenth century, you've destroyed it."

Summing up the experience, Alleghany said, "It's been such a great way to meet people. One day we were at the Houston Center for Contemporary Craft, this beautiful new place, and the next day we were at this big college party on the street in Austin, and all these people who love cars and old things were coming up to us and being exposed to the art inside. It's interesting how it can travel back and forth between these different strata of society. In a sense, it's a bit of a ploy, but I'm using the beauty of that object to try to put crafts into people's lives."

For more information on the *Artstream*, including a long interview which was recently published in *Studio Potter*, you can visit www.art-stream.com.
—Robin Dreyer



West 53rd St., New York, March, 2005