EARTH ARTIST: John Davis Gets Creative

There’s no doubt about it: Crouched at his potter’s wheel, plodding away among the scraps of clay littering his studio floor, John Davis is completely in his element.

“I like the elasticity of clay. You can do virtually anything with it – that’s why it’s so prevalent throughout history,” says the campus arborist, who is also a painter with works hanging in the second-, third- and fourth-floor lounges of the Stern Student Center. “Plus, there’s an endless supply of it in most places, since, when you think about it, you’re transforming dirt into art.”

It should come as no surprise that Davis – who has been creating art out of dirt in the gardens and flower beds across campus since he came to the College right after Hurricane Hugo – doesn’t mind getting his hands dirty for the sake of aesthetics. Still, for Davis, it’s not just about beauty.

“Clay is man’s first high-tech medium,” he says. “Where would we be without pottery? No stew! No lobster bisque! Not to mention history: Civilizations for a long time have been judged by the quality of their pottery and identified by the design of their pottery.”

Davis’ appreciation for clay and pottery started at the University of South Carolina, where, as an art major, he took the school’s first ceramics course and quickly learned that pottery was about more than just technique and training.

“You can get the technique down, but if you can’t visualize the form – if you can’t feel the center of mass and see its beginning and its end – your pot will never mean anything,” says Davis, who went on to teach ceramics at USC and the Richland Arts School while curating at the Columbia Museum of Art in the 1970s. “It’s very difficult to teach. People who can see the form in clay – you don’t have to tell them – they can just visualize it. That gives them a big leg up.”

As it turns out, an eye for form might just give you a leg up in landscaping, as well. At least that’s how it worked out for Davis, whose creative focus eventually moved outside.

“As a landscape designer, I visualize things from overhead, and I’ve found that if it looks good in the drawing, it’ll look good in the garden,” he says. “The colors, the mass, the texture, the lines: It helps to have an eye for these things.”

Whether he’s working in a flower bed, at the potter’s wheel or at his easel, for Davis, it’s all about letting the unique properties of his medium speak for itself.

“I get a great joy of manipulating paint and color and I try to let the color take on movement in my paintings,” says Davis, who primarily uses acrylics. “There’s no message there except color. I’d like people to say, ‘Oh, what nice color.’ Maybe it’ll brighten up their day a bit. But color is always the big message.”

The “big message” in his pottery may not be quite as vibrant, but it is just as straightforward, subtle and striking.

“The two things I like about how I do clay are: One, I like the material to show through, and two, I want the process to show through,” says Davis. “That’s what I want people to see when they look at my pottery: material and process.”

In other words, Davis wants us to see the organic art within the elements and the creative potential that emerges at the hands of man. And, while we can’t all have an eye for these things, we can all recognize talent when we see it.

John Davis’ goblets, vases, platters and other pottery and sculpture are on display at Sparks Studio, 12 HAGood Ave. For more information, visit sparksstudiosandgallery.com.