

Background Information

Conversations and Cups

"I think most people who've been through a war, they don't talk about it. So sometimes I think the cups can be that little spur to start a conversation that wouldn't happen otherwise."

– Ehren Tool

Lesson Overview

Students will explore the work of ceramic artist Ehren Tool, who creates clay cups on the potter's wheel, and embellishes them with military images. Tool gives away his cups, and to date has given away over 14,000, in an attempt to provide a catalyst for conversations between veterans and those who have not served in the military. In this lesson, students will research what Tool describes as "war awareness;" a sense of who has performed military service in their community and an understanding of who (and where) Americans are serving in the military in the present. Finally, students will make a cup that features imagery to honor a chosen individual who has served or is serving in the military or another form of service.

About the Artist

Ehren Tool is a ceramic artist and Senior Laboratory Mechanician at the Ceramic Department at University of California, Berkeley, and Marine Veteran of the 1991 Gulf War. Tool was greatly influenced by American expressionist ceramic sculptor, Peter Voulkos. Tool says of his own work, "The images on the cups are often graphic and hard to look at. You may be for or against a particular war but I think it is too easy for us to look away. I think we as a country and as humans should look at what is actually going on." Tool received his MFA from the University of California, Berkeley and BFA from the University of Southern California and has exhibited his vessels at the Oakland Museum of California, the Craft and Folk Art Museum, the Berkeley Art Center, the Bellevue Arts Museum, and The Clay Studio among others.

Key Concepts:

- The United States Armed Forces has an historic tradition of recognizing the power of crafts to restore veterans to post-war civilian life.
- Crafted objects can be used to create awareness of issues.
- Crafted objects can be a catalyst for conversations.

Critical Questions:

- In what ways has the U.S. Armed Forces used studio crafts to restore veterans to civilian life?
- How can a crafted object create an awareness of issues?
- How can a crafted object be a catalyst for conversations?

