



Modelling & Painting Clay Faces During COVID-19

Oonagh E. Fitzgerald, April 2021



Mask painting

- For a few years I experimented with painting scenes on ready-made masks





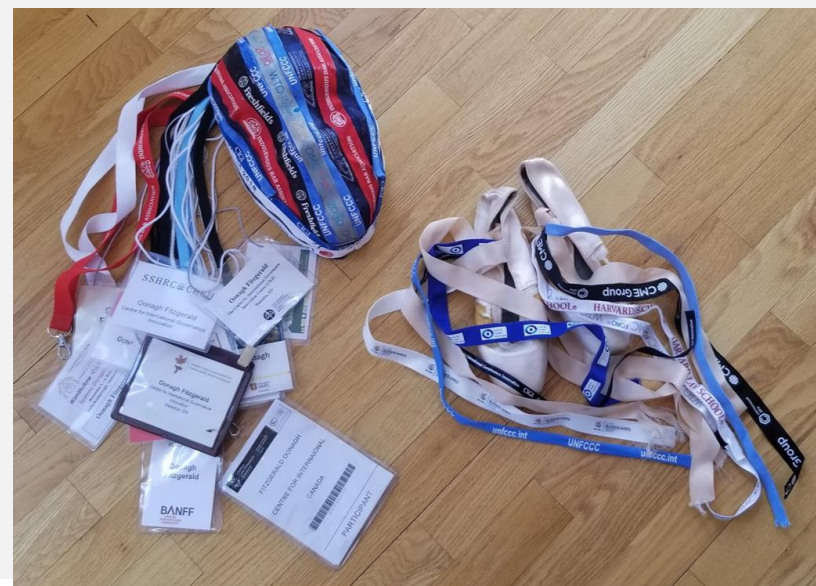
Working with clay

- My first attempt at making a clay mask was in February 2020 at the Waterloo Art and Glass Museum, where we were supposed to make charcuterie dishes.
- When I inquired about making a three-dimensional face the instructor suggested using newsprint balls to support the shape. I didn't venture far from the two-dimensional plane, making a rather flat clay face, painting it with glaze.
- After it dried it was baked in the museum workshop's kiln. Having painted it with yellow and red glaze I thought it might look like a sun face.
- Because of the pandemic it took months to retrieve our artworks, and when mine arrived in the mail I laughed in horror. The resulting piece is quite scary – the shiny mottled red surface looks more like flayed skin than a blazing sun. Still, it's ... interesting?





Plaster bandages



- I then tried making a face with plaster bandages. After watching YouTube videos about how to do this I decided I did not want to attempt it on my own face and anyway did not want a model that looked like me.
- I used a cardboard prefabricated mask form, taped table tennis balls behind the eye holes to provide a curved eye surface, covered everything with saranwrap and then applied the plaster.
- The resulting face was not smooth on the inside or the outside. I was not sure what to do with it. Eventually I incorporated it into my installation of the International Law and Governance Tutu, covering it with conference lanyards.





Experiments in air-dried clay

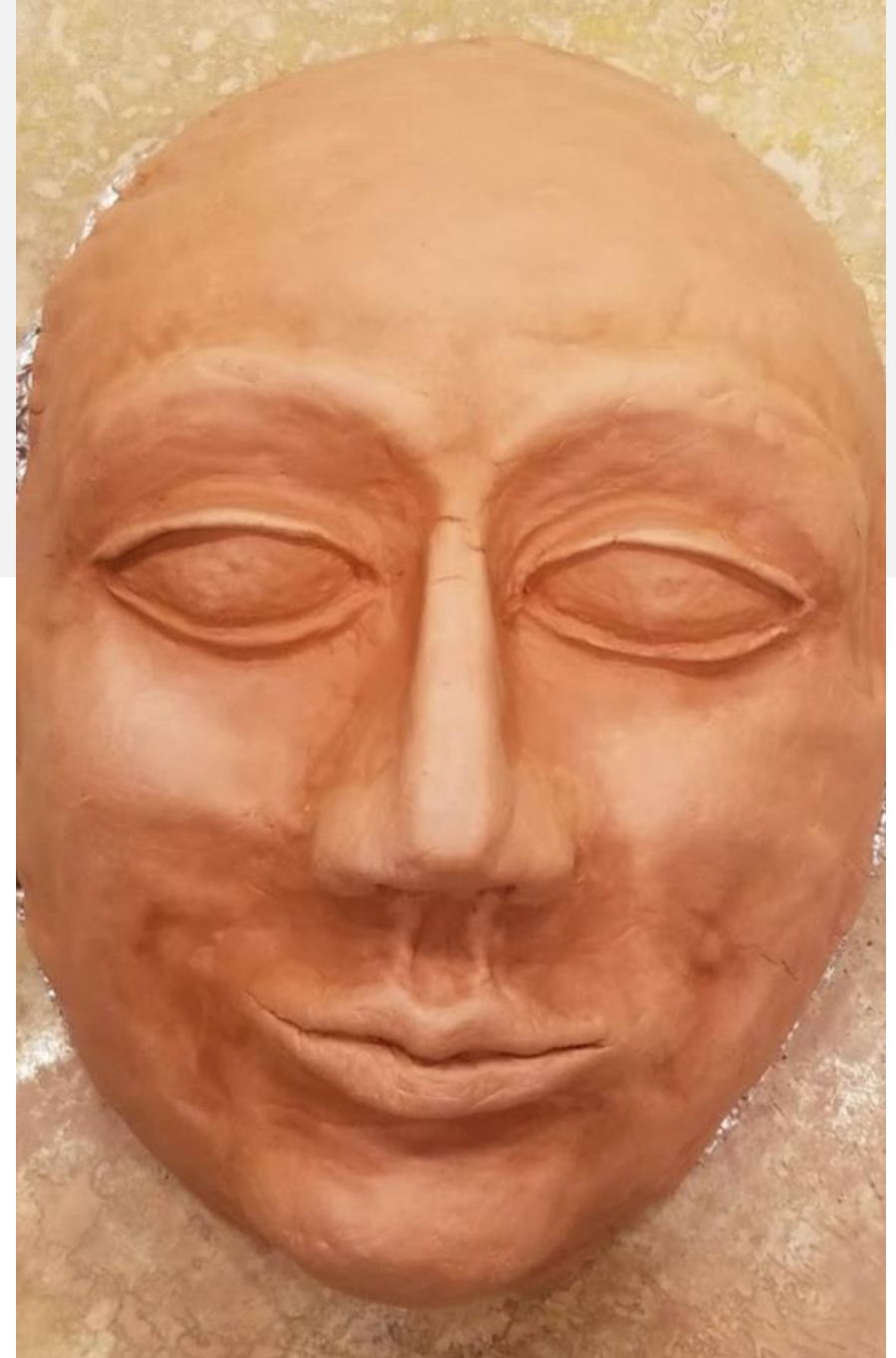
- I did some Internet research about using clay without access to a kiln and concluded that there were some options for making masks with air-dried clay.
- I researched some brands and ordered online from Wallacks art supplies three blocks of DAS clay, 10 lbs. of ordinary pottery clay, samples of other modelling products, and some simple wooden modelling tools.
- I picked them up at the store front with my son. On the way we talked about playing and working with mud - “mudding” and Playdo.





DAS clay

- For armature I used paper masks that looked like aliens but had roughly humanoid 3-D contours. I used masking tape to cover the eye holes and taped bubble wrap to areas of the face where I wanted more contours. I covered this with tin foil which seemed to fit nicely with the alien faces, an idea I will save for a later project.
- I rolled out a ¼ inch thick pancake of the DAS and applied it to the armature and began sculpting, adding more to build facial features.
- I enjoyed working with DAS but it is expensive, so I felt limited to using a relatively thin layer for most of the face to conserve clay for building up facial features.
- DAS also dries quickly so I needed to keep moistening it with a mix of clay and water and hurried to complete each face in about 3 hours.





Winter light, morning

- I made 3 DAS clay faces over 3 weekends.
- I enjoyed the challenge of trying to model faces that were smooth and human looking.
- Once dried, I coated each mask with gesso, to make a better, less absorbent painting surface.
- With oil paints I painted the masks with winter scenes exploring the interplay of ice, snow, sky and wintry forests.





Winter light, night

- It took some time to choose scenes.
- The first (preceding page) was a view across the lake in the morning.
- This is a view of the lake through the trees in moonlight.



Winter scenes on driftwood





Winter light, sunset

- This is sunset at the Experimental Farm in Ottawa.
- I thought about mounting the three together on a wooden board but realized they each stand alone.
- I am gathering branches of driftwood to hold them.



Clay mask making from scratch

- I had watched enough DIY videos on clay modelling to feel ready to attempt to model the natural clay.
- The clay, from Indiana is cool and damp, sensual to touch and press, the colour and texture of warm chocolate but not warm, sticky or fattening.
- I practised making a clay mask but crushed it back into a ball and put it back in the plastic bag with the rest of the clay.
- I took the full 10lbs of clay to the lake on a Friday and made a clay mask a day for three days.





Clay mask making from scratch

- I cut the clay block into quarters but ended up using roughly a third of the block for each face, as they grew bigger and bigger.
- I rolled the clay into an oval about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch.
- As I rolled and flipped the clay, I notice the difference between the light handmade wooden rolling pin I am using, which tends to disassemble with the amount of force I need to exert, and the heavy manufactured marble roller which I had used for the DAS masks, which does more of the work because of its weight.
- I enjoyed the delicacy and simplicity of the wooden rolling pin, even though it made me work much harder. I wondered where it came from because it looked like an heirloom.



Spring flood - father

- I have a seemingly endless supply of newsprint kept after my move back to Ottawa from Waterloo in March 2020, and this is very handy for making the pancake face three dimensional by balling and twisting pieces of paper and inserting them for the forehead, brow, cheekbones, nose, mouth and chin.
- I get better at this with each try, using more and more paper to resist the pressure of my hand shaping the outer surface of the face.





Spring flood - mother

- I enjoy all the work of making the clay face – how both hands are involved, how physical and delicate the work is, how the clay roughly takes human form, making me wonder, should I stop now because it is interesting, or should I keep going to make the smooth symmetrical face? In a future project I may use rougher more abstracted face images as they could be interesting to paint.
- I find each face takes about 3 hours to sculpt, although my technique is becoming more assured and rapid.





Spring flood, daughter

- I notice it is important to examine all parts of the face multiple times to clean up blemishes, nicks and cracks and this takes patience. I used a squared off paint brush to smooth the surface.
- After the three large clay faces had dried, I coated them with white gesso to make a better, less absorbent, painting surface. The masks look like a family.
- Winter was ebbing, everything was melting, and streams were rushing with spring water. I painted this theme.
- I will look for a strong piece of driftwood to hold the Spring flood family.





Ongoing experimentation

- The other samples of modelling products I had bought turned out to be more useful for making small decorative items such as jewelry, so I will save them for a later project.
- I made a face with Mexican PRANG modelling clay, but it has a strong chemical smell and never dries.
- I am pleased to have developed a technique for making large air-dried clay masks from scratch and painting nature scenes on them with oil paints.
- I bought a 20 lb bag of clay. The next project likely will be something involving making a full or partial human form from raw clay which I will then paint as a landscape...





Spring
Flood
Family on
Driftwood

Modelling Clay Faces to Paint Nature Scenes

