



Alex Marshall

California ceramicist Alex Marshall's earth tone glazes and minimal asymmetrical forms comprise a comforting collection of tactile pottery that's both sensory and sensual.



Thanks to the burgeoning success of her dinnerware collections, Marshall has introduced coordinating lamps and textiles.





SHE WORKS FROM A FIVE-ACRE OLIVE GROVE TWO HOURS NORTH OF Sacramento in the rural hamlet of Corning, also known as Olive City, thanks to the fecundity of the glossy ovoid fruit. In this verdant and fragrant locale, Alex Marshall has found the perfect home for her six-year-old enterprise, Alex Marshall Studios, producer of organic and functional sculptural tableware. "We're here in the middle of nowhere," Marshall chuckles. "I pass cows on the way to the studio." She even cured her own olives last season, much to her own bemusement and amusement. "It's the perfect place to create my ceramics because it's quiet, tranquil, and beautiful." The thirtysomething Marshall along with her business partner and husband Andrew Barry say they couldn't have scripted a finer existence. "We work all of the time and business is often challenging," Barry notes, "but we're incredibly lucky to do what we love and we love the lives we've built for ourselves." ● It's a life that, like most, took myriad twists and turns before the east coasters made their way west to the olive orchards of northern California. The former Jersey girl was raised with an avant-garde predilection thanks to a prescient grandmother whose art forays had an enormous effect on her granddaughter. "My grandmother was way ahead of her time," Marshall notes, "and she instilled an aesthetic in me from a very early age." Marshall pursued studies in photography and painting, dabbling a bit in ceramics along the way but never developing a passion for it. "It was messy, complicated, and overwhelming," she candidly conveys.

By Amy Stavis



"Something just didn't click with me," she says. "I did enjoy photography very much though, exploring concepts of light and dark." (Most of the photography on these pages was taken by Marshall.)

Marshall chose to cut her studies short to gain field experience in a New York art gallery. She also took the opportunity to explore clay again. "The thing with me and ceramics is I so totally wanted to skip the basics," she laughs, "and it took me awhile to learn that I had to study the basics." A crash course provided the catalyst for a newfound ceramics crush. "That's where it took shape for me," she says, her unintentional pun acknowledged. "It was an intense, intimate environment," she continues, "and it's where I fell in love with making the same form over and over, exploring repetition in ceramics, discovering subtle differences in the same piece."

The idea of reduplication continued to fascinate Marshall. Repeating the same form over and over but with varying results was a concept further developed during her graduate studies at San Francisco's Art Institute where she explored conceptual, performance, and interactive art. There the theme of repetition, of subtle differences changing the work, of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts, informed Marshall's art. "It was such a strong time for me," she recalls. A key lesson learned was the significance of all actions. "There's no such thing as an arbitrary decision," Marshall says. "Everything is important and informs each other. I learned that if



Alex Marshall's nature-inspired ceramics sport colors from intense oxblood to vibrant green. The ceramicist loves the slight variations in glazes, a favored theme first developed in grad school. "It's fascinating to see the subtle changes from piece to piece," avers Marshall. "It makes every piece a one-of-a-kind statement."



you don't pay attention to every decision, you become the effect of that decision."



Alex Marshall Studios has a definable look where one earthy glaze, one organic shape, naturally morphs into the next.

“All of our forms are simple and are derivative of each other,” Marshall says, from her northern California workshop. “We don’t pull anything out of left field.”



This informative period helped shaped Marshall’s deliberate approach to business as well as art and prompted her to open a studio in 2000, particularly after friends and family raved of the hand-formed plates, bowls, and platters she gave as gifts. Marshall’s initial glazes and shapes were quite similar to her signature look today and this clean, modern aesthete was appreciated early on by retailers like Barney’s, Gump’s, and Fillamento. “I have always listened to retailers when it comes to developing new products,” Marshall says. “It’s their vision as well. I’m always thinking about how to accommodate their requests.”

Whilst focusing on others though, Marshall lost a little direction herself. She decided to sell her collections by opening a retail store as well as cold calling prospective accounts. “I was resisting the idea of wholesaling and exhibiting at trade shows for quite some time,” Marshall admits. “I just didn’t think



Alex Marshall's collections range from a \$14 sake cup to a \$390 lamp. Dinnerware averages \$150, a four-piece place setting. Notes Marshall, "There's a great multi-functionality to our pieces which is great for stores. Our line is all about editing. One store can create a story with 20 items while another store can create an entirely different story using a different 20."

I could support that kind of production and I had this romantic notion of keeping my line custom and special and small." It became clear though after a couple of years that this particular approach wasn't working. Marshall shuttered her retail store to pour her energies into wholesaling collections and made the move into trade shows by exhibiting in San Francisco, where she "jumped in with both feet", and again to her bemusement and amusement landed quite smoothly.

The 2003 show convinced Marshall (and by this time new husband Barry) that this new course could reap rewards. "It was such a different experience than cold call pitching," she imparts. Heading home with hands filled with orders, the young couple was certainly inspired. Over the next three years, Alex Marshall Studios grew its account base to 100 stores, a mix of tabletop independents, art galleries, and florists. "And as our line diversifies," Marshall adds, "we've been growing our account base even more. I'm conscious of maintaining our style, but I'm also looking at compatible products to branch into." Like lamps and textiles which joined the fold last year.

With upwards of 50% growth annually, Alex Marshall Studios is bursting a bit at the seams. There are now five employees as well key sales reps. "The areas we feel hold the greatest potential for us is where we've added independent reps to sell the line," Marshall says. Along with infrastructure growth, product assortments have been fast and furious. "Everyone always wants to know what's new," Marshall says, "and to be successful we have to continually show retailers what's new." With 60 unique shapes in up to 14 different finishes that's more than 700 SKUs already. And every season brings an av-

erage of four new shapes as well as three new glazes. Marshall rarely retires colors and has never discontinued a form.

While bowls are the best selling shape and white, aqua, and marble are the most popular glazes, Marshall says her latest hues – butter cream, blue/gray, and honey – hold great promise. Developing glazes is a favorite job. "There's nothing like seeing peoples' response to a new color," she says. "It confirms when I'm doing something special." Tabletop is a continually developed category. "For some time our strength was accessory pieces," Marshall clues, "but now I'm paying more attention to the dinnerware."

With at least 500 pieces produced weekly, it's no surprise that the young couple routinely work 15 hours a day, seven days a week. "It's a lot of work," Marshall acknowledges, "but it's still enjoyable. I've got a box filled with ideas that I want to do. There just never seems to be enough hours in the day." This time deprivation already has Marshall and Barry concerned about sustaining growth (and there's the other matter of wanting to start a family). "We're currently teaching the process to more workers and relying on them," Marshall says. "We'll be there soon."

But, she hesitantly admits, there's the issue of ceding control, not easy for someone used to maintaining control of the reins. "I'm excited about spending more time designing, but there's the emotional side of losing control which I'm not quite ready for," Marshall admits. But this too is something she'll handle, she knows. "We've been able to grow while maintaining the authenticity of individually handcrafted pieces," Marshall says. "Everything we've wanted to do so far, we've been able to do and we have every intention of continuing the tradition." □