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Thematic Manifestations: an Aesthetic Journey

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

In partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

by
Jeff Kise
May 2004

Don Davis, Chair
Anita DeAngelis
Catherine Murray

Keywords: Ceramics, Simplicity, Aesthetics, Saggar Firing, Flash Firing, Naked Raku

ABSTRACT

Thematic Manifestations: An Aesthetic Journey

by

Jeff Kise

This thesis, in support of the Master of Fine Arts exhibition entitled *Thematic Manifestations* at East Tennessee State University, Carroll Reece Museum, Johnson City, Tennessee, March 2-12, 2004, describes in detail three aesthetic themes that are manifested in the work exhibited. The artist discusses his journey in establishing a “criterion of aesthetic values” whereby his work is conceptually developed. The three themes – The Paradox of Simplicity, The Decorative Power of Nature, and The Beauty of the Irregular – are founded on historical and contemporary influences and are further described in practical application of form and process.

DEDICATION

For my daughter, Hannah Grace

And my son, William Jeffrey:

You have been perfect examples of joy, contentment, and happiness.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express appreciation to the members of my graduate committee: Don Davis, who has also knowledgeably critiqued my work these three years, Anita DeAngelis, and Catherine Murray. I am grateful for your time and thought.

Thank you to Blair White and the Carroll Reece Museum for helping me pull together the details of my exhibition.

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Above all, I thank God who has carried me through.

CONTENTS

| | Page |
|---|------|
| ABSTRACT | 2 |
| DEDICATION | 3 |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS | 4 |
| LIST OF FIGURES | 6 |
| Chapter | |
| 1. INTRODUCTION | 7 |
| A Discussion of Thematic Manifestations | 7 |
| The Paradox of Simplicity | 8 |
| The Decorative Power of Nature | 11 |
| The Beauty of the Irregular | 12 |
| The Artist's Journey | 13 |
| 2. HISTORICAL INFLUENCES | 16 |
| Primitive Pottery | 16 |
| Japanese Ceramic Art | 18 |
| The Song Dynasty | 20 |
| 3. CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES | 23 |
| The Japanese Folk Art Movement | 23 |
| Contemporary Smoke Fired Potters | 25 |
| 4. TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS..... | 29 |
| Saggar Firing | 29 |
| Flash Firing | 30 |
| Naked Raku | 30 |
| 5. ANNOTATED CATALOG | 32 |
| CONCLUSION | 56 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY | 57 |
| VITA | 59 |

LIST OF FIGURES

| Figure | Page |
|---|------|
| 1. <i>Thematic Manifestations, view 1</i> | 32 |
| 2. <i>Thematic Manifestations, view 2</i> | 33 |
| 3. <i>Thematic Manifestations, view 3</i> | 34 |
| 4. <i>Ring Lip Bowl</i> | 35 |
| 5. <i>Spectacle III</i> | 36 |
| 6. <i>Crossing Yangtze</i> | 37 |
| 7. <i>Melted Ash</i> | 38 |
| 8. <i>Steelwork</i> | 39 |
| 9. <i>Escape</i> | 40 |
| 10. <i>Imprint</i> | 41 |
| 11. <i>Subversion</i> | 42 |
| 12. <i>Bones</i> | 43 |
| 13. <i>Turkana</i> | 44 |
| 14. <i>Saggar Vase with Gloss Resist</i> | 45 |
| 15. <i>Tall Vase with Rings</i> | 46 |
| 16. <i>Artifact II</i> | 47 |
| 17. <i>Subtle Leaves</i> | 48 |
| 18. <i>Papillary</i> | 49 |
| 19. <i>Wilderness Bowl</i> | 50 |
| 20. <i>Concentric Circles Bowl</i> | 51 |
| 21. <i>Convergence</i> | 52 |
| 22. <i>Nights</i> | 53 |
| 23. <i>Circumscription</i> | 54 |
| 24. <i>Fallen Circle</i> | 55 |

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

A Discussion of Thematic Manifestations

“[The] average potter... without some standard of fitness and beauty derived from tradition cannot be expected to produce, not necessarily masterpieces, but even intrinsically sound work” (Leach 1). With this statement, Bernard Leach opens the first chapter of his classic for ceramists, *A Potter's Book*. Likewise, with this statement, I begin this discussion of my aesthetic journey.

In essence, Leach is urging aspiring potters to lay foundations for their perception of what is fit for enjoyment and what is beautiful for the soul. Without a “criterion of aesthetic values” (Leach 1), an artist leaves his or her work to the whims of the untrained mind. Whether his or her art is a deliberation of conscious thinking or a product of the subconscious mind, it will be governed by the artist’s perception of aesthetics and beauty.

In a philosophical journey to discover my own aesthetic criterion, I have mentally collected examples of beauty from historical and contemporary influences. These have worked together to build my individual concept of successful ceramic art. Combined with these, a deeper vision guides my work. As each artist does, my soul has a perception of what is noble and praiseworthy. This perception is manifested through three major themes in my ceramic art: The Paradox of Simplicity, The Decorative Power of Nature, and The Beauty of the Irregular.

In the following chapters, I will explore these themes as they occur in my work. In the remaining portions of Chapter 1, I will expand on this introductory discussion of notable thematic manifestations and their contribution to my aesthetic journey. In

Chapter 2 I will present three historical influences that have contributed to these themes: Primitive Pottery, Japanese Ceramic Art, and the Song Dynasty of China. In Chapter 3 I will add my contemporary influences including the Japanese Folk Art Movement and several current smoke fired potters. In Chapter 4 I will discuss the technical considerations for my work, and then in Chapter 5 I will present an Annotated Catalog followed by my conclusion.

The Paradox of Simplicity

I maintain that simplicity is a virtue. Allow me first to give support for the goodness of simplicity and then I will explain the paradox that whenever simplicity is found in nature, it is accompanied by complexity.

What is the value in simplicity? Why leave behind a world of advancements? Henry David Thoreau explained, “Our life is frittered away by detail... Simplify, simplify, simplify!” (74). In this modern age, without a determined effort to hold on to a simple life we are swept into the rush of those around us. But why is it worth holding on to simplicity? Peace and intentional goodness abide with simplicity. Beauty is found in simplicity.

Lin Yutang describes the value of simplicity by saying, “I do not think that any civilization can be called complete until it has progressed from sophistication to unsophistication, and made a conscious return to simplicity of thinking and living” (13). In *The Good Life*, Helen and Scott Nearing discuss their Thoreau-like deliberate living. In explaining their departure from city life to their self-sufficient farm in Vermont, the Nearings said:

We were seeking an affirmation – a way of conducting ourselves, of looking at the world and taking part in its activities that would provide at least a minimum of those values which we considered essential to the good life. As we saw it, such values must include: simplicity, freedom from anxiety or tension, an opportunity to be useful and to live harmoniously. Simplicity, serenity, utility and harmony are not the only values in life, but they are among the important ideals, objectives and concepts which a seeker after the good life might reasonably expect to develop in a satisfactory natural and social environment. As these things stand today, it is not this combination of values, but rather their opposite (that is, complexity, anxiety, waste, ugliness and uproar) which men associate with the urban centers of western civilization (14).

Simplicity is a virtue in that one is relieved, unfettered, and enabled to enjoy his daily life. Likewise in art, simplicity enhances natural form and beauty. A piece of artwork is simple when it has limited distractions and minimal decorations, when its silhouette is similar to the piece itself. The viewer is freed and fully able to entertain the inherent beauty of the work, whether it be form, color, movement, etc.

Some may argue that simple art serves no purpose. Some may assume that simplicity is easy for any artist. What could be its value? Alan Hovhanness, a twentieth century Armenian composer, describes his music by saying, “Things which are complicated tend to disappear and get lost. Simplicity is difficult, not easy. Beauty is simple. All unnecessary elements are removed – only essence remains.” The simple is profoundly beautiful. For the artist, simplicity is a challenge to remove all distractive

elements, leaving behind an aesthetically pure, solid, virtuous work. The Japanese, unmatched masters of ceramic art, spend their lives on a journey. They seek beauty, uninhibited beauty. In speaking on the artworks of the Japanese people Soetsu Yanagi, a world renowned leader in the modern Japanese Folk Art Movement, says:

...they are simple and unassuming. Here the quality of extravagance that is always associated with expensive art objects is wholly absent, and any surplus of decorativeness is objectionable... Simplicity may be thought of as characteristic of cheap things, but it must be remembered that it is a quality that harmonizes well with beauty. That which is truly beautiful is often simple and restrained.... I am told that St. Francis of Assisi advocated what he called 'Holy Poverty'. A thing possessed in some manner of the virtue of poverty has an indescribable beauty. Indeed, Beauty and Humility border upon each other. What is so appealing about the art of the people is this very quality... beauty accompanied by the nobleness of poverty (Leach 8-9).

In the same way that Japanese potters embark on a pursuit of ideal beauty, I have sought purity and simplicity in my work. However, as is manifested in my work, this theme of simplicity is accompanied by a corresponding complexity. In nature simplicity is paradoxically coupled with intricacy. For example, an open field is seemingly simple. Long grasses wave in peace and serenity. Yet, upon closer look, battalions of ants march past in search of food. A chrysalis, symbolic of remarkable metamorphosis, hangs on a nearby branch. Even the ground itself is warm with vitality as decomposition and growth simultaneously occur. The examples of this paradox of serenity and intricacy in nature

are innumerable: the bark on a tree with its bulges and hollows, a snowflake with its millions of ice crystals, a leaf with its network of veins and capillaries. These few examples illustrate how nature displays simplicity hand in hand with complexity.

The Decorative Power of Nature

In my work I have intended on giving nature the opportunity to manifest her paradoxical beauty. I begin with forms that are organic, fluid, graceful, unassuming, and pure. My intention is that the form of each piece, whether handbuilt sculpture or wheel-thrown vessel, embodies the characteristics that I consider admirable in people, an idea first planted in my mind by reading Bernard Leach. I strive to make my forms honest, true, strong, subtle, and refined. With these simple forms I use the decorative power of nature, in my case fire, to transform the surface of the pot into a vivid display of her characteristic aesthetics. The depth and simplicity, intricacy and serenity of the finished surface is beyond what an artist can create. Though an artist can manipulate conditions, the ultimate surface design is defined by the firing process.

The surface decoration of my pots depends on the direct relationship between the clay and the firing process. I use smoke-firing processes that involve close contact between the vessel and smoke, fire, natural combustibles, or chemicals. My purpose is to allow the firing process to decorate the piece. In explaining the art of the firing process itself, Tsugio Mikami states, “The art of ceramics is the art of clay, and its creations are a tangible and intimate part of our lives. At the same time we can call ceramics the art of fire. It would be better, however, to say that it is the art of creating new entities from the mingling and blending of clay and fire” (9). By letting the smoke infiltrate the clay, I

allow the inherent beauty of nature to manifest herself. By using simple, organic forms I allow the observer to focus on the complex variation and natural beauty of fire.

The Beauty of the Irregular

While this current body of work displays simple, unpretentious forms decorated with immense variation from the firing process, there is yet one more theme that stands out. This third primary theme is another of my criterion for aesthetics that has been branded on my soul. My work, though consistently balanced in form, displays an irregularity, a hidden beauty, due to my resignation to the firing process.

Though there is no exact translation of this concept in English, the Japanese refer to this aesthetic ideal as *shibui*. Literally translated, *shibui* means “tastefully astringent.” It is more clearly defined by Soetsu Yanagi as having “a profound, unassuming and quiet feeling” (Mikami 228). The idea can also mean somber or unostentatious. In ceramics, the concept refers to a whole beauty that both embodies a pot and is effused by that work. Yanagi explains this hidden beauty as “not a beauty displayed before the viewer by its creator” but rather one “that will lead the viewer to draw beauty out of it for himself” (124). And within this unassuming beauty, irregularity is always present. Yanagi continues, “The irregular is in a sense something to which all who pursue true beauty resort... The profound truth in this emphasis is that freedom always resolves into irregularity in the end. ‘Free’ beauty of necessity boils down to irregular beauty” (119).

A consideration of the Japanese Tea Ceremony, *Cha-no-yu*, will illustrate the beauty of the irregular. The tea masters chose tea bowls and other utensils that were common, simple, and ordinary yet unusual and irregular. In this way, true beauty was

brought daily into everyday Japanese life (Sanders 228). *Cha-no-yu* was used as a means to harmonize life and beauty. “In the eyes of the tea masters the coarse imperfections of the clay, the careless touch of the potter’s hand, and the accidental running of a glaze had a spontaneous quality associated with nature” (Nelson 57). In essence, the tea masters perpetuated the Japanese perception of beauty according to the tradition of *shibui*.

According to Yanagi, *shibui* is an everyday word in Japan. It is an adjective understood across the culture as the standard for aesthetics. It has been so for centuries. *Shibui* “is the final criterion for the highest form of beauty” (Leach 9). Though our Western minds have difficulty understanding all of the nuances of this concept, it is deeply understood by the Japanese.

Though I make no claim that my work embodies such a noble quality, one seen in Japan to be only the result of a life of dedicated work, I have been influenced and inspired by its aesthetic virtue. I have sought to manifest the irregular, hidden beauty of nature in my work.

The Artist’s Journey

The Japanese ceramic masters deliberately seek *shibui*. To them, their art is a lifelong journey, a spiritual calling to bring beauty to their culture. In my journey, I began with primitive pit firing methods. During my undergraduate study at Berry College, I researched sawdust firing and developed a series of slips to be used as colorants on the surface of my vessels. At that time I worked with very simple bulbous vases. I used a fifty-five gallon oil drum that I converted into a kiln. The kiln was loaded by stacking the pots inside and filling in and around them with sawdust. The appearance

of the finished work was affected by differences in the types of sawdust used, by how tightly the sawdust and pots were packed, by the kind of clay and slips used, and by differences in other materials used, such as copper carbonate, salt and other organic matter. I burnished all of my pieces at three stages in order to achieve a pristine sheen. I enjoyed the subtlety of the smoke's flashings; but after working extensively with sawdust and other combustibles, I began experimenting with more dramatic surface effects.

During my first year of graduate work at ETSU, I began combining gloss glazes with smoke-fired ceramics. I made a shift from sawdust firing to saggar firing, still maintaining the direct relationship between clay and smoke; and a shift from bulbous vases to various bowls, still maintaining organic, simple forms. I painted the inside of the bowls with glazes and placed them upside down in a handbuilt clay saggar. Though I developed methods that produced some excellent results, I decided to take a break from burnishing, to leave glazing for a time and to search for a more efficient saggar container.

From that point, I began to use a polished terra sigillata in order to achieve a smooth, shiny surface, and I began building a saggar inside a gas kiln with bricks and kaowool. The saggar, which is rebuilt for each kiln load, has been successful at keeping the carbon in to effectively fume the pots. I have been experimenting with various chemicals and manipulations in the saggar and with flash and raku firing as well. In particular, I am using sulfates, steel wool, gloss medium varnish, and other various chemicals to add a new dimension of bold color, texture, and contrast to my forms. Though I will go into greater detail about these processes in my chapter on technical considerations, suffice it to say that I have been pleased with the results of these firing methods as they leave their varied marks on my pieces.

My forms have been through an evolution of sorts since making bowls in my first year here as well. I still create simple bowl forms but have been manipulating the lip in order to cultivate a sense of unexpectedness. I have continued to throw vase forms and have added plates to the set of traditional forms. Some of my plates are made from slabs, some are wheel thrown with wavy lips or with other unique dimensions. In addition to these traditional forms, I am creating several series of ceramic sculptures that, when installed on a wall, each create a dynamic composition. Each sculpture set includes multiple simple forms that maintain the aesthetic characteristics of my traditional forms.

Though I do not consider my journey complete, I can see that the distance I have come thus far has deepened my sense of aesthetics and has challenged me to apply those criterion to an evolving combination of form and process. I foresee the remaining journey to be even more refining.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES

All artists are influenced by the words they read and by the art they see. Whether or not they consciously adopt certain styles, each artist's work takes on bits and pieces of past and present work. Even an artist who decidedly attempts to be free from influence cannot filter out his cognizance of other work. According to the Japanese, it is a wise artist who lets the work of the past govern personal perception and style, though it may not dictate form or process. Three eras of ceramic art history have fueled the development of my "criterion of aesthetic values." A discussion of the relevant aspects of each era follows.

Primitive Pottery

Primitive pottery from its roots was smoke-fired. Long before the advent of gas and electric kilns, potters dug pits and fired their pots with fire itself. Due to the strictly utilitarian purpose for creating ceramic wares, forms were generally simple and without elaborate decoration. The decoration, whether the primitive potter intended it to be so or not, was largely the fire's markings. I consider most of the simple, organic forms preserved from ages past, with their natural fired finish, to be a solid example of pure aesthetics and of theoretical beauty.

Because pottery fired to the fairly low temperatures obtainable by pit- and hearth-firings was porous and fragile and because the use of glazes to make a surface waterproof had not yet developed, potters used other methods to render the pottery impervious and strong. One common method was to burnish the clay before it completely dried. The

surface was rubbed with a smooth stone, compacting the clay particles on the surface and giving it a flat and shiny finish that made the surface less porous. This shine endured the firing process and added to the aesthetics of the vessel. According to historian Rivka Gonen,

Burnishing seems to be the oldest known decorative technique, and it is found on some of the earliest Neolithic pottery known as “dark-faced burnished ware.” Burnishing has been and still is popular wherever glazing did not develop. Outstanding pieces of slipped and burnished pottery are the sculptural vessels of the pre-Columbian cultures of the Americas (46).

Attracted to the clean and shiny surface of burnished pots, I incorporated burnishing into my work until I found terra sigillata to be an applicable technique for a similar effect.

Another popular primitive method used to decrease porosity was to cover the pot with a slip of very fine clay. “This was prepared by making a watery clay mixture, allowing the larger particles to sink and decanting off the fine ones left in suspension, which were used for the slip” (Cooper 15). This method of using slips to waterproof pots, similar to my present terra sigillata method, was also used for decorative purposes by the Greeks. They covered their pots with a red and a black slip to give their wares a painted appearance.

Various early potters, such as some in ancient Egypt, intentionally turned their pots black in the firing in order to make them more attractive. Known as “carbon smoking,” this was done by covering the pots with a layer of wet leaves toward the end of the firing, so that the smoke penetrated the pores in the clay and turned them black in

color (Cooper 16). I do not let the entire surface of my pots turn black; however, I do use carbon's effects to create subtle flashings on my pots. Though my work is in general not functional, the functional vessels of primitive potters have inspired simplicity of both form and process in my work.

Japanese Ceramic Art

While primitive pottery has affected the outward appearance of my ceramics, Japanese Ceramic Art has influenced the inner character of my work. In a book whose primary purpose is to describe the history of ceramics in Japan, Tadanari Mitsuoka presents a complete argument for the causes of the characteristic features of Japanese Ceramics. According to Mitsuoka, the serenity and beauty of the Japanese land and climate have mellowed the senses of the Japanese people. Consequently, Japanese culture appreciates and creates “gentle and suave” pottery. In his words,

Anyone who takes up and appreciates such articles of Japanese pottery will soon receive from them some hints as to the temperament and character of the Japanese who produced them. Through Japanese pottery he will understand that the true character of the Japanese consists in their gentleness of heart, love of nature, and a hearty desire for the enjoyment of life. To those who cherish nature, life and peace, beauty is of necessity the highest ideal. It is no accident that the Japanese created works of ceramic art rich in graceful beauty (10).

From the beginning of recorded history in Japan, ceramic arts have been incorporated into daily life. Also from the beginning, simple and natural beauty has permeated daily

life. It only follows, therefore, that Japan would have an unmatched tradition of beauty in its ceramic art. Soetsu Yanagi said, “To me the greatest thing is to live beauty in our daily life and to crowd every moment with things of beauty” (Stitt vii). In this statement, Yanagi exemplifies the common goal of traditional Japanese artists.

As a culture, the people of Japan seek to adorn their ordinary lives by making their daily routines beautiful. Their homes are rich with handmade papers. Their gardens are cultivated with serenity. Their tea ceremonies are treasured as a ritual of beauty. Even their land is lush with the manifestations of unadulterated nature. To the Japanese, things that reflect the subtle, irregular comeliness of nature are considered beautiful. For example, the ceramic work preserved from the Jomon Period of ancient history was created to be both practical and aesthetically complete. These forms, though rustic and heavy, were pleasingly curvilinear and were also simply decorated with textured impressions from cords and reeds. Next, in the Yayoi Period, the ceramic vessels took on a more refined and graceful appearance due to a primitive type of potter’s wheel. Yet through this transition, Japanese wares retained their quiet beauty. Through the development of ceramics from low-fired earthenware to high-fired stoneware, each era of production held to *shibui*. Potters allowed the gray, coarse clay to be as it is; they see in it the truth that nothing in nature is strictly uniform. They have put on no masquerade, and they have let each piece have its own character.

The masters of Japanese ceramic tradition prize technical excellence as well. To them, technical flaws are not acceptable. Each generation of potters trains the next generation to carry on their tradition of unsurpassed excellence. According to their philosophy, only after a potter has mastered technique in the gamut of ceramic skills,

including wheel throwing, paddling, glazing, and firing, is he or she able to create a simple and excellent piece. In Japan, one does not assume to be able to create the seemingly basic forms of the masters without a rigorous training in which perception of beauty in form and decoration is developed. As master potter Shoji Hamada explains, each step from choosing a clay body to choosing a place in the kiln for firing plays into the perfection of the piece. In order to create a profound, unassuming and quiet piece, one must have mastered all of these technicalities (Peterson 177). The Japanese ceramic tradition has had a great impact on the aesthetics of my work, and I have been inspired by their commitment to technical excellence as well. While the time it takes me to perfect a pot can be discouraging, I am reminded by the Japanese that fifty excellent pots are worth more than five hundred mediocre pots.

The Song Dynasty

As the Japanese Ceramic tradition has influenced the inward character of my work, likewise the aesthetics of the Song Dynasty of China (960-1278) have inspired my ceramic art. The Song Dynasty has been commonly considered the noblest achievement in ceramics (Leach 10). With relative peace from previous political and territorial unrest, China turned inward, resulting in a spread of education, poetry, and art (Vainker 88-91). During this time of heightened stability, potters of the Song Dynasty were liberated and inspired to create what “the Chinese themselves consider... the greatest classical achievement of their history” (Thiel 42). Although individual traditions developed during the dynasty, the general characteristics of this age were beauty and vitality. Song potters produced organic, intuitive, well-balanced, proportioned forms (Leach 5). The

ceramics of the previous period, the T'ang Dynasty, were forceful and strong while the pottery preserved from the Song dynasty was peaceful and poised (Cooper 50). It is characterized by great simplicity.

To illustrate the aesthetic merit of the Song Dynasty, consider for example Song porcelain. (Though I do not work in porcelain, its success is applicable.)

Here we find all the purity and strength of an inception. In later centuries command of material and range of expression increased, but never again did Chinese porcelain exhibit such noble simplicity of treatment, such fulness and clarity of form, such skilful potting without loss of virility, the tonality light and the decoration... limited... (Leach 38).

Song porcelain is praised for its “perfect and indivisible unity” (Leach 39). Specifically Ding ware, a porcelain made in the Northern provinces for use in the court, was a pure, unified collection of visually enchanting ceramics. Forms were simple and mostly limited to deep, simple bowls which were occasionally foliated. “The potting techniques were sophisticated, producing a thin-walled bowl with a finely finished lip and an elegantly fashioned foot-ring” (Tregear 51). Glazing was accomplished with a simple, yet dense, ivory glaze. Decoration was minimal; pots were either lightly incised or impressed with flora-type motifs. These classic examples of sound aesthetic achievement have been instrumental in the development of my “criterion of aesthetic values.” Consequently, these same aesthetic principles of simplicity and purity are manifested in my work.

In addition to being aesthetically superb, the Song ceramists practiced superior technical expertise as well. S. J. Vainker relates the often overlooked technical excellence of the Song Dynasty's aesthetic achievement by saying:

It is the exploration of clay, glaze and firing that gave the Song potter a thorough understanding of the craft, so that the forms and colours produced were deceptively simple. The discreet ornament chosen to complement those forms and colours resulted in ceramics with an aesthetic attraction that concealed the technical accomplishment which produced them. This combination of unobtrusive technical discipline and obvious loveliness is what lies behind the reputation of Song ware as classics and masterpieces (93).

Technically speaking, Song potters gave great consideration to form, which was given more importance than decoration. Contours were smooth resulting in serenity and stillness. Ornamentation was, for the most part, discontinued and what decoration remained was simple, stylized and represented only flora. Artists of the Song Dynasty communed with nature in order to impart to their work impressions and conceptions of natural phenomena. My attention to the potters of the Song Dynasty has not resulted in an imitation of their work. Rather its end has been an effort to produce forms with unity, spontaneity, restraint, and simplicity.

CHAPTER 3

CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES

While the ceramic traditions of historical eras offer inspirations in conceptual development, I have found the work of contemporary ceramists useful in providing practical application of aesthetic principle. Specifically, the Japanese Folk Art Movement in its effort to rekindle the common beauty of both art and process has brought frequent examples of the preeminent Japanese aesthetic ideal: *shibui*. Similarly, current smoke fired potters such as Jane Perryman, Duncan Ross, Linda and Charlie Riggs, and others have been examples of workable methods to achieve an irregular and naturally decorated surface.

The Japanese Folk Art Movement

With the rise of industrial civilization, the expanding field of science and the proliferation of modern industry in Japan, art was taken from the hearts and hands of the people and was mechanized. At the same time, artists became individualized and proud rather than humble in their appreciation of traditions past (Yanagi 95-97). It distressed Yanagi that the people of Japan were replacing a priceless heritage of rich ceramics for cheap imitations of Western products. He, like other traditionalists, held strongly to the aesthetics of past generations. It seemed to him that Japan was losing the everyday beauty that had been cultivated for centuries.

In a concerted effort to bring reformation to the modern philosophy of art in Japan, Shoji Hamada, Kanjiro Kawai, and Soetsu Yanagi began the folkcraft movement. The three of them established museums of folk art, published a magazine, worked to

promote the aesthetics of traditions past and changed the image of the “art of the people” in Japan. In doing so, they have coined the term *mingei*, literally translated “art of the people” or folkcraft, which has grown into an entire aesthetic philosophy (Peterson 56). The philosophy manifests itself with a degree of variance in each potter’s work, yet it nonetheless holds to confirmed aesthetics of hidden beauty. For example, the work of Shoji Hamada is characterized by “honesty, forthrightness and vigor” (Koyama 239). “His effects are never contrived; a characteristic of Hamada’s work is that he recognizes a spontaneous effect in each of his pieces and brings it out. This may be either in the form itself, a natural irregularity in the glaze, or perhaps a mood suggested by the decoration” (Stitt 101). Such standards of beauty, in my opinion, are paramount to aesthetic success.

Though the Folk Art Movement deals primarily with an abstract aesthetic philosophy, the pottery produced from artists in this movement is profoundly beautiful. The folkcraft tradition follows a simple, rugged style that is never ostentatious. It has been described as rich in simple beauty, unpretentious and ageless in appeal. The wares are usually decorated with a simple white slip combined with a running glaze in an earthy color, like black, gray, dark brown, dark blue, or dark green. This pottery is strictly utilitarian, encompassing only traditional shapes. Though my work is rarely functional and not always traditional in form, I appreciate the Folk Art Movement and its corresponding preservation of aesthetics and humility in modern art. I have sought in my work to be humble and to be true to art for the sake of beauty.

Contemporary Smoke Fired Potters

In my years of burnishing and sawdust firing, I became familiar with a handful of artists who experimented successfully with this type of smoke-fired pottery. Though at this point I have moved from sawdust firing to other types of smoke-firing, the knowledge of their practices has been influential. For example Carol Molly Prier, an artist who tediously burnishes her pots at four stages, bisques and then fires her pots in sawdust and copper carbonate, as I did. Though Prier mimics the traditionally simple pueblo pottery forms, she does not adhere to the pueblo method of surface design. Instead, she wants to have her surfaces marked by the movement of fire. In her own words, “All the energy and careful hours of making, burnishing and firing are now returned in the experiencing of each piece. I’ve done half in the making; the fire has met me in the marking: grace and gratitude” (54). Like Carol Molly Prier, Peter Gibbs is a contemporary potter who values primitive methods of firing and form for their simplistic beauty. In speaking of why he chooses to begin with simple forms, Gibbs says, “The surface created in pit (or in smoke) firing is complex and beautiful enough, without some tricky sort of form to complicate matters” (76). Though my method has changed, Prier, Gibbs, and I still share the same quest for fire and its power to decorate.

Another smoke-fired artist, Gabriele Koch, has brought simple organic forms to the forefront in contemporary ceramics. She uses hand-building techniques and burnishes her vessels to obtain a shiny surface. Koch creates rounded, gourd-like pots in an effort to unite form and surface. She attempts to express delicate balance and strength of form in her pots. Growing up in an affluent and lush location in Germany, Koch was tantalized by simplicity of both possession and land in her travels throughout rural Spain.

In the beginning of her work as a full-time potter, she focused on this ideal of simplicity. “Everything at that time was about simplicity: simplicity of form, simplicity of technology, about immediacy. My thinking was very conscious at that time – I was very much aware of what I was doing” (Perryman 52). Koch’s deliberation in pursuing simplicity is similar to my own pursuit, intentionally leaving behind complexity in order to find the essence of ceramic aesthetics. In speaking of the decorative power of fire she states:

I am not 100% in control over it but I don’t want total control.... I know I will probably get some movement or liveliness or patterning here – and a quieter area over there. I make the form and give that form over to the fire and the smoke.... The interaction between the smoke and my clay surface has become my main concern rather than my own mark making (Perryman 53).

Koch has been an example of both simplicity of form and complexity of decoration due to the effect of smoke on the vessel.

In the past years, the work of British ceramic artists Jane Perryman and John Leach have also been inspirational to my work. Perryman’s amazingly harmonious, balanced vessels are handbuilt and then smoke fired. She often uses a tape-resist method that I have experimented with for added visual effects on my plates. Her double walled bowls inspired my concave-lipped bowls. In her work, the subtle, simple flashing of smoke enlivens the vessels. Speaking of the decorative power of smoke she says that therein lies a method for achieving a tactile surface with depth and richness without using a glaze. The smoke penetrates the surface of the pot and creates patterns and markings,

which become part of the form. Along with the aesthetic results of smoke firing, the process itself is an art of participation. In Perryman's words,

...the attraction of this kind of firing lies in the elements of unpredictability and excitement. After many hours of slow, controlled making it is a wonderfully liberating feeling to "give" the pot to the fire; to be directly involved with the firing; to see the flames and see and smell the smoke. It is an exciting moment to lift the lid and see what the fire has given (41).

I sympathize exactly with Perryman's words here. Given the time I invest in each form, it is an exercise in faith to resign its final character to the fire. Likewise, in describing the technique for his deceptively simple saggar-fired black pots with their distinctive white markings, John Leach says, "Each pot is an adventure; Each pot is a revelation; Each pot is a confession; Each pot is humbling" (Perryman 81). The making of a smoke-fired pot is spiritual art, one that involves the soul of the artist, even as the refining of human character is spiritual art.

Similar to Koch and Leach, Duncan Ross is known for his very simple, refined bowls. Each has a perfect shape. Their essence, according to Ross himself, is the "fine balance of form and decoration" (Perryman 70). Using tape resist and sponging on terra sigillata, he creates repetitive linear patterns that lead the viewer to turn around the pot. These intriguing patterns contrast with the classical shapes he uses. Describing his form production, Ross says:

I look for an organic quality in the shape and good proportions between rim and base... I sometimes put the form back on the wheel as it dries and throw though again to push the shape further than the wet clay would

allow. Turning is an important process as it allows me to create the uninterrupted surfaces and small base profile that I want. I turn and lightly polish inside and out (Perryman 72).

I use this same methodical, controlled technique in shaping my work. In what Ross calls “turning,” I shape and polish my pots. Not only are Duncan Ross’s techniques for form and decoration a source of challenge, his aesthetics are similarly solid and well developed.

While many of the artists who have influenced the process and style of my work are traditional smoke-fired potters, using sawdust, saggars, and the like, Linda and Charlie Riggs and Wally Asselberghs lead me into an alternative form of smoke-firing called Naked Raku. Though I will describe my technique at length in Chapter 4, here I will say that, in Naked Raku work, the smooth surface of burnished clay is decorated with black patterns by using either a pop-off slip (the Riggs) or by layering a slip between the pot and a standard Raku glaze (Asselberghs). While at a workshop led by all three of these artists, I learned both Naked Raku techniques. Using these techniques has broadened the scope of my surface decoration from the subtle flashings of sagger firing and the bold color splashes of flash firing to include the sharper contrast of black on white.

CHAPTER 4

TECHNICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In my discussion of technical considerations, I will go into greater detail regarding the three firing methods that are included in this exhibition of work: Saggar Firing, Flash Firing, and Naked Raku Firing. Prior to each firing, no matter the method, I spend significant time creating a form that will serve as a fitting canvas for the fire to paint its character. At times, especially with the wall sculptures, I hand build forms by slab construction and sometimes extruding. On my wall sculptures I also build a sturdy mounting device so that only a nail or screw is needed for hanging. All of my vases, off-center pieces, bowls and most of my plates I throw on my wheel. I meticulously work with each form until I am pleased with its organic curves and its unobtrusive serenity. All pieces have smooth surfaces that are polished with a terra sigillata before firing and waxed after firing for a shiny finish. Each piece in the catalog will be annotated with comments as to which construction and firing methods were used.

Saggar Firing

When Saggar Firing, I use a downdraught high fire natural gas kiln. After experimenting for a while with saggars I built with a groggy clay, I began to build a temporary saggar inside the kiln with bricks and kaowool. This has successfully kept in the carbon and is relatively simple to rebuild each time I fire, though firing several loads in sequence is beneficial. When loading my work in the saggar, I sometimes wrap pots in steel wool to intensify the color markings at the point of contact. I also use copper carbonate, iron sulfate, or cobalt sulfate to add flashings of color to the smoke's

markings. I fire to cone 012 (which is around 1600 degrees F) and then soak for 20 minutes at temperature. It normally takes between 3 ½ to 5 hours to complete a saggar firing. Results vary greatly and often I am surprised by the outcome. I suppose the unexpected intrigues me; I can plan for smoke to penetrate more in one place than another by my placement of sawdust, but the outcome of surface flashings is controlled by the smoke.

Flash Firing

In Flash Firing, the outcome is as variable and as dependent on the process as in Saggar Firing. The difference is in the bold color affected by ferric chloride. Colors range from orange-yellow to bright red to deep purple depending on the temperature fired to. This process is the simplest and quickest of the three presented here. I paint ferric chloride, bought as PCB Etchant Solution at Radio Shack, on each pot with a foam brush. Then the pot is simply wrapped in aluminum foil and fired for 10 minutes or so in a raku kiln. I fire the kiln to roughly 1000 degrees F with the pieces reaching about 500 degrees F due to the foil insulation. Sometimes I lay paper dipped in copper sulfate over the pots before I wrap them in aluminum foil. This creates a successful resist that leaves lines or other patterns. Wrapping pieces with steel wool or sprinkling with copper sulfate crystals can alter the results as well.

Naked Raku

Naked Raku produces a clean black on white contrast that offers a fitting visual effect in my collection of subtle fire markings. In naked raku, the aim is to have the

smoke penetrate the clay in some places, leaving them black, and to be resisted in others, leaving it white. I have adopted and slightly modified the recipes and methods presented at the Riggs' workshop. I use a "pop-off slip" in order to create a look of melted ash on the surface of the pot. A crackle resist slip is used so that where the slip crackles, the smoke penetrates the pot. After firing, the slip pops off (or is at times scratched off) and the pot is waxed for a shiny finish. In addition to the pop-off slip, I have used Wally Asselberghs' method in which the pot is first dipped into a thin slip to create a layer of separation between the clay and glaze (Riggs 30-32). The glaze is then applied and can be carved to create specific pattern. When fired, the top layer of glaze crackles and allows smoke to penetrate through the layer of slip to the clay surface of the pot. It is critical at this point, when the glaze begins to bubble, to hold the temperature steady for 5-10 minutes. If the temperature is allowed to get too high, the glaze will melt completely and cover the pot as in regular firing methods. The pot is then removed from the raku kiln and put into sawdust or newspaper in a trash can in order to let the smoke seep through the clay while the pot cools for up to 10 minutes. The effect is subtle yet rich in contrast. In some of my pieces, I have splattered the outer layer of glaze on my pieces instead of covering them completely for a varied surface decoration.

In each of these three smoke-firing methods, the decoration of the pot is yielded to the firing process. In this way, the Decorative Power of Nature manifests the Paradox of Simplicity and the Beauty of the Irregular in my work.

CHAPTER 5
ANNOTATED CATALOG

The following catalog contains a sampling of the work included in my Master of Fine Arts exhibition entitled *Thematic Manifestations* at the Carroll Reece Museum, March 2-12, 2004 (Figures 1-3). The exhibit displayed five wall sculptures, each with multiple forms in dynamic arrangement, and 38 other ceramic forms, including non-functional bowls, plates, vases, and other variations of these forms. This sampling has been chosen in order to present a descriptive survey of the entire body of work. Every sculpture has been included based on its uniqueness. Other forms have been included based on their representation of the whole body.



Figure 1. *Thematic Manifestations*, view 1



Figure 2. *Thematic Manifestations, view 2*



Figure 3. *Thematic Manifestations, view 3*

Although the formation of the pieces was varied and will be noted as each is cataloged, some of the procedures I used are common to every piece. I applied terra sigillata to all of the work that I included in this exhibition, and each piece was burnished and bisque fired before it was smoke fired with one of the three smoke-firing methods described previously: Saggar Firing, Flash Firing, or Naked Raku. Upon completion of the firing, all of the work was polished with paste wax.



Figure 4. *Ring Lip Bowl*

Flash Fired with ferric chloride; wheel thrown; 4.25"x8.25"x8.25". This piece was chosen for my show card because of its representation of both simplicity of form and the subtle yet complex decoration of fire. It is one of three ring lip bowls included in the exhibition; each is a variation of the Flash Firing method.



Figure 5. *Spectacle III*

Flash Fired with ferric chloride and paper resist; wheel thrown; 28"x40"x8.5". I threw each of these tubes as a complete circle and then cut them to look as if they continued into the wall.

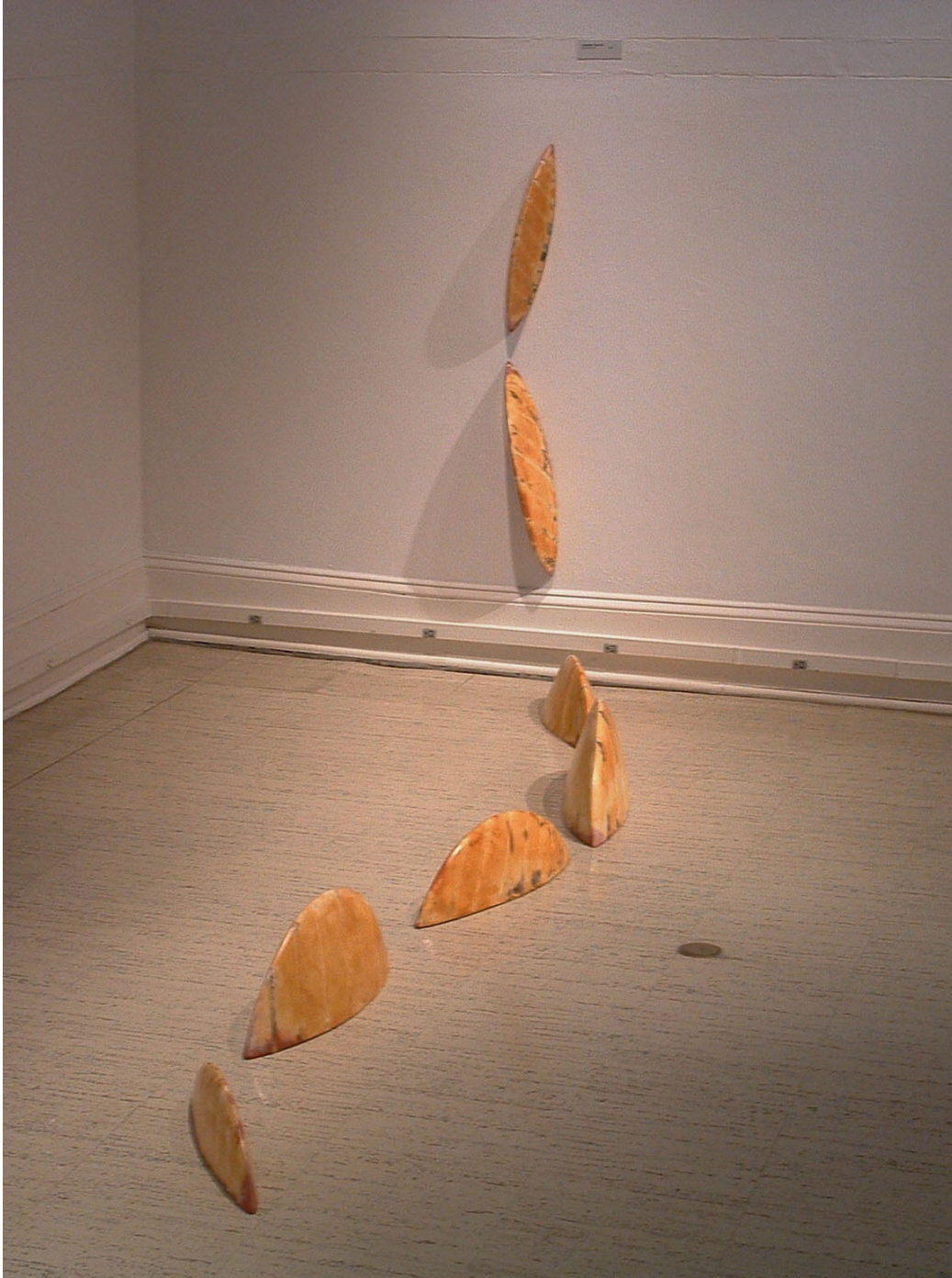


Figure 6. *Crossing Yangtze*

Flash Fired with patterned paper resist; slab constructed; 50"x120"x25". The yellow to orange color variation shown in this sculpture differs from the red hue of the previous pieces. This is due to a difference in temperature when fired.

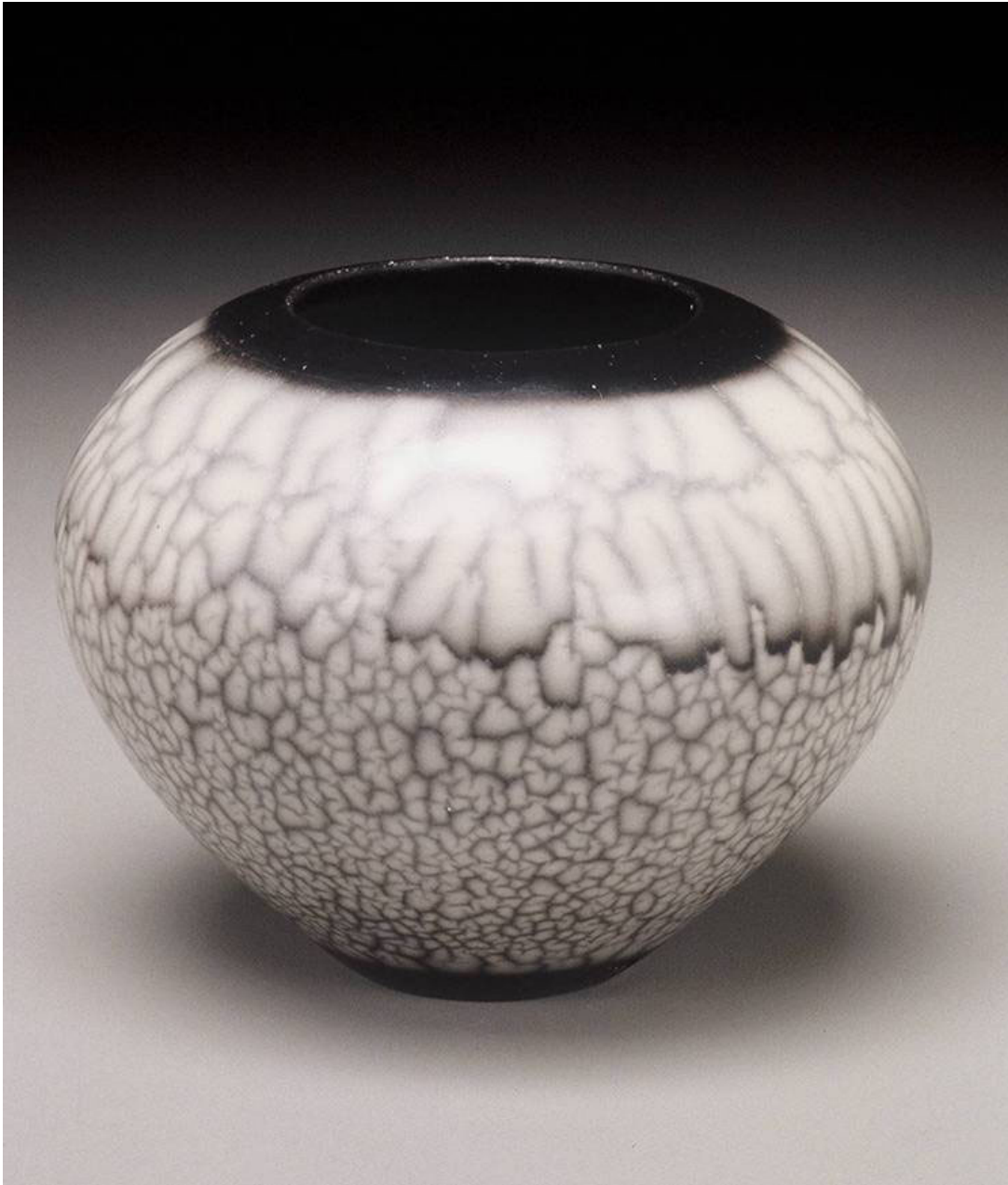


Figure 7. *Melted Ash*

Naked Raku with pop-off slip; wheel thrown; 4.75"x6"x6". This globe shaped vase form displays the variation of crackle from large at the top to small at the base. Two other pop-off slip pieces, each a variation of the vase form, were included in the exhibit.



Figure 8. *Steelwork*

Saggar Fired; wheel thrown; 8.25"x8.5"x8.5". I wrapped steel wool around this vessel in order to create the hairy markings that move around the form.



Figure 9. *Escape*

Saggar Fired; wheel thrown; 10"x9.5"x9.5". The slight texture on the surface of this pale red and black vase form was created with my gloss resist technique.



Figure 10. *Imprint*

Flash Fired with ferric chloride; wheel thrown; 7.5"x10.5"x10.5". This vessel is an example of the color variation due to the use of ferric chloride. The red patches reached a higher temperature in the aluminum foil than the yellow areas.

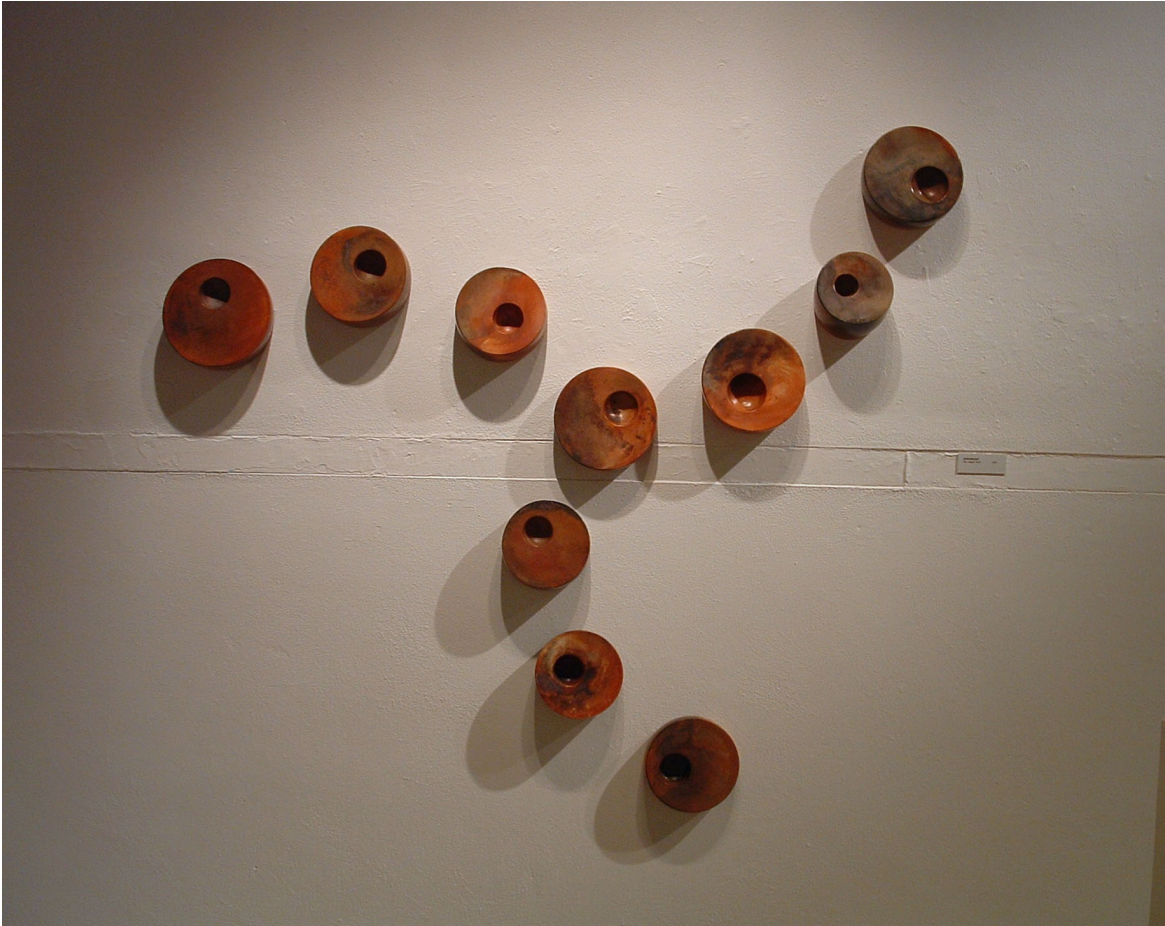


Figure 11. *Subversion*

Sagar Fired with iron sulfate; wheel thrown on two centers; 67"x60"x4.5". I enjoy both the dramatic size and the movement of this wall sculpture. Its individual forms are cut at a slant to lie diagonally on the wall.

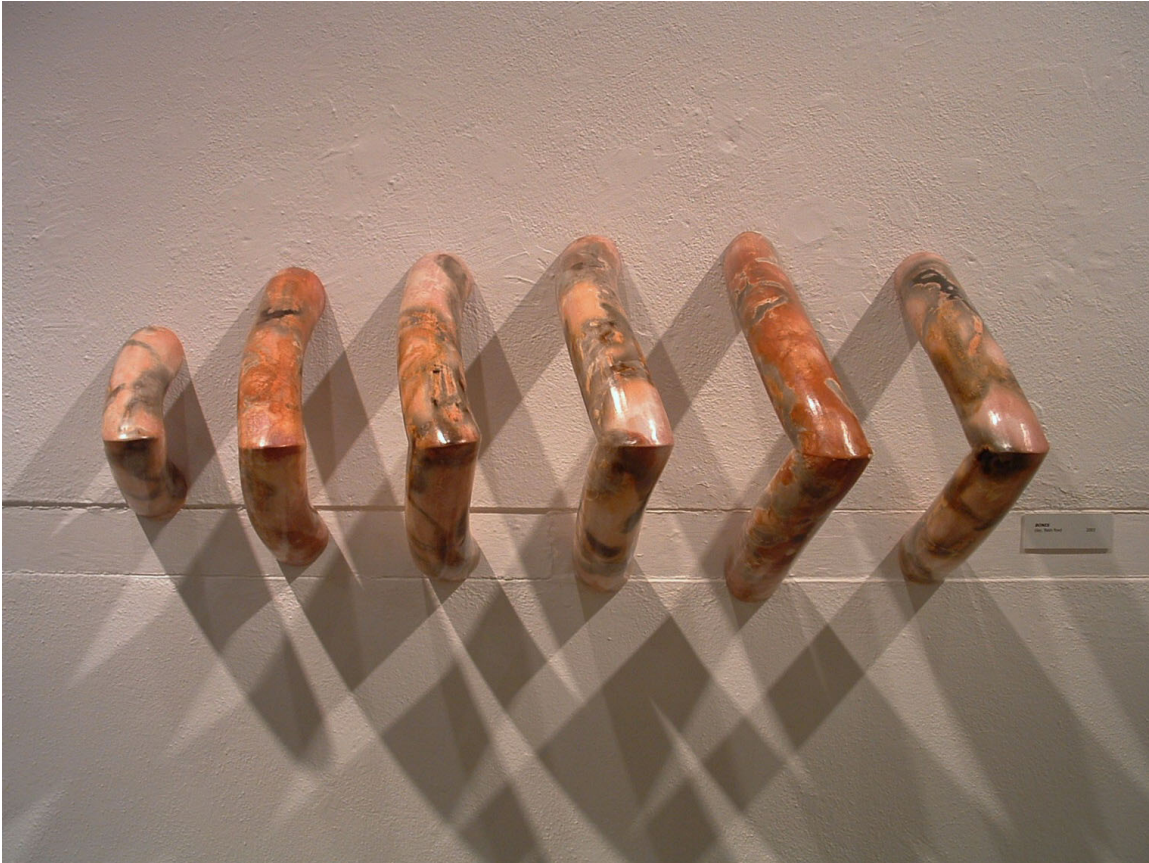


Figure 12. *Bones*

Flash Fired with ferric chloride and unraveled steel wool; extruded; 39"x17"x13".
I laid each of these extruded tubes in a slump mold and then joined them together at the corners. As in all my wall sculptures, I built a sturdy mounting device with slabs on the back of each piece.



Figure 13. *Turkana*

Saggari Fired with sulfates and steel wool; wheel thrown; 15.5"x8.25"x8.25".

This piece is one of a few works with compounded shapes included in the exhibit. The piece itself is as simple as its silhouette.



Figure 14. *Saggar Vase with Gloss Resist*

Saggar Fired with steel wool; wheel thrown; 7.75"x8.5"x8.5". This is one of only a few pieces that I fired without previous soaking in sulfates.



Figure 15. *Tall Vase with Rings*

Saggar Fired with iron sulfate; wheel thrown; 17"x8"x8". This vase is another on which I used gloss medium varnish to create subtle surface texture.



Figure 16. *Artifact II*

Saggar Fired with iron sulfate; wheel thrown; 8.5"x10.5"x10.5". The simple shape of this vase is a fitting canvas for the decoration that results from the firing process.

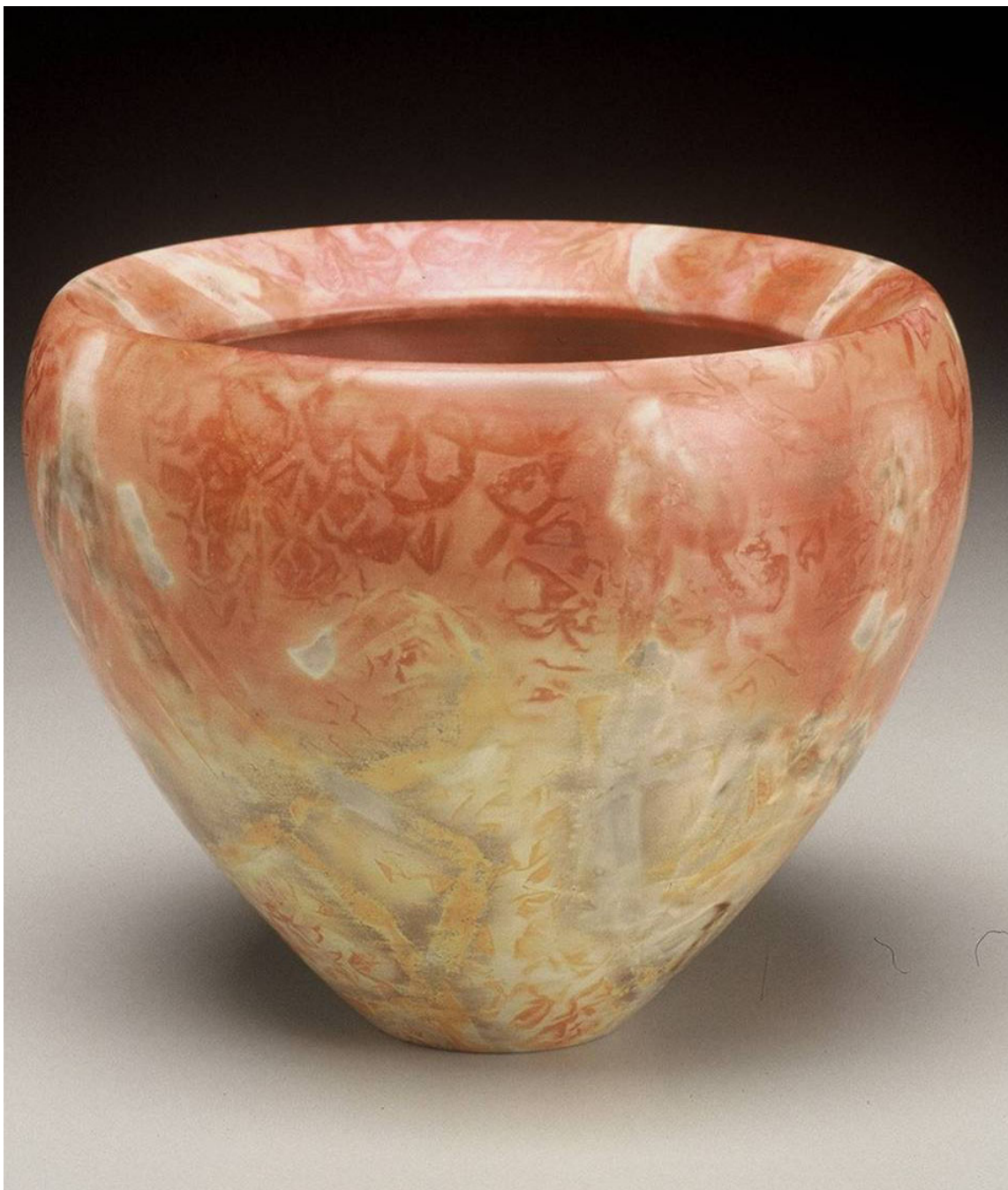


Figure 17. *Subtle Leaves*

Flash Fired with paper resist; wheel thrown; 7"x8.5"x8.5". This tall bowl displays the beauty of nature with its paper resist markings in the shape of fallen leaves. It is one of the varied concave lip bowls that I included in the exhibit.



Figure 18. *Papillary*

Flash Fired with ferric chloride; wheel thrown; 8.5"x8.5"x8.5". This piece is a form variation from my concave lip bowls.



Figure 19. *Wilderness Bowl*

Saggar Fired with iron sulfate; wheel thrown; 5"x7.5"x7.5". Another one of my concave lip bowls, this piece is a display of nature's brown hues.



Figure 20. *Concentric Circles Bowl*

Naked Raku; wheel thrown; 4"x6"x6". This bowl is one of four pieces included in the exhibition with a carved Naked Raku surface. Before firing, these pots were dipped into a Raku glaze and then carved to create surface pattern. Smoke penetrates through the carved areas and is resisted by the glaze left in place.



Figure 21. *Convergence*

Naked Raku; wheel thrown; 5"x5.5"x5.5". This form is another of the four that shows carved surface pattern. The crackles in the white areas are lines where the smoke penetrated through the cracks in the Raku glaze.



Figure 22. *Nights*

Naked Raku; slab constructed; 40"x25"x3". As in the previous Naked Raku pieces, I used the Raku glaze to create a smoke resist on the surfaces. In this case, I splattered the glaze before firing.



Figure 23. *Circumscription*

Saggar Fired; slab and wheel constructed; 15"x15"x1.5" each. Each of these three plates was constructed out of a slab, which I placed on the wheel to shape. These plates were soaked in cobalt sulfate before firing which gives them a blue hue.



Figure 24. *Fallen Circle*

Saggar Fired; wheel thrown; 65”x42”x4”. I threw each of these domes and then trimmed some with spiral etching. After completing the form, I placed each piece in a chuck and trimmed the bottom so that they sit on the wall at a slant. Each has a slab-built mounting device on the back. These pieces are fired with no sulfates.

CONCLUSION

In describing the Japanese way of art, which would be well considered by the West, historian Irene Stitt writes:

Craftsman practiced their skills from generation to generation, and whole areas produced a similar kind of art. Theirs is the true way of learning an art, absorbing it from all sides as children, observing elders working in a centuries-old tradition, trial and error having been the great teacher. In this way art runs in the blood. It cannot be learned and assimilated in a few short years of schooling, as we so often vainly think (vii).

I know that I have yet to reach the end of my journey. There is much to learn, much to understand. In the search for my “criterion of aesthetic values” I have appreciated the work that has been done before me, and I have let the success of past traditions inspire my work. Though my work has a definitive character of my own, I see common themes that have been manifested in traditions past. Hopefully these themes are rooted in a spiritual understanding of virtue and aesthetics. As Soetsu Yanagi philosophizes, “To be unable to see beauty properly is to lack the basic foundation for any aesthetic understanding....Beauty is a kind of mystery, which is why it cannot be grasped adequately through the intellect” (109-110). Beauty must be seen through the eyes of aesthetics and known in the soul. It has been my intention to sharpen my perception of beauty and to assimilate its virtuous characteristics into my work.

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VITA

JEFF KISE

EDUCATION

- 2004 M.F.A. in Studio Art, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee
1998 B.S. in Interdisciplinary Studies (Art and Business), Berry College, Mt. Berry, Georgia

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

- 2003-2004 Adjunct Faculty, *Walters State Community College*, Morristown, Tennessee
2002-2004 Graduate Teaching Associate (Instructor of Record), East Tennessee State University,
Johnson City, Tennessee
2003 Adjunct Faculty (summer term), East Tennessee State University, Johnson City,
Tennessee
2001-2002 Graduate Assistant in Ceramics, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City,
Tennessee
1999-2001 Admissions Counselor, *Berry College*, Mt. Berry, Georgia
1999-2000 Ceramics Director, *Camp Winshape*, Rome, Georgia
1998-2001 Ceramic Artist, *Kise Studio Pottery*, Rome, Georgia

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

- 2004 “Thematic Manifestations,” MFA Thesis Exhibition, Carroll Reece Museum,
Johnson City, Tennessee, *solo*
“Winterfest 2004” Ninth Annual National Art Exhibition, Guntersville, Alabama, *Juried*,
Honorable Mention
2003 “Seize the Clay,” Nelson Fine Art, Johnson City, Tennessee
2002 Mountain Empire Community College, Big Stone Gap, Virginia
“Blue Plum Arts Festival,” Main Street, Johnson City, Tennessee, *Juried, Merit Award*
“Art from Earth,” Nelson Fine Art, Johnson City, Tennessee
“An Evening with the Arts,” Kingsport Association Gallery, Kingsport, Tennessee,
Juried
“Centennial Alumni Invitational Exhibit,” Moon Gallery, Mt. Berry, Georgia
1999 “Chiaha Harvest Festival,” Ridgeferry Park, Rome, Georgia, *Juried, Purchase Award*
1998 “Celebration 98,” Nashville, Tennessee, *Juried*
“Thru Fiery Trials,” Senior Thesis Exhibit, SunTrust Bank, Rome, Georgia, *solo*
“Student Honors Exhibit,” Moon Gallery, Mt. Berry, Georgia, *Juried, First Award*

SELECTED HONORS

- 2004 First Place Overall, Mockingbird, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City,
Tennessee
Honorable Mention, “Winterfest 2004,” Guntersville, Alabama
2003 Phi Kappa Phi National Honors Society
500 Bowls, Lark Books
2002 Merit Award, “Blue Plum Festival,” Johnson City, Tennessee
1999 Purchase Award, “Chiaha Harvest Festival,” Rome, Georgia
1998 First Award, “Student Honors Exhibit,” Mt. Berry, Georgia
1997 Eleanor Tinker and Ruth Baird Award for ceramic excellence
1994-1998 Georgia Hope Scholarship for academic excellence
1994-1998 Berry College Academic Scholarship