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TOOLS FOR NOURISHMENT

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Ceramics

by
Ernst Meyer
December 2011

Accepted by:
David Detrich, Committee Chair
Mike Vatalaro
Christina Hung
Todd McDonald

ABSTRACT

Although modern life is often fragmented and hurried with little time for reflection, the shared use and contemplation of handmade objects can strengthen human connections. By creating functional ceramics for everyday use, I make tools that help heighten users' awareness of their food, their families and their communities. My work considers the interaction between person and object through the senses of sight and touch. Cups, pouring vessels and small bowls have rounded forms that fit easily in the hand, while large bowls have grooves and folds inspired by the natural landscape; plate and bowl sets are designed to be assembled into sculptural towers that require human interaction before use, thereby encouraging contemplation of form. To further the sensation of touch, I frequently apply textures from elements I find in my environment. These textures inform the user of my interest in repurposing cast-off materials as well as contributing to the human connection that is evident in the individuality of form and in the marks left behind from my tools and hands.

DEDICATION

To my wife, Jen, for her support and her willingness to help guide me through this process. I love you.

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INTRODUCTION

By focusing on functional ceramics, I provide people with tools to nourish their relationships and communities. The need for sustenance is a common desire we all share. My contribution to this thread is the creation of handmade tableware which, by providing an alternative to the expected, serves to strengthen our interactions with one another and with the everyday activities of eating and drinking. Throughout my work, human connection is evident in the individuality of form and in the marks left behind from my tools and hands. By infusing my work with character and giving it a sense of purpose, I enhance the experience of dining as well as highlight the importance of building connections between us and our surroundings.

Jane Herold writes that “the most important task of a useful pot is to generate caring” (70). Gwendolyn Yoppolo expands on this concept when she writes that “a service designed for a dining ritual can shift the perceptual horizons through which we comprehend food as nourishment, and nourishment as relationship” (Yoppolo). The customs surrounding the presentation and consumption of food are very important to me. As a child I shared a home with my parents, sister and grandparents in Germany. We ate together more often than not, at least once a week, and my aunt, uncle, and cousins would frequently come to the house for a meal. My grandmother would set the table with her best dishes, fresh flowers and a tablecloth. The tableware was a central part of the experience that my grandmother was creating with food and family.

CHAPTER ONE

FUNCTION

A tool, by definition, is a device used to carry out a particular function. When a tool is well designed, has a sense of purpose and works effortlessly as intended, a satisfying exchange takes place between user and object. A tool can often be passed from hand to hand so that the experience is shared. However, that shared experience is subject to individual interpretation. Until recently, I expected vessels to operate only according to their primary intent, frequently discarding those that were limited in their function, such as bowls with textures or perforations that made them suitable for solids but not liquids. Now, I explore how objects engage the user and the way they can operate in different settings.

One of my many goals in building connections between individuals and tools is to challenge the user's preconceived notions of function. By developing forms that stack and nest (Figs 1.1 and 1.2), I change the user and the experience by capitalizing on the overall mindfulness that develops from the beginning of any deliberate activity. Rather than presenting a place setting in front of each chair as my grandmother did, I deliver a centerpiece that diners must disassemble before turning their attention to the food, both increasing their interaction with the tableware and heightening the anticipation of the food to come. This exchange enhances the development of connections between diners by initiating communication and sharing even before the food is served.

These stacking sets also allow me to introduce an additional element to my work, one that includes a complementary view of functional form by integrating new

relationships between familiar forms. In these constructions, the initial impression is of a unified whole. The stacked sets of bowls (Fig 1.3) are presented as objects on a pedestal, yet even the pedestal disassembles to become a pair of serving bowls, enhancing a sculptural perception without eliminating the ability to serve food and beverage. The stacked sets of plates and bowls (Fig 1.4) behave similarly by adding vertical interest to the presentation and changing the expected interaction. Subsequently, the stack has an architectural feel that resembles different stories in buildings similar to a pagoda or a high-rise building, drawing the viewer in through use and disassembly. This interaction and engagement with the work enhances the appreciation of it and supports anticipation of use.

Even though most of my work is functional, I blur the boundaries between functional and non-functional. Some function is inherent in an object because of familiarity. Other function needs to be found, either because the object is unfamiliar or because it suggests a function that can't be immediately identified. Creating pieces that welcome user interpretation and investigation builds excitement about the work and helps people connect to it.

The pouring vessels are inherently interactive, partly because they must be picked up to fulfill their purpose and partly because their designs are delivered from another object that requires human interaction: the old-fashioned spinning top. During a visit to Germany when I was a teenager, my grandfather suggested I choose several small items from the house to bring home with me. I chose an old wooden spinning top from the drawer of toys near my grandfather's favorite chair. Analogous to pottery forms, spinning

tops in motion have symmetry and balance as well as distinct parts: the spindle, the body and the point on which they spin. At rest, they tilt gently to one side, inviting interaction. A pouring vessel at rest similarly has some of this contained energy. Subsequently, some of my forms have rounded bottoms so that even though they are stable enough at rest, they become more stable when in use (Fig 1.5). Due to their scale and anthropomorphic qualities, users are tempted to engage with the vessels and to pass them from hand to hand rather than setting them down.

While an empty bowl or platter can serve as a decorative object, it becomes a symbol of community once it is pressed into service with food. Sharing also plays a role in the other serving pieces that I make. Diners may pass a serving piece from person to person, collect food from a plate on a sideboard, or gather around a communal bowl and eat directly from it as the people of The Gambia in West Africa still do. Whatever the approach, a serving piece plays a central role in gatherings of two or more people.

CHAPTER TWO

FORM

Form is defined as the visual appearance or the configuration of an object. It helps define volume and space in and around the object as well as giving it a sense of purpose. It is one of the main driving forces I consider when creating my work. I create quiet, simple forms that confidently define volume, their geometry, texture and simple lines helping to highlight their volume.

Familiarity is possible through the recognition of basic geometry. The circle and square relate to each other both formally and in what they both represent. According to Carl Jung, the circle symbolizes self and wholeness regardless of whether it is found in astronomy, in mandalas or in art (240). The square and rectangle represent the connection to the earth as well architectural structures and buildings (249). When paired, they give each other life and energy, roots as well as movement. The movement from the circle to the square gives the feeling that the vessels themselves contain movement. The way the interior volume suggests outward expansion is similar to the way the chest cavity expands as the lungs fill with air. There is a sense of fullness as well as a feeling of containment, a holding ready to give and receive.

Negative space creates intrigue and fosters interaction. The space inside a handle or around a spout impacts the form by supporting the relationship of the parts to one another as well as creating a flowing line throughout the form. The space around the form can also invite the hand of the user to interact with the vessel. How a form will be held and used, and the experience of the surface are all design elements addressed in my work.

Ceramic artist and designer Eva Zeisel inspires me with her ability to capture volume and active space in and around her vessels. Her work appears simple, shows confidence and is pared down to the essence of the form. Similarly, I utilize simplicity in form when I create my work, an attribute that gives the user the power to decide how the vessel should be picked up, experienced, and used

Further connection arises from touch. The rough natural surface of the clay and the feel of the glaze on a finished piece reveal the form to the user. Chris Staley's cups are examples of vessels that reveal much through touch. To experience fully the volume and the hard edges he incorporates, the user has to feel the object. Staley, a professor at Penn State University, believes that "functional pots ultimately become fully realized through the activity of their use....Touch is one of the most powerful ways in which we experience the world" (Staley). I feel a kinship to this statement since my work provides an experience that cannot be perceived by sight alone, such as the feel of the texture on the bottom of a bowl or the interaction with a pouring vessel that has no handles.

My forms, especially of my pouring vessels, are also influenced by larger structures, such as old metal water towers and machine assemblies. Water towers in particular not only serve as containers but also have strong geometric shapes and a structure that arises from their function. The joints and connections visible on the exterior help enhance and articulate the form as the lines in my work accentuate the volumetric nature of my forms.

After I create my initial forms, I enhance their surfaces by either incorporating applied texture from objects that I have found or by pressing simple lines into the vessel.

Lines and texture help break up the surface area as well as enhance the visual volume of the forms. The textures that influence my work are frequently linear, giving the piece a mechanical or architectural feel. Overall, this effect gives my work the appearance of control and cleanliness that are so much a part of my aesthetic. The applied textures also invite the users' touch, which leads to questions about the source of the marks.

Texture and touch are made explicit in my large basins. These are the most organic vessels in my current body of work (Fig 2.1 and 2.2). Geologically, a structural basin is a bowl-shaped depression caused by tectonic stress. In my own basins, the lines and texture of the surfaces suggest erosion or deformation. The texture is created by pressing objects into as well as rolling texture onto the surface of the slab before draping it over the mold. The basins are substantial and, therefore, need sturdy feet to reinforce their visual and physical weight. These feet become an integral aspect of the design as well as functioning as structural support. They are formed by collapsing and folding slabs of clay to create a bold foundation for the basin.

Inspiration for texture also comes from metal objects such as plumbing connectors, old locks and gears. Each of these has the potential to become a shape or a texture in clay. In a pouring vessel, a valve might inspire a spout, or a metal hub might leave a unique impression on the rim of a plate. Re-imagining metal shapes and textures in clay gives the work unexpected and exciting qualities that invite the viewer to give meaning to the surface of the work.

With so much focus on form and texture, I prefer to keep my glaze palette and application simple. Form is the essence of my work and the glaze should enhance its

quietness, bringing it to life. For tableware, the glaze provides a backdrop for the food; thus, it should not be in direct visual competition with the dining experience. In all of my work, glazes highlight the shape and texture of the vessel, or I leave the clay body exposed to focus attention on the form and function. Because of these decisions, my work reveals a sense of confidence and subtle touch.

CHAPTER THREE

PROCESS

The process of creation is as important to me as the result. I typically study my forms in clay by making multiples, which allow me to navigate through the learning and experimentation process so that I can see how the structure responds to subtle altering and various construction methods.

To further enhance the work, I use both light and dark stoneware as well as two porcelain clay bodies. Each of the clay bodies has distinctive qualities that, when used together, contrast each other, creating tension as well as highlighting aspects emphasizing their opposing surface qualities such as cool versus warm and smooth versus coarse (Fig 3.1). This dialogue enhances the viewer's appreciation of the surface of the forms and the quality of the lines.

As I begin my work, I focus on several considerations, the primary ones being the form of the piece and its interaction with the user, i.e. what the object is and how it might be used and handled. During this process I make a series of forms, with each having some small variation to give me visual feedback to help direct the work. I have to see the form and volume to determine its final outcome. The choice of clay is also very important as its surface reveals color as well as texture, both of which can be featured as part of the piece or covered in glaze to modify the color and provide surface quality. The construction process that guides my work is the use of the potters' wheel, providing me with the control that is such an important part of my work. This working process is crucial to the evolution of the piece, which is then, to a certain extent, continued in the

discovery and the interaction of the user. All of these decisions guide the surface and line quality, both of which will be revealed by the glaze and firing process.

Using atmospheric firings allows me to feature the raw surface of the clay. By leaving part of the vessel unglazed, I allow the process of the soda firing to encase the clay with a layer of soda ash, this evidence of the flame forever recording a moment in time and enhancing the surface of the vessel. The use of various thin slips enhances the surface contrast and color, resulting in the warm orange brown color found throughout my work. Tension between a controlled, well-defined form and the open, interactive and sometimes unpredictable effects of soda firing helps enhance the vitality of the resulting vessel.

The second firing process that I implement is the use of a reduction kiln, good for pieces featuring celadon glazes on porcelain. The celadon has the transparency to reveal the lines and texture of my work. My glaze selections are quiet and very subtle so as not to overpower their interaction with the meal. It gives the setting a sense of calmness and clarity. I want the color of the food to enhance the surface of the tableware to create an inviting and enjoyable setting.

CONCLUSION

My ceramic work strengthens the relationships between user and object through my exploration of form, process, and function. Changing the presentation of a table setting from passive to active by introducing tableware that stacks and nests encourages the user to become involved with the work and to experience fully its tactile quality. Touch provides perceptions that cannot be experienced by sight alone. For the same reason, I develop forms that are functional and fit easily in the hand. Both the function and scale serve as signs that the work is intended for a purpose, one that cannot be fulfilled until the object is picked up and pressed into service.

Handmade objects help strengthen our human connections through interaction and use. They reveal our human qualities and interests, making statements about ourselves as well as injecting life and energy into our surroundings. I enhance the everyday activity of eating by creating tableware that is simple yet confident in form and inviting to the touch. Human touch connects us to our surrounding environment. I strive to enhance the experience of eating, to instill a mindfulness through use and to create connections between family and community by creating forms that enrich the activity of nourishing the body.

FIGURES



Figure 1.1

Four small bowls (hidden)

Soda-fired stoneware and porcelain

7" h x 8" w



Figure 1.2

Four small bowls (revealed)



Figure 1.3

Four bowls with pedestal

Soda-fired stoneware and porcelain

9.5”h x 9”w



Figure 1.4

Tower of four bowls and four plates

Porcelain

10”h x 9”w



Figure 1.5

Pouring vessel with rounded bottom and base

Soda-fired porcelain and stoneware

6.5”h x 5”w x 4.5”d



Figure 2.1

Basin II

Soda-fired stoneware

8”h x 14”d



Figure 2.2

Basin III

Soda-fired stoneware

5”h x 13.5”d



Figure 3.1

Pouring vessel with base

Soda-fired porcelain and stoneware



Installation view 1



Installation view 2



Installation view 3

APPENDICES

Appendix A

Clays

Nebraska Stoneware Cone 10

Hawthorne Bond	40%
TN Ball Clay	20%
Tile 6	15%
Silica	10%
Custer	15%
Grog	7% Fine
Grog	7% Medium

Porcelain Cone 10

Tile 6	35%
TN Ball Clay	18%
Grolleg	10%
F4	20%
Flint	17%
Bentonite	1%
Molochite	5%

Laguna Clay Body Rod's Bod Cone 10

Highwater Clay Body Helios Cone 10

Appendix B

Glazes Fired to Cone 10

Blue Celadon A

Talc	2.63%
Wollastonite	23.68%
G200	29.82%
Grolleg	13.16%
Silica	30.7%
Red Iron Oxide	.44%

VCU Light Blue Celadon

Custer	27.5%
Flint	32.9%
Whiting	19.6%
EPK	20%

Korean Celadon

Custer	25.9%
Whiting	25.9%
EPK	6.74%
OM4	20.73%
Silica	20.73%
RIO	1.55%
Bone Ash	.21%

Avery Slip

Avery	70%
Neph Sye	30%

Elaine Coleman Base

Flint	24.9%
Custer	24.9%
EPK	17.5%
Whiting	21.2%
Zinc oxide	2.7%
Frit 3110	8.8%
Zircopax	2%

Hennesy Celadon

Custer	22%
Silica	10%
Grolleg	6%
Wollastonite	10%
Dolomite	2%
RIO	.75%

Pete Pinnell Celadon

Custer	24.5%
Silica	34.3%
Whiting	19.6%
Grolleg	19.6%
Barium Carbonate	1.9%
Tin Oxide	1%
Yellow Iron Oxide	.5%

Shaner's Oribe

Custer	29.3%
Flint	24%
Whiting	21.2%
Talc	7.4%
EPK	11.9%
Bone Ash	1%
Copper Carbonate	5.2%

Malcolm Davis Shino

Nepheline Syenite	45%
Soda Ash	19%
OM4	15%
F4	8%
Spodumene	3%
EPK	10%

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