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“Whoever has been to La Jolla and has not seen the Green Dragon Colony has missed much, for La Jolla is the Green Dragon and the Green Dragon is La Jolla.”  
—*The San Francisco Chronicle*, 1901

The Jack O’ Lantern. The Doll’s House. The Oriole’s Nest. Noah’s Ark. The Gables. These are the names Anna Held gave to the cluster of wooden bungalows she built in La Jolla over 100 years ago, names that reflect her enlightened Victorian spirit and echo with the sentiments of a bygone dream. The first bungalow, Noah’s Ark, was designed by Irving Gill and constructed in 1894. Eventually there were eleven of them, perched along Prospect Street, spilling down the hillside above Goldfish Point. English novelist and suffragette Beatrice Harraden, a frequent guest of Held’s, named the little collection of dwellings the Green Dragon Colony. Artists, musicians, and writers were allowed to live there for free.

For a few decades at the turn of the century, La Jolla was a freethinking sanctuary of arts and science, where the denizens of the Green Dragon Colony mingled with marine biologists and scientists from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, whose Irving Gill-designed laboratories lay just across La Jolla Bay. While Gill’s original 1906 Scripps laboratory still stands, very little remains of Anna Held’s Green Dragon Colony. A few original walls, fireplaces, and foundations were saved and incorporated into the restaurant and retail buildings that now occupy the site, but the place and its spirit, once the defining cultural force of the town, is long gone. Tourist-trap/Kardashian-chic seems to be the dominant theme on Prospect Street these days. There are exceptions, but for the most part Prospect is a valet parked, wannabe-Rodeo-Drive shit show where going “upscale” has only cheapened the place.

Developers covet every square inch of La Jolla, and the town’s heritage is always in jeopardy. Perhaps the saddest and most infuriating example of this is the Red Rest

# Spirit of the Green Dragon

*Ceramicist Joe Skoby and the ghosts of La Jolla's Arts Colonies*

by Richard Kenvin



PHOTOS: DEREK DUNFEE



and the Red Roost, the two oldest cottages in La Jolla, built in 1894. Both were designated historic structures in 1975—but that didn't stop the landowner's desire to tear them down so that he could expand the hotel he owns next door. The California Coastal Commission denied him, so he boarded them up and let them fall into disrepair. He was hoping the city would condemn the structures so that he could proceed with his expansion plans. The Red Rest and the Red Roost have languished for over 30 years—under the apparently toothless preservation laws intended to protect them—while the City of San Diego has failed to force the owners to maintain them and prevent their continued decay.

Still, there are people with a certain attitude and filter who can come close to experiencing La Jolla the way Anna Held intended. Joe Skoby is one of them. Had he been

LEFT **Westbound and down Bonair Street, our ceramicist stays focused on the surf at Windansea.**

ABOVE **Potter's hands, surfer's feet.**









LEFT **Contemplative slide on a Tyler Warren twin-keel planing hull, Windansea.**

ABOVE **Untitled, 8.5" x 7", reduction high-fire glaze, hand-carved stoneware.**



ABOVE **Untitled, 9"x 9", oxidation medium-fire glaze, stoneware.**

RIGHT **Speeding down the low road on a 6'4" twin-keel shaped by Larry Mabile. Baja Sur, September 2011. Fluent in Spanish, Skoby heads south whenever he can.**









DUNFEE



DUNFEE



AVID STUDIO

alive 100 years ago, he would no doubt be residing rent-free at the Green Dragon Colony, his eligibility granted by his passion for ceramics and his skills as a potter. Skoby moved to La Jolla from Irvine in Orange County in 2003. He put the blinders on and immersed himself in all the good that La Jolla still has to offer, while somehow finding a series of affordable living spaces that were old enough to retain a hint of the town’s elusive old charm. “The characters of La Jolla are pretty classic,” he says. “There’s the whole Windansea thing, and then there’s old money side-by-side with shot-out bums. Somehow it all fits together seamlessly, like some Steinbeck novel.”

His first place was an apartment near Windansea, followed by a rented room in a beautiful old house, circa 1898, that still stands on Cave Street about a block away from the former Green Dragon site. Next came a stint in a ramshackle cobblestone cottage on an alley near

Windansea, then a year in a 1920s Spanish colonial on Gravilla Street, before finally winding up in his current home, a little 1930s Mission Revival studio in Bird Rock.

A dedicated aesthete, Skoby transforms every place he rents into a carefully tended manifestation of his vision for living. Passing through his garden gate feels like diving into a pool of cool water in some fern-bedecked backcountry grotto after a long, dusty hike through the chaparral. The psychic grime of traffic, strip malls, and other soul sucking aspects of 21st century, Southern California living vanishes. The garden and the interior blend into one nuanced little habitat where everything—from the plants on the patio, to the books on the shelves, to the paintings on the wall—seem to belong exactly where Skoby placed them and nowhere else. As an artist, he’s mostly known for his ceramics work and he makes his pots on the patio in the garden, completely immersed in his own realm. “My





grandfather was a gardener,” he says. “I’m into making a place feel right, and a garden is the ultimate way of doing that. If you can mimic nature and create a natural feeling in a place, that’s an art form, in my book.”

Skoby lives with his wife, Cristiana, and their 2-year-old daughter Solea. Another child is on the way. Their life is a balance of home and family, work and play. For Joe, the latter usually means surfing. The slow, frustrating process of finding a place in the pecking order at Windansea was softened somewhat when he got a job at El Pescador fish market. Local to the core, everyone who works at El Pescador surfs the La Jolla reefs. Cristiana got a job as a barista at the Pannikin coffee house, another long standing local institution. Before long they were assimilated into the community and Joe started getting his share of waves. The fact that he was a polite, respectful, and extremely stylish surfer didn’t hurt his cause either. “I sat

**LEFT Skoby at work in his garden: “The final form is unknown until the end of the process, determined by what happens during the ‘ride’ when the clay is in motion on the wheel.”**

**ABOVE Finished pots. Like waves, no two are alike.**









**LEFT Roundhouse rebound on a hand shaped planing hull by Daniel "Tomo" Thomson at Windansea. Though he often rides longer boards, Skoby finds all the glide he needs on very short, Simmons-inspired designs.**

**ABOVE Untitled, 9.5" x 6", reduction high-fire glaze, stoneware.**



**The Skoby family: Christiana, Solea, and Joe, entrenched in the La Jolla surf life circa 2016.**

out there and got no waves for years,” he says. “It took me a long time, but somehow, through working at Pescador and surfing Windansea everyday and meeting people, I was finally able to start getting a few. People have such deep roots here, and I don’t. Just to be out there means a lot. I don’t take that stuff lightly.”

When he was 18, Skoby broke his back going off a jump in a snowboard park. The effects of the injury linger, and his surfing is tempered and flowing—he seeks and finds the path of least resistance. He rides with a low center of gravity for maximum glide and graceful, steady carves. Nothing super radical, but very easy on the eyes. At Windansea, he is an obvious understudy of Tom Ortner, whose impeccable lines have graced the peak for 50 years. “Basically I just try to surf like Ortner. He’s the perfect Windansea surfer.”





PHOTOS: DUNFEE



Joe's quiver ranges from an older 7'2" Frye to a 5'7" Pavel fish to ultra-short planing hull designs from Tyler Warren and Daniel Thomson. "I like boards that let me draw a long line. I'm not ripping. I'm just doing high lines and stuff. I just like glide...so anything that gives me glide."

Over the past few years Skoby has been able to supplement his income from El Pescador by selling his ceramics on his website with a few select accounts in Tokyo and New York. Though he avoids surf or ocean-inspired themes in his ceramics, Skoby does feel a connection to surfing in the process of making pottery. "You're taking this lump of clay," he says, "and it's spinning and moving and you need to control that spin and movement, and it's all about curves, like bottom turns and top turns. The clay is wet, and you have a time limit, a beginning and an end, so in a way it's kind of like riding a wave." The final form is

unknown until the end of the process, determined by what happens during the "ride" when the clay is in motion on the wheel.

Skoby was born too late to live and work in a rent-free studio at the Green Dragon Colony courtesy of Anna Held, but he did form a bond with another La Jolla matriarch of the arts—the late Martha Longenecker. Martha was a renowned potter, teacher, and founder of San Diego's Mingei International Museum of Craft and Design. She passed away in 2013 at the age of 93. "Martha used to come into El Pescador when I was working, and I would take her orders out to her and we'd talk," Skoby recalls. "After she passed away I happened to meet the family who inherited her estate, and they saw my pottery. They offered me Martha's studio to use, so I'd go over there and use her tools. It was really beautiful and peaceful. It meant a lot to me to be working there. I used Martha's kiln to fire my pots, which to me was like going to Skip Frye's shaping room and using his tools to shape a board."

A young man in La Jolla quietly crafting pots in his mentor's studio on a hill above the sea. The Dragon is dead. Long live the Dragon. ■