TIPS AND TOOLS

working backward

by Tim Berg and Rebekah Myers

In order to move through the processes of glazing, firing, and installing the ceramic components of a complex piece, this collaborative team plans carefully and thinks ahead.

Great excitement and satisfaction can be found in developing a simple solution to a complex problem. In our experience each new project brings its own unique set of conceptual and technical challenges, and frequently we find that they are interrelated. When beginning a new project, we envision its installation in the finished state and then work backward to develop the processes and techniques required to produce it.

Puzzling Out The Project

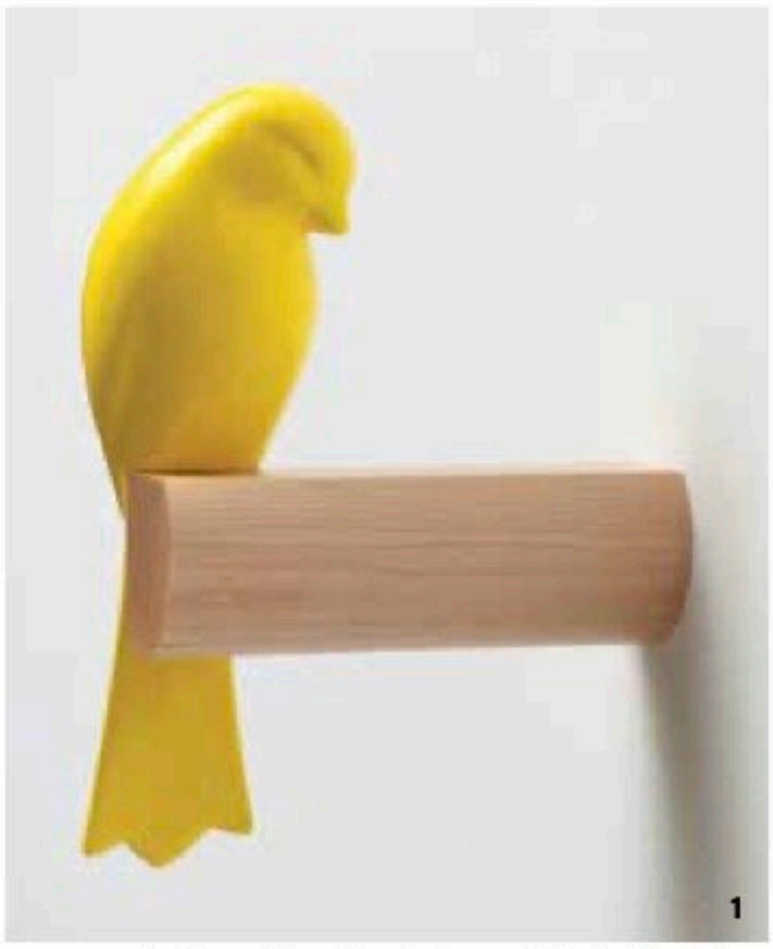
The initial vision for our installation piece, *Turn a Blind Eye*, was a dense, circular flock of almost 200 yellow canaries, each uniformly attached to individual wooden perches that were seamlessly mounted to the wall. Our minimalist aesthetic for this piece dictated that all of the hardware and attachments on the perches and the wall be completely hidden. We discovered that drilling a single small hole in each slip-cast form allowed us to simply and methodically underglaze, glaze, fire, assemble, and install each ceramic bird the way we envisioned.

Working backward from the idea of the finished product, we puzzled out all the props, supports, and tools we would need, beginning with the design of the canary sculpture itself. The canary has a 90°–angled wedge removed from where the feet would naturally be. This cut-out wedge allowed us to fit the sculpture onto a hewn wooden dowel to approximate how a bird might perch on a branch. This wedge-shaped notch allowed each bird to sit on any 90°-cut object, including the perches and the soft bricks used in firing. It was vital that we could permanently secure each bird to the hewn dowel. By gluing a small post into the perch that matched up with the hole in the notch on the bird, we were able to provide extra reinforcement to the connection.

Creating the Tools

This hole in the notch led us to invent three different tools to assist us as we underglazed, glazed, and fired these pieces. Knowing the size hole we needed when the sculpture was finished, we calculated the size of the drill bit used to make the hole in the canary (keeping shrinkage in mind) while the clay was leather hard. A paper template helped us to approximate the correct location of this hole on each bird. Since the slip-cast bird sculpture is essentially a closed form with no ordinary bottom on which to sit when wet, we created stands to support the birds. These stands provided us with a solution that was twofold: first, they allowed us to place the sculpture on it while wet without disturbing the underglaze, and second, they operated as a stand for use while spraying glaze for touch-up firings.

After the underglaze application, we needed a hands-free way to dip the birds in glaze, as well as a manner in which to store them while they dried. We decided to use wrapped floral wire to make large hooks that fit into the drilled hole in each bird's notch. Once the hook was in place, we used poster putty to fill in around any open space so glaze would not fill the interior of the bird. They were dipped, then hung up to dry. Once the birds were ready for the kiln, we devised a simple prop made with a soft brick and nichrome wire based on a



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1 *Turn a Blind Eye* (detail), 7 in. (18 cm) in height, slip-cast earthenware, glaze, maple, 2017. *Photo: Robert Wedemeyer.* **2** A hole was drilled in each leather-hard, slip-cast canary using a drill bit and a paper template. **3** Scrap wood and dowel stands were used as supports when applying underglaze and glaze.

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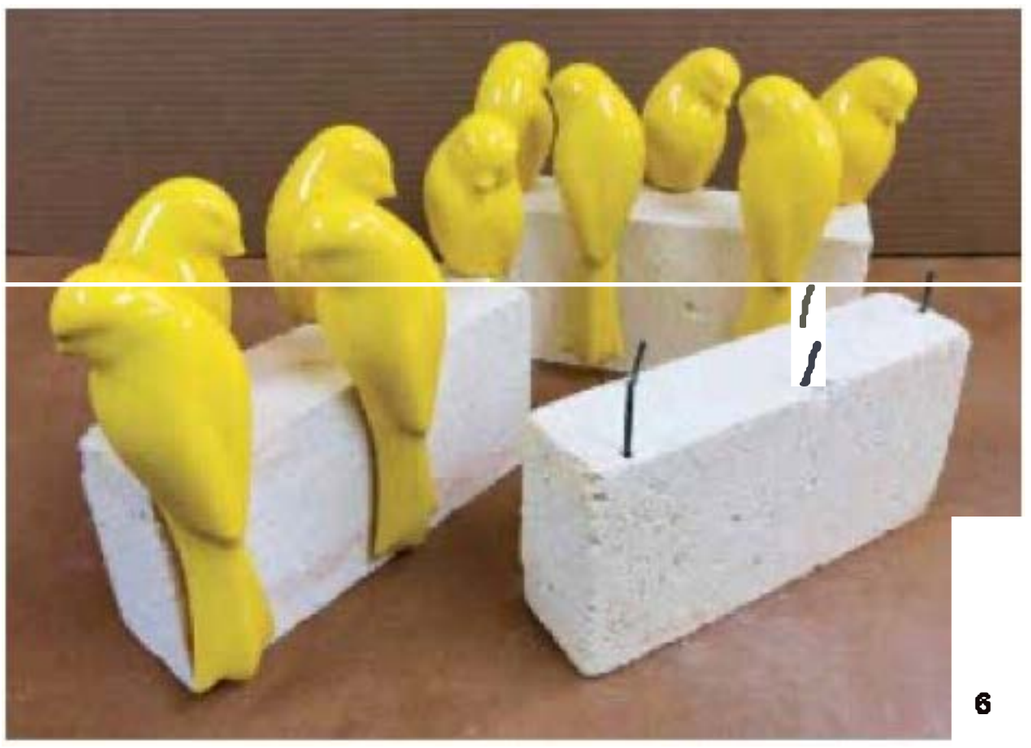

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4 Wrapped floral wire and poster putty were used to dip the canar es in glaze. **5** The canaries were allowed to dry upside down, hooked on a dowel. **6** Sof: brick and nichrome wire props supported each canary in the glaze firing. **2 6** *Photos: Rebekah Myers.*

studio mate's use of a similar system for firing her jewelry. We found that each brick could fit about f ve birds. Holes were dr lled into the bricks and thick 9 gauge nichrome wires were inserted. The birds then fit over the wire, prevent ng them from t pping over and making sure only the unglazed notch was touching the brick.

This project led us to innovate on a small scale using many materials we already had in the studio such as leftover soft brick, nichrome wire, scrap wood, and floral wire. It was essential we had a system and the specialized tools in place to make the entire process efficient and robust enough to survive heavy use and in some cases multiple kiln firings. We believe that significant value comes from the time and investigat on necessary for solving problems and that this value extends far beyond any finished art object

the authors *Tim Berg and Rebekah Myers are a studio art collaborative based in Claremont, California. They enjoy problem solving, making custom tools from scrap materials, and sharing innovative techniques with others. To learn more, visit www.myersbergstudios.com.*