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# Discovery Through Numeric Strata: A Balance of Form and Aesthetics

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A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Art and Design  
East Tennessee State University

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In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Masters of Fine Arts in Ceramics

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by  
Marc Ian Sonenberg  
August 2001

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Don Davis, Chair  
Catherine Murray  
Scott Koterbay

Keywords: Ceramics, Sculpture, Clay Texture, Glaze, Cone 5 Oxidation, Form

## ABSTRACT

Discovery Through Numeric Strata: A Balance of Form and Aesthetics

by

Marc Ian Sonenberg

This thesis is in support of my Master of Fine Arts exhibition in the Carroll Reece Museum at East Tennessee State University. It describes a body of work that strives for a balance of form and aesthetics. Chapter 1 charts how I refined my personal stylistic qualities. Chapter 2 gives a brief overview of the history of ceramics technique. Chapter 3 discusses the techniques used in surface treatment and construction of the pieces in the show. Chapter 4 presents each piece in chronological order.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Discovery Through Numeric Strata, my graduate exhibition and thesis, is dedicated to my wonderful and loving family.

I also wish to express my appreciation to the following:

Don Davis and family, for stepping in and treating me like family. Catherine Murray, sculpture professor, for the freedom to carry out my vision. Scott Koterbay, for pushing my ability. Lynn Whitehead, who believed in me as an artist. The Carroll Reece Museum, for the facility to showcase my work. Blair White and Lisa Erwin, who aided in the final details of the show. Peter Rose, for lending me one of his potter's wheels. Mike Garrett, for his excellent sense of timing. My friends, who encouraged me to keep on creating. My girlfriend, Julie Abell, who is always on my mind.

Many Thanks to all of you.

# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .....	2
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	3
LIST OF FIGURES .....	6
Chapter .....	Page
1. INTRODUCTION .....	7
Form and Aesthetics .....	7
Aesthetics of Functional Pottery .....	7
Nature as a Source of Aesthetics .....	9
From Functional to Sculptural Pottery .....	9
My Beginnings in Functional Pottery .....	9
My Move to Sculptural Pottery .....	10
2. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW .....	12
History of Ceramics .....	12
Historical Discussion of Technique .....	13
Form .....	13
Decoration and Surface Treatment .....	14
Historical Sketch of American Pottery .....	15
Production Pottery .....	16
Pottery as Fine Art .....	16
3. DISCUSSION OF TECHNIQUE .....	18
Construction .....	18
Early Footless Pieces .....	18
Adding Feet .....	19
Closing the Cone .....	20

Chapter	Page
Working the Form .....	20
Wall Hangings .....	21
Texture .....	22
Glaze Application .....	23
4. DISCUSSION OF EXHIBITED WORKS .....	25
About the Titles of the Works .....	25
Discussion of the Pieces .....	26
<i>4:55 A.M.</i> .....	26
<i>2-13-75</i> .....	29
<i>7320</i> .....	31
<i>13490</i> .....	33
<i>7601 and 15713</i> .....	35
<i>5103</i> .....	38
<i>1002, 16021, 4115</i> .....	40
<i>15708</i> .....	43
<i>35, 315, 6, 1, 315-D</i> .....	45
<i>12641, 214, 325, 1201, 26</i> .....	46
Conclusion .....	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	52
VITA .....	53

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. 4:55 A.M. ....	28
2. 2-13-75 ....	30
3. 7320 ....	32
4. 13490 ....	34
5. 7601 ....	36
6. 15713 ....	37
7. 5103 ....	39
8. 1002 ....	41
9. 16021 ....	42
10. 15708 ....	44
11. 12641 ....	47
12. 214 ....	48
13. 325 ....	49
14. 1201 ....	50

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to establish an understanding of my work in clay. The focus of this work is a series of organic clay sculptures executed during my last three semesters at ETSU. The motivation for the work was my deep evaluation of life's subtle relationships to its surrounding environment: the understanding and awareness of nature's role as a living textbook to the elements of my art.

#### Form and Aesthetics

I was initially attracted to functional ware because of the interactive process between its users and the work itself. Though I did want to understand what made things like form, aesthetics, design and balance important to the piece, I wasn't concerned with developing my own forms and aesthetics. It was the utilitarian element that caught my interest, the idea that somebody would be interacting with my work on a daily basis.

Now, form and aesthetics are the most important aspects for expression in my art, followed by the function and balance. I look at form as the leading element in ceramic design, although function poses a strong presence when blended properly with pure form.

#### Aesthetics of Functional Pottery

Pottery can be viewed simply as a decorative object—a means of expression—or as a functional item, something to use. It may be enjoyed simply by



studying its form and glaze application, but it brings even more pleasure when put to use:

We are searching for a balanced form of self expression, and potting is one of the few activities today in which a person can use his natural faculties of head, heart, and hand in balance. If the potter is making utensils for use (simple bowls, pitchers, mugs, and plates) he is doing two things at the same time: he is making ware that may give pleasure in use, which provided one form of satisfaction to the maker, and he is traveling in the never-ending search for perfection of form which gives a different gratification. As these two activities come together and the potter is at one with the clay, the pot will have life in it." (Leach, 1975 21)

The essence of functional art is the combination of skills, values, attitudes, and formal and utilitarian concerns, along with the sensitivities of the potter to his material.

Traditionally, potters use parts of the human body to describe a number of fundamental parts to a vessel:

The main parts of the pot are usually described thus: 'belly' for the main bulk container; 'foot' for the supporting element, either a mere ring or a high pedestal; 'stem' if it is long and narrow; 'shoulder' for the point at which a shape turns over at the closure; 'neck' for a developed form giving on to the interior; 'lip' for the shape which encircles the rim. (Rawson, 100)

It is very important for a beginning functional potter to recognize these parts. Within each piece of functional pottery there should be continuity from the foot to the body to the lip of the lid. These parts were essential for the development of my sense of form and aesthetics. I found them to be very helpful in learning proportions and how the parts relate to each other in a composition.

In my early work, I had a fixation on a vessel's form. I attempted to reveal the subtle anthropomorphic qualities that overcome the parts of the pot. In doing so, I let my subconscious have free reign to affect the final form as if the pot had a

life of its own. I tried to recognize the purity and grace that our bodies so easily expose. When considering pure form, the human figure is a logical frame of reference.

### Nature as a Source of Aesthetics

When I look at nature, I can't help but attach to it some kind of creator. I find it intriguing how this seeming creator has the ability to continually stay true to form and aesthetics. No matter where in a process nature might be, it is always growing and changing in form, and, yet, it still manages to conform, morph, and manipulate itself to the laws of aesthetics. Even in decay, its forms are fresh, new, and innovative. Nature acts like an artist. It attends to the concepts an artist does: balance, harmony, rhythm, proportion, shade. It understands the relationship of lines and patterns in space. It is the ultimate creator of organic form.

The viewer of nature on the surface might not always see what is there in its details: little worlds, like the vein structure of a leaf, the patterns in the way things fall to the ground, the 'push and pull' of color. The person who takes the time to look beyond the pretty blue skies and green grass is rewarded. Looking at nature seems always to amaze me visually and technically. My work is at its best when, like nature, I loose sight of what I'm trying to say and focus on the process of doing.

### From Functional to Sculptural Ceramics

#### My Beginnings in Functional Pottery

In my undergraduate program I concentrated on developing and practicing as many skills and techniques as I could. The classes in ceramics were very

demanding of time. Trying to juggle those and a full dedication to my life-long passion in baseball left little time to create. Because I was preoccupied with technique, I didn't take the time to ask myself why I was in ceramics at all. However, I found my technique progressing fairly quickly. This early success maintained my interest in the field and kept me returning for more balls of clay to throw.

In my early stages as a potter in college, I can remember how excited I was to make something that I could later use. I can recall wanting to make pots that were affordable to all kinds of people in hope to preserve the existence of hand made pottery. The extent of my interests in ceramics was not much deeper than that. I believed that there was no substitute for the individuality of functional, hand made objects. I felt it was important not only to own hand made art but to use it on a daily basis. For me the beauty of hand made pottery was that it carried the artist's personality, emotion, thoughts, and much more—qualities that machine-made pottery cannot hold. For example, you could tell ten potters to throw the same coffee cup, and in return you would have ten different cups. Often, it is the imperfections of hand made objects that make them so personal and precious to the artist and the buyer. No matter what you do, it is impossible to duplicate a hand made object. There will always be something about it that is not the same as the next. In my work at that time, I intentionally made one-of-a-kind pottery to emphasize this uniqueness.

### My Move to Sculptural Pottery

During my first two years at ETSU, I was searching to find myself as a functional potter. For several reasons, I decided to switch gears and take some sculpture classes. I hoped that taking some sculpture classes would help me solve

some of the problems I saw in my functional pots. As a potter, I tend to work in a very controlled manor and my style was very tight. I thought the sculpture classes would pose some new approaches to handling clay and might help free up the way I handle and manipulate it. Leaving utilitarian concerns behind did push my understanding of form and aesthetics to a greater level.

Subsequently, in an independent study course, I contracted with the professor to make a series of ten sculptural vessels of substantial size. I restricted myself to building the forms without using wheel throwing as a tool. The idea was that I would use the new techniques learned from hand building in my wheel thrown work. However, this turned out to be a major change in my direction as a potter. Though I couldn't see it then, I largely left functional pottery and steadily moved towards sculptural ceramics as a wonderful new vehicle for expressing myself.

The direction I pursued in these sculptural forms helped introduce many new ideas and approaches in dealing with clay. One of the most important discoveries I made was a production process: establishing a form interesting enough to explore through a range of ideas. By working through a series, I was able to develop an idea and fully understanding the avenues available to my work. This resulted in a narrowing or declaring of a direction and created a good atmosphere to work in. Instead of the form taking all the attention away from the process, the procedures themselves become the focus. I found that when this happens I feel my control of aesthetics is the strongest. When focused like this, I feel I've found a place to just sit and play. By creating a discipline of work within a specific series of forms, for example, the pieces with the tripod feet and the saucer forms, I began to have fun with the entire process.

## CHAPTER 2 HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

### History of Ceramics

Clay work has provided a source of historical knowledge spanning over thousands of years. Clay artifacts range from the ancient shards found to the vast contemporary works of modern ceramicists. (Camusso and Bortone 7) Recent finds in Australia claim archaeological remains containing rudimentary ceramics dating back 30,000 years. The area usually credited with being the birth of civilization, the Mesopotamian basin in the Middle East, is also credited with having the first cultures making pottery. Japan's ceramic history dates back at least as long as any in the Middle East. (Hopper 2)

Over time, ceramic art has evolved through a hybrid of technological and aesthetic discoveries. In the earliest times, making pottery was most likely a common duty. As small communities developed, so did the need for skilled potters who could make utilitarian ware, starting with vessels for functional purposes. In modern times, ceramic artists have led an exploration and revival of the historical aspects of the vessel. Many contemporary artists have revived old techniques and attempted to use them in unique ways.

The art of ceramics started with a prehistoric population that had learned to work, mold and bake clay in order to create useful containers. These primitive clay containers came to the people by way of accident. There are two primary theories of ceramic development. One credits observations where the earth's crust became baked around the edges of hot fire pits. Another credits possible mistakes in clay-lined basket used for storage containers. Early baskets made of leaves to store goods were later lined with clay to prevent leakage . These would have dried in the

sun. When the baskets became worn, a hardened clay container was left, revealing some of the first pots known to man. (Hopper 3)

### Historical Discussion of Technique

#### Form

The characteristics of the clay body determines how a vessel can be manipulated. It makes it possible to mold a piece and ensures that the clay can hold the details of its shape. Modeling was originally done solely by hand typically in practical wares and small sculptural figures. The work was then assisted by a variety of aids for cutting, incising, smoothing, and polishing. A primitive form of the potter's wheel was later introduced, driven either by the potters themselves or by an assistant and used for modeling clay into circular shapes. Another ancient way of potting involved building up a series of clay coils to create the final forms. Working in coils added an unlimited variety of free-hand pots.

Primitive drying techniques probably began with air drying. The shapes obtained were left to dry for a first hardening. At this stage the potter might proceed to smooth the piece, an act that will affect its aesthetic appearance. Complete evaporation of the water would then take place through firing. Baking was originally conducted in the open air and involved the direct exposure of the pieces to the flame. The construction of kilns with a separate chamber was a further advance that allowed for higher temperatures to be reached. (Camusso and Bortone 8)

Clay workers seem to have followed two different routes to develop their abilities as potters. In one route potters followed a deep concern for understanding the paths that had been trodden from the beginning of pottery, with the potter

stepping back, as it were, in order to go forward. In the other route, potters tended to remove themselves from or even ignore all that has gone before. This group attempted to live in a bubble, where the clay is the only thing that mattered and contact with the past was irrelevant. "Total isolation from all outside stimulus is virtually impossible, since the nature of the artist's imagination is to get ideas and concepts from a variety of sources, no matter how unlikely or trivial they may seem to anyone else." (Hopper 2)

The forms of functional pottery throughout history may be used as a reference for potters today to learn and draw from in producing new material. The form thus grows out of historical progress as well as the direct response to function. This is largely the way it has always been: each major culture had its own record of growth and history, but often they intermixed their arts when they were brought into competition. "These cultures [of Europe and Asia] were independent of one another prior to the development of trade routes around the Mediterranean Sea, through the Middle East to the Orient. Later they were to become linked through trade, war, religion, and the migration of people from one area to the other." (Hopper 2)

### Decoration and Surface Treatment

The decoration of pottery was introduced with higher temperatures and the use of kilns. "The earliest type of ceramic decoration took the form of a wide variety of different coatings." (Camusso and Bortone 8) The earliest decorations were Ancient Egyptian, which were based on alkaline fluxes. Later lead glazes were introduced, and then tin glazes which changed the transparent ones into opaque colors. "These acted as a good substitute for the smooth surfaces of Chinese porcelain, which used a felspathic glaze." (Camusso and Bortone 9)

Another unique glaze is that found on luster ware, which was developed by Islamic potters, to create brilliant metallic effects and iridescence. Yet another early type of glaze, called salt glaze, was used typically in wood kilns by German potters. This kind of glazing was based on sodium and silica, which helped to decrease the melting temperature.

The decoration of ceramics has always involved techniques other than painting techniques. Decoration may, in fact, be achieved through incisions, punch marks, sgraffito work, inlays, carving, encrustation, stamping, reliefs, and the addition of elements in the round. (Camusso and Bortone 9) Sometimes the decorative reliefs were stamped out separately and then applied as required to the body of the vase. Decoration was also created by tracing ornamental motifs on the vessel's surface by means of a brush dipped in slip. Another treatment common with today's studio potter comes by way of molds, pre-made pots used for repeating forms.

### Historical Sketch of American Pottery

Early American settlers brought the ceramic forms and techniques of their homelands, particularly those of England and Germany. By necessity, the earliest American wares were utilitarian in nature; crocks, bowls, jugs, and bottles were produced for functional use. The European and Far East argued over who arose the basis of what was to become known as the American Ceramic Style. Eventually these influences would combine with the energy and spirit of American potters to produce the distinctive character of American ceramics.



## Production Pottery

The earliest potteries in America were typically family establishments, many passed down from father to son, but as more foreign potters emigrated, they brought with them the technical knowledge and production methods of foreign industry. This helped the process of mass production to invade the states. (Camusso and Bortone 266)

"The production of what was to become the prototype of American art pottery began at Rookwood Pottery in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1880." (Camusso and Bortone 266) Rookwood was a success, first artistically and eventually, financially. It spawned many imitators, some of which were successes, others not as fortunate. Among some of Rookwood's imitators were the J.B. Owens, Roseville, A. Radford, and Weller potteries. The styles of the many potteries in American art did not always reflect the Arts and Crafts style. The wares often spoke more of Victoriana, with their high gloss glazes and floral and figurative decoration. As the pottery movement in the United States headed forward, the demand rose for ceramic wares to complement a sparer more restrained style. "The ideals of the art world gave way to the realities of the market place as art potteries became more and more reliant on mass production methods and less attention was given to handcraftsmanship." (Camusso and Bortone 267)

## Pottery as Fine Art

Ceramics as an art form became the command of studio potters, as the ceramics industry turned to the production of utilitarian wares. When the Depression struck in 1929, it delivered a final blow to what had quickly become a fading art. The Depression sparked a change from pottery to sculpture. Finding that no American tradition of clay sculpture, young ceramicists turned to European

influences, especially those of Vienna. This lack of American influences played a role on the size of the works being made. "While the majority of the clay sculpture produced between 1925 and 1950 was small in size, a few artists did work on a very large scale." (Camusso and Bortone 267)

The sculpture movement was ended by World War II. When the artists failed to gain a market, they moved on to other livelihoods. Extreme changes took place following the war. American potters felt the sway of new ideas and became very expressive. Combined with Japanese influence, these ideas led young artists to break the traditional aesthetics that dominated American ceramics. The results were revolutionary. The function of pottery was beginning to play less of a factor. Pottery soon became a means of expression. These new explorations dealt with aspects of art such as volume, form, surface, line, color, and attention to detail. Influenced by Japanese aesthetics, potters rejected the traditional European characteristics. The results were new, looser, fresher, and faster approaches to form and the creative process. This revolution in American ceramics led to a long tradition of creating original effects. Experimentation took place using a vast number of approaches. Clay work was taken to immense size. The vessel as an art form returned with greater strength and presence than ever before. Clay slowly was viewed in terms of aesthetics instead of function. (Camusso and Bortone 268-269)

American ceramics is as diverse as the culture from which it has sprung, and this is one of its most telling characteristics. Without the baggage of European traditions, Americans have been free to pursue the works of other cultures and other times and to choose only those elements that would serve their purposes. (Camusso and Bortone 269) From this growth came original bodies of work sparked by the American spirit, which in turn now influences others to create.

## CHAPTER 3

### DISCUSSION OF TECHNIQUE

In the summer of 2000, in an independent study class, I contracted to create a series of ten sculptural vessel forms of substantial size. During this series I developed much of the technique used on the pieces described below. Trying to develop new techniques to cross over later to my thrown work, I restricted myself to building the forms without using the wheel as a throwing tool.

#### Construction

##### Early Footless Pieces

I started the first piece in the series, *4:55 A.M.* (figure 1), by rolling out large slab forms. I then draped these over long, thick, cardboard tubes cut in half. The tubes, being made of a dense paper, quickened the drying process. When the four half-cylinder forms were stiff enough to stand up, I scored and slipped the two halves and attached them together, giving a cylinder shape. The second form being taller, I attached the taller form to the outside of the other and so tried to layer the slabs to create some depth in the piece. To fill in the top gap, I rolled up some clay coils and attached them across the opening caused by the uneven joining of the half cylinders. Last, I added a slab to the bottom of the form. I used the slab roller to get large, even slabs. This added some nice textures to the outside surface as well. Using random found objects, I pressed, scratched, and rolled out patterns through the clay to add a design.

The next piece, *23-13-75* (figure 2), was of similar construction with the addition of a closed saucer form in the middle. I used two hump molds I threw on

the wheel to form the saucer. The molds were bowl shapes that could be tuned upside-down or right-side up to drape clay slabs over or within. When stiff enough, I could attach the draped forms together to make a closed form. Because I was trapping air inside, I created internal channels to allow the air to escape during firing. I placed small holes using my needle tool in the middle of all closed forms where the holes wouldn't be seen. These holes led to exit holes on the medial surfaces of the feet. To get the saucer form to sit better on the slabs, I gave the cylinder form a beveled edge that matched the curve of the saucer form. All of the parts were then scored and slipped and attached together. To finish, I used a carving tool to randomly dig out pieces of the cylinder form. Then, to the top of the saucer form I added bolt-like heads to give a contrast to the surface. To the two slab collar shapes that sit above the saucer and wrap around the cylinder I also added rivets down each side. Finally, I bent the top section to create some visual tension.

### Adding Feet

I started to recognize that these forms were relying on repeated, segmented parts. In the piece *7320* (figure 3) this became even more evident. The construction is still very similar to *2-13-75* except it has tripod feet and the center balance is much lower. The tubes shooting up from the saucer and the feet on bottom were built by rolling slabs around wooden dowels and then by pinching the overlaps together. In this piece, the forms became more abstract and symmetric.

The last piece from the summer, *13490* (figure 4), was a derivation of the piece before it but with two additions. One was the jump-start to the rest of the show. The tubes on this piece were made by extruding clay through an extruder. The way this piece was built was similar to the last one in that I made all the parts

first. However, up to this point, I kept everything hand built, but here I threw the four coned feet to contrast to the three extruded tubes. I threw the cones upside-down so that the tips were at the top and the connection points were on the wheel head. Then I slab-built the saucer form. After extruding the tubes and letting everything dry to the proper stiffness, I assembled the pieces.

### Closing the Cone

Moving into the fall semester, against my original intention of leaving the wheel behind, I reached a point where there were more thrown parts than hand built: four parts were thrown, the three feet and the extension off the saucer, and two were hand built. That formula would remain the same for the fall pieces until On a tangent, I made a series of teapots using these and similar forms.

The fall in its entirety seems to have been driven by my functional background, but when I noticed that the forms were getting away from the direction I wanted, I had to reevaluate. The piece *5103* (figure 7) put me back in on track. I threw a larger version of the cone feet in an attempt to make a statement regarding the functionality of these forms. The cone was thrown like a closed form with no bottom on it. Making this piece helped me finally losing the boundaries of functional ware and commit to sculpture. With the addition of the conical shape on top, the presence appeared to be more architectural in character.

### Working the Form

The spring was simply a continuation of what I had stumbled onto in *5103*, and, therefore, the construction methods were very similar. However, I introduced some new elements and reintroduced applied textures. The first addition was on the piece *1002* (figure 8). Here I added a collar between the saucer and the cone shape

in an attempt to give the cone some lift and make it less grounded to the base. I think it was successful. It made the piece seem more connected, as if the cone grew out of the saucer instead of just sitting on it. In *1002*, the collar was a separate element, but in *16021* (figure 9) and *4115* the cone and collar were thrown as a single piece. In theory, this seemed to be the right answer, but I lost the ability to really exaggerate the size and narrowness of the collar. *4115* also contained an extra saucer form on top of the other. The idea was good, but it made the piece too difficult to construct.

The challenge of stacking the saucer forms lured me into trying to put a third saucer on *15708* (figure 10). In doing so, I had to leave off the cone. Originally, this piece was going to have a cone extending off the top saucer, but the form I felt would not accept it. It is funny how things occur sometimes; I ended up liking it better without the cone.

### Wall Hangings

The series of slab pieces were a last minute introduction to the show. I had to decide whether to fill an open wall on my side of the gallery. By the time I decided to build some hanging wall slabs, I had roughly three weeks. Little did I know how tedious my idea would be to make. I planned to make five large slabs that would hang on the wall. I borrowed this idea from earlier thinking that the process of working the clay itself had its own beauty. I intended to make simple, rolled-out slabs an inch thick and as long and wide as the slab roller would produce. This part was easy enough. Each piece took about twenty pounds of clay. The construction problems came when I decided the slabs should be concave so they would sit on the wall well and would be more interesting. I didn't anticipate how long and carefully I would have to dry these pieces. First, to achieve the

curve, I had to stuff and line garbage bags around and under the form. Then I had to manage the drying cycle so that the middles would dry at the same speed as the outside, otherwise the middle could pull itself apart from the shrinkage. Once the clay was stiff enough to flip, I had to figure out how to mount them on the wall. I started with two lugs with holes in each for attaching a wire. I didn't like the way these looked, so I approached the problem like hanging a framed picture and put some teeth on the back for a nail to sit in.

### Texture

In my exploration of sculptural ceramic vessels, I found textures to be very beneficial. The first four pieces in my show used an assortment of applied surface textures. I started early collecting objects and clay tools to press into scrap pieces of clay to see what kind of marks they would leave. I was using textures to create visual layers of pattern. This originally developed from trying to free up my conception of what my wheel-thrown pottery should look like. I was attempting to force myself to swing out to the other side of the pendulum, away from utility and toward more abstraction.

In my summer pieces, I used these techniques lightly to give interest to the surfaces of my work. However, during my fall experimentation, the surfaces went back to a dependence on glaze alone to create any element, pattern, or texture. Similarly, the forms I produced in the fall semester were mainly wheel-thrown, again a return to my functional techniques. Paradoxically, by taking my work to a place it had never been, I quickly brought myself back full circle to the place I always was. Although these pieces were not exactly what I wanted, I don't think they were complete failures. They still have their significance to the others in the

show. It was my understanding of functional pottery that acted as the vehicle for my later discoveries in the spring.

Having swung to both sides of the pendulum, I feel I came back to the middle nicely. All of the work from the spring semester incorporated a ideas from both sides of the spectrum. I had figured out a way to balance my wheel-thrown, functional background with the newly chartered sculptural world. When I return to the use of textures, I narrowed it down to only five that would be used on the pieces in the spring.

### Glaze Application

I found it easier to make the work first and then to glaze it in a group at the end of each semester. Before choosing glazes, I first had to establish the firing method that I was going to use. I decided to use a mid-range electric kiln for several reasons. One, this was the most practical way to fire my forms without distorting or cracking them. Two, if I eventually start my own studio, economically this would consolidate the amount of kilns I needed down to one. Three, at that point, I hadn't had much experience with electric glazing in electric kilns, and because I had enough practice with the other firing methods, this made it the right and final choice.

I just happened to be finishing a ceramics technical class when all of this was starting to develop. In that class, we were responsible for developing our own clay bodies and glaze formulas. Because I wasn't familiar with mid-range cone 5 glazes, I picked them to study in the class. Going into this new development of textures and forms, I had some new glazes to add as well.

I started my glazing by first establishing a pallette of colors. Between what the studio had in-house and the ones I developed in the class, there were a little over a dozen. I made a series of test tiles out of the clay I was using on the pieces. This way, the colors would stay true from one piece to another. Some clay bodies



will change the color of the glaze so it was important to keep the test the same as the work. I textured the tile surfaces with a bunch of different found objects and tools I had collected. Some of these I was already using while others were new.

I glazed the first batch by dipping the tiles to get a good example of the actual colors. For the second set of tiles, I painted the glaze on with a brush so I could see how the areas where I couldn't dip the piece would look. On the third set of tiles, I used a spray gun to apply the glazes, also as a method of glazing areas that couldn't be dipped or easily reached. The spray gun was very helpful in applying a glaze evenly or in a tight place. I treated the last set of tiles with a method that I later used extensively. I first crudely painted the glazes onto the textured surface, and then took a damp sponge and wiped off the raised areas, exposing the clay's surface again. From there I used the spray gun to apply a thin coating of different colored oxides. The idea was for the glazes to pool in the low areas where the texture was pushed into the clay, while the raised areas would get a coating of colored oxide. This technique of wiping off and spraying over became the best way for me to illustrate the depth in the work.

I was also concerned with the texture of the glaze itself. Though I was dealing with textures as visual decorative elements, I did want to consider them being touched as well. With this in mind, I felt the surface of the glaze was important too. I tried to pick ones that were semi-matte in texture, for these glazes were best for touching.

In my study of ceramics I have always had the hardest times in the glaze room. From the extensive testing I did in the last three semesters I did began to feel I had more control of my glaze and more confidence in choosing a direction to follow. From the glazes I used in my show, I felt as if those in the spring semester displayed the best techniques.

## CHAPTER 4

### DISCUSSION OF EXHIBITED WORKS

The sculptural pots represented in my Master of Fine Arts exhibit contained a series of progressive abstract forms. I began making the forms in the summer of 2000 and concluded in the spring of 2001. The last three semesters were dedicated to this development and to the completion of my masters show.

#### About the Titles of the Works

The title of the show, *Discovery Through Numeric Strata*, has a specific meaning to me. “Discovery” represents my becoming aware of what I was trying to accomplish as a ceramist. This was a sustained process of experimenting to create a library of knowledge in my field. “Numeric Strata” refer to my travels from birth to the present. The first piece, *4:55 A.M.* marks the hour of my birth and *2-13-75* marks the date. Subsequent works are named by the house numbers I lived at. The last piece marks my current age. Thinking back on these numbers revealed stages of personal significance acting as layers, or strata, in my life. The word “Strata” also refers to the layers of clay in the earth and the layers and sequences in the process of forming my finished work. These layers act like a bridge between the growth of my work and the succession in my life—the layers of clay and the periods of time spent exploring and developing as a human being. This show illustrates to me the parallel of growth between my life experiences and my progression as a ceramic artist.

## Discussion of the Pieces

### 4:55 A.M.

The piece *4:55 A.M.* (figure 1) was one of the first of ten works made during the summer sculpture class. The professor worked with me and agreed on letting me continue my study of ceramics in a sculptural way. The contract for the class simply stated that I was to make a series of ten substantial and related works. I was given a lot of freedom in which to approach the assignment. I started by stripping away all evidence of working on a wheel. I first drew some sketches with the intention of building some open, abstract vessel forms.

To restrict myself in using the potter's wheel, I went back to the original methods of making pots. Hand building is an old process of shaping clay without a wheel. The techniques consist of pinching, coiling, extruding, molding, and slab working. These techniques can result in almost limitless possibilities. At the same time, I became interested in creating layers by using found textures and in building up the glazed surface.

*4:55 A.M.* was formed by using large slabs of clay and then draping them over thick cardboard tubes. After the clay became leather hard, the slabs were removed and then pressed together to form a new shape. To help the two sides adhere to each other, I used a procedure called scoring and slipping: an old technique of scratching the clay's surface followed by moistening the area with a clay slip. I noticed that the tool I used for scoring left a nice texture in the clay, and I soon began using it to make surface textures. By making long stroking movements, I left an interesting ribbed pattern in the clay. The grooved surface later acted as a good surface for glazing. By filling the grooves with glaze and then sponging off the raised areas, it would expose some raw clay that I later sprayed color oxides over. I wanted to illustrate the textures and glazes as if they were

becoming part of the form. To better help the association, I would look at things in nature for aesthetic guidance.

Shortly before the summer semester, I stumbled onto the beauty and importance of form that lived in the process of working clay itself. My love for simplicity aspired me to incorporate these ideas together. Even though the overall form of *4:55 A.M.* is pretty stiff in shape, the interior lines have a loose organic feel. I achieved this look by crudely tearing off the edges of the slabs before assembling the two halves together. The application of textures on the clay's surface also created a nice sense of movement. The glaze was then applied in such a way that it accentuated the overall texture.



Figure 1. 4:55 A.M.

## 2-13-75

2-13-75 (figure 2) was an attempt to recognize the possibilities of combining contrasting surfaces. I wanted the series to appear as if it were growing or evolving from one form to the other. The construction of 2-13-75 was very similar to 4:55 *A.M* with the new addition of a closed saucer form. Originally, the saucer form was incorporated to help break up the vertical plane. I was trying to make two unlike forms work as one. I made the saucer by laying two slabs over slump molds and connecting the open ends together. I liked the idea of giving the appearance that the forms my have been thrown. At times I find that the technique and process are more important then the content.

In the first two sculptures, I attempt to embrace a juxtaposition between nature and man. I also describe the look as if they were futuristic artifacts, a new-old look, so to speak. The introduction of the saucer form felt good to me and created new avenues to follow. I think artists today are always searching for their own style or niche which tends to evoke the idea of future—the avant garde or cutting edge.



Figure 2. 2-13-75

## 7320

4:55 A.M. and 2-13-75 were very grounded to the pedestals on which they sat. To balance this, I purposely made them tall and somewhat narrow to give a sense of lift. With the new development of the saucer, I saw a good opening for attaching feet to the bottom. Like the first two sculptures, 7320 (figure 3) was made with all hand built parts. What I saw happening in 2-13-75 I tried to exaggerate in 7320. The saucer was acting as an excellent platform for extensions and for growths to spurt from. The saucer form also acted as an horizontal axis from where I could play with the balance and weight of the piece.

With each piece, I felt as if the pieces were evolving. Each piece seemed to accent the next. The three tubes shooting out from the middle helped the form appear more animated. The tubes were slabs that were crudely rolled around wooden dowels to create some natural textures on the outside. The slabs themselves also had some accidental textures that were picked up from the canvas on the slab roller. These kind of spontaneous textures became very evident in my work. Adding to the spontaneous textures were deliberate ones that I had experimented with. Part of the process that I enjoyed came from discovering these unforced aesthetics. In the field of art, they sometimes are called 'happy accidents.'

With my background in functional ceramics, I feel as if I have true understanding of design, form, and aesthetics. One of the lessons I discovered along the way is how the relation of numbers can affect the overall feel and balance of a piece I learned when dealing with design elements, odd numbers are sometimes stronger than even ones, yet are less likely to be used. The symmetry or asymmetry can really make a piece pop out at you. Asymmetry tends to conjure up more tension within a visual form.





Figure 3. 7320

### 13490

*7320* and *13490* (figure 4) are two good examples of using asymmetrical balanced in a form. In *7320*, the three tubes match the three feet, almost as if they are passing through the form. In the piece *13490*, the tubes don't match each other in relation to the conical feet. I placed an extra foot on the underside of the saucer, in hopes of creating some sort of visual contrast. In these last three pieces, I am playing with the saucer's position with every piece.

*13490* is the last piece to come out of the summer semester. In this form there are two new building methods. The tubes have been extruded from a clay press, and the first presence of wheel thrown parts were added. The conical feet were made on a potter's wheel. I think the adaptation happened because I was experiencing throwing withdrawals. It really seemed to be the next suitable step. From that point on, aside from the five wall slabs in the show, everything else has some kind of thrown additions. However, the saucer forms remain hand built. I was in the process of developing some givens that I could start applying different shapes too. The forms were gradually being segmented into three major areas. The conical feet at the bottom and the saucer form in the middle were both becoming permanent fixtures to the final form. The top portion became the new area where the emphasis was strongest.



Figure 4. *13490*

### 7601 and 15713

Continuing into the fall semester, it only seemed natural for me to incorporate more thrown forms, but once again, this brought me back to my point of departure, functional pottery. At first I thought the openings in *7601* (figure 5) and *15713* (figure 6) would be a good source of tension, but they made the pieces seem like functional ware and confused the message I was sending.

In these pieces I abandoned my applied textures. Instead, I tried to make the forms and glaze patterns relate to each other by reflecting the outside lines or contours of the piece onto the interior with a painted glaze. Here again I returned to the basic style of my earlier functional pottery. It fascinates me how things come around full circle, or swing like a pendulum between two points.

The fall series was a very important step forward. After the fall semester, the growth became much more subtle and direct. Introducing the thrown forms to the top of the saucer turned out to be a great advancement. However, there were still some problems. Previously, the lower two portions were more like bases instead of complete forms. I took note of this with some other problematic areas and found what I thought to be the best answer yet.

The fall semester was not heavily supported in the show. Though in this period I built up my palette of cone 5 glazes, it was mostly a tangent. Most of the forms I developed were intended as functional pottery within a sculptural setting. Not represented in the show was a series of large animated teapots. The teapots were the furthest push in the direction of creating visual tension between functional sculpture.



Figure 5. 7601



Figure 6. *15713*

### 5103

The development and evolution of *5103* was the most important form change in the show. During a critique regarding some of my earlier opened forms, I was receiving mixed responses questioning the form's purpose. The comments weren't really positive or negative, but the critique did bring to my attention a definite concern. The opening was creating some level of confusion to the viewer. The closing of the form was then a direct response to this confusion. I had to ask myself why are these forms open and do they need to be functional? My initial intention was for them not to be used, so why did I give the forms an appearance of having functional characteristics? I think it was the process of hanging on to my functional background. *5103* was the first attempt at leaving my safety net. By leaving this safe place, I bloomed into a new one. I think the only natural thing for me to do was to close off the opening.

The idea of throwing a cone shape on top amounted to reflecting the cone-shaped feet on the bottom. The repeating of the shape helps to create a perception of rhythm. I was hoping the new addition would be the answer I was looking for. I think it did help by unifying the three formal components together as a whole. Up to this point, I was still bouncing around the idea of doing a functional show. *5103* gave me the confidence I was looking for to carry out my commitment to this direction. After completing the piece, I truly felt something click inside. From this piece on, it was like each piece just got better and better. I wasn't getting bored with the procedure of making each one. I felt as if I had many possibilities in this line of work to express my understanding of aesthetics and form. It was like the whole package was finally falling into place, piece by piece. This was a feeling I hadn't had much experience with in ceramics.



Figure 7. 5103



1002, 16021, 4115

At the start of the spring semester, I felt strong about the direction I had chosen. With the cone addition to the saucer form, I was able to focus on a single design. Looking back at the work that got me to this point helped me to pick up old ideas to apply to the new forms. I noticed the work from the fall departed from the use of surface textures. The look and process of applying found textures was too important to me just to let go of. Eliminating the look that these were different connected parts was very important and challenging. The answer to this problem came from resurrecting these textures and from developing new ones. Applying a overall pattern to these forms helped tie the pieces together as one form.

I eventually narrowed the textures down to of five. The first one used a metal throwing rib with serrated teeth, originally used for scoring the clay's surface. The second tool I used was a long threaded bolt that I cut the head off of so that I could roll it along the outer skin of the clay. The third object came out of a sock drawer; it was a wooden cedar ball that had some ringed grooves which I used for rolling in circles on the clay. The fourth and fifth textures only appear on the wall slabs. One of them is the shell of a walnut which I used like a stamp and the other is a golf ball that was rolled fairly hard into the clay's surface.

*1002* (figure 8), *16021* (figure 9), and *4115* were textured with the metal rib tool. Their forms stayed mostly the same except for *4115*. By adding another saucer form I hoped to create a rhythm. I also played off the idea that everything has layers to it. Some are physical, like parts of a pot, and some are mental, like what a piece says to you. By simply manipulating the symmetry of a piece, a totally different feel comes out. *16021* and *4115* were both attempts at adding a more unbalanced position.



Figure 8. 1002



Figure 9. *16021*

## 15708

The piece *15708* (figure 10) is like none of the other forms in the exhibit. Its original purpose was to serve as some kind of keystone piece. The three saucers were supposed to stand for the three textures used up to that point. Each form was to embody a different surface treatment, thus creating a layering of three set textures. Each layer was also to have a specific glaze application that would always stay the same according to the texture used. I decided to leave that idea out because I was limiting myself to only these glaze combinations. The piece called *4115* is what lead me into a third saucer form. When I reached the third one, I had to stop because the construction was weakening. This is probably why there isn't a cone form on top. However, it worked for me anyway. The three saucers matched and reflected the three conical feet on the bottom. Because the saucer forms grew in size a little as they progressed up the form, I connected the saucer order to the order of the textures I discovered. On the top saucer, I used a grooved cedar ball to make the textures, the latest technique I discovered. On the middle saucer, I used a screw shaft, which I had discovered earlier, and on the bottom saucer, I used a metal serated throwing rib, an even earlier discovery.



Figure 10. *15708*

35, 315, 6, 1, 315-D

The wall slabs (not pictured) arose from a large 22-foot empty wall of gallery space. The wall was first a visual concern which later became a technical struggle and a race for time. I decided to fill the wall with a series of five wall slabs that would hang as a group. I envisioned the pieces to be individual and separate, but at the same time work together as one piece. In theory, I wanted the wall to become part of the piece as well: the negative space created by the wall and the positive space provided by the hangings. The number of slabs picked to hang was a combination of space and balance. I chose five pieces, considering the idea that odd numberings create more visual interest. Each wall slab would portray an all-over pattern from the five found textures used in the show.

The idea for these slabs was borrowed from my earlier interest in the beauty of the process itself of creating a final form. By simply using organic shaped slabs without manipulating or disturbing the form created by the procedure of rolling the clay through the slab roller. The slabs were also intended to showcase the five textures that were used in the work.

Technically, the wet construction was no problem. The main concern was how well the form would dry and fire without cracking. Each slab measures roughly 48 inches in height and 12 inches wide and about an inch thick. Anticipating the shrinkage on such a form was kind of tricky and time consuming. The drying time had to occur slowly and evenly, otherwise the clay would destroy itself with s-cracks—I made a total of ten slabs before reaching my goal of five.

12641, 214, 325, 1201, 26

The last five pieces in the show were subtle variations on the forms I had made previously. I was trying to stretch out the components that worked in the previous pieces without losing the overall design. Since the conical forms previously were short and squatty, I added more height to make the forms taller and to create a better sense of lift to the piece.

The top conical shape was extended and narrowed to visually lighten the weight up top. I tried to balance the parts in relation to each other and the piece as a whole. An open dish form was the only new element added to the compositions. This was a direct reflection of the saucer form and was used to make a reference to the saucer and to break up the vertical plane. By repeating and reflecting shapes throughout the form I achieved a visual rhythm and a more fluid contour. When making these forms, it was very important to pay attention to the connection points. This was for two reasons. First, with so many different parts to connect, I was worried these things might come apart at the joints. Second, I wanted each element to look as if it were passing through the next connection point. Otherwise, it would have looked like parts on top of parts, instead of one complete coherent structure. Because the pieces were hollow and air was trapped inside the form, I had to channel a series of holes from the middle to an exit hole on the surface. Otherwise, the forms would explode in the firing.

The process of building these forms became very enjoyable. I found it fun to make a bunch of assorted parts and then to mix and match them until I found the ones that best worked together as a whole. I found by throwing and hand building the parts separately I could create a more elaborate finished product. I felt as if the last five pieces were really reaching my own expectations of form and aesthetics.



Figure 11. *12641*





Figure 12. 214



Figure 13. 325



Figure 14. *1201*

## Conclusion

My goal with these forms and the show was to develop a growth of progressive forms strong enough to show the chains of time spent tweaking and manipulating the work without losing the blanket of consistency.

The vessel is a piece of art that can hold its own. If done correctly, it can possess as much power as a good painting. It also has withstood the passage of time and will keep on going. The vessel can be used in many different ways: as art forms for visual pleasure or as functional working pieces. I think pottery will be a part of everyday life for a long time to come. However, I think we are losing it some as a functional piece in today's society. That's what we the future can attempt to change. Everything today is about speed. How fast can we get it, fix it, clean it, and so on. People tend to overlook the vast realm of pottery for many of those reasons. Society would much rather go to Wal-Mart and pick up a set of plastic or Tupperware dishes. If possible, as an artist dealing in the field of ceramics, that's an aspect that I would greatly like to change now and in the near future.

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