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Into the Fire!

The process of creating my thesis show has been tumultuous. I have had so many plans that have been disrupted, overturned, or disregarded. This has been particularly stressful for me, because I am a person who thrives on schedules, plans, and knowing what the future holds for me. As a result, the process of creating my senior show has been a therapeutic test for me, a trial in learning to let go of the set track and heading blindly into the dark. Not knowing what is ahead is scary, but it's exciting too.

Outside of my artwork, I used to know exactly what I wanted to do with my life. Or, at least, for my five year plan. I wanted to be a Public School Visual Art teacher, live in eastern North Carolina, and only create my artwork as a personal practice. Many things happened to upset this. I learned what it was like to be a public school teacher in North Carolina, I became infatuated with studio life. The biggest dichotomy to wake me up from this track was my plans in Summer 2021. I had one more class to take in art electives, so I opted to take a five week internship in Seagrove, North Carolina, with the North Carolina Pottery Center. This being unpaid, I wanted to finish the process as quickly as possible and return to Greenville to teach summer art camps. The art camp was on a contractual basis, so I had to split the five weeks of my internship in half to accommodate a two-week stint teaching camps.

The internship was spent as an apprentice/ assistant to a local potter, so I was indignant that I would be providing free labor to a business that was not going to pay me. I learned just before the internship started, I would be working with Sid Luck. Sid luck is a seventy-six-year-old lifetime potter, and the fifth generation of potters in his family. Now retired, during his career he was a high school Chemistry teacher and US Marine during the Vietnam war. The Luck family was one of the first to start the Pottery tradition in Seagrove, North Carolina, and Sid still practiced many of the traditional methods of pottery that his family created over the years. The

concept of working with someone so steeped in local history was exciting, but his pottery style did not interest me. It was evident to me that his work focused on function and tradition over aesthetics, which was in opposition to my own work. I took the internship to learn the background of traditional pottery, but I had my primary interests in conceptual, figurative, and installation art. I expected that I would primarily be making work for or helping with tasks around his shop and have no time to make the work I liked. I was very wrong, and I am grateful for that.

The first week of my internship was spent preparing for a wood firing that next weekend. This meant lots of manual labor cutting and moving wood, preparing the kiln, and preparing previously made work to go into the kiln. The kiln is a traditional groundhog kiln, previously the only method that pottery was finished in North Carolina, but now this kiln is one of the three of that type left in the state. It is heated only by wood, over an approximately thirty hour period, and has table salt and borax sprayed in at the end. This is called an atmospheric firing, where the elements in and added to the air affect the surface of the pottery. The wood ash throughout the firing adheres to the pottery, as well as the salt and borax sprayed in with a leafblower at peak temperature.

At the high temperatures of the kiln, approximately two thousand degrees, the sodium and chlorine separate in an endothermic reaction – sodium bonds with the silica in clay to create sodium silicate – which is commonly known as glass! The chlorine bonds with water to create hydrochloric gas and fumes out of the kiln. The chemical bond creates a glassy surface on otherwise unglazed pottery, and can be quite beautiful, if not unpredictable. That unpredictability can be frustrating, but exciting too. To not know what an end result will look like is freeing and is one of the biggest reasons I fell in love with ceramics. No matter how much you try to control the media and understand the processes at hand, sending an object into the kiln leaves a degree of control out of your hands. There is no way to completely predict the resulting object that will come out of the kiln at the end. Sometimes, an object will crack unexpectedly under the heat, or the glaze will turn a beautiful, unexpected color in the specific reduction atmosphere of the kiln. There is always a part of my art, my work, my life, that will be out of my hands.

I fell in love with the three weeks spent at Luck's ware. During the two weeks teaching art camp in Greenville, NC, I missed the Seagrove life. I was bored by teaching, and disagreed

with many of the administrative methods used in their structure. I called Sid one day, to confirm my return and to catch up on the studio happenings while I was gone, and in his southern accent he said, “I miss you!” I quit my job teaching art and decided to spend the rest of my summer working in his studio. When not working on specific tasks for Sid’s studio, I was able to make my own work using his facilities and materials. Using this free time, I started to make pottery meshing the traditional Seagrove style and my contemporary aesthetics and created work to suit my new self. I decided to sink into the unknown and create my thesis work in his studio. Because the firings are so labor intensive, we are not able to test new glazes or new clay bodies on a whim, and new things created are sent into the kiln with a hope that the end result is good. I created colored slips using my leftover clay and started painting designs onto the groggy clay. I did not know what these slips would do at the high temperature and the atmosphere of the kiln. I enjoyed creating objects that I had no control over their future. Quitting my summer teaching job was symbolically quitting my future teaching plans too – letting go of control over my future. It was exciting.

Firing the kiln that contained my thesis work was exciting – Sid affectionately called it “Rachel’s firing,” with my work filling approximately a third of the kiln. I did not know what my work would look like when I took it out of the kiln, and I was fine with that. While watching the flames of the candling kiln slowly building heat overnight, I wrote my thesis statement and show title. I titled my show *Into the Fire*, after the idiom “jumped out of the pan and into the fire.” Ending my seventeen year stint in school, one that I am thoroughly ready to end, feels like escaping one stressful situation to enter another, more anxious one. This new-to-me world has higher stakes and more volatility but has higher potential and more exciting possibilities. I didn’t know what the pottery coming out of Sid’s kiln would look like, but I was thrilled with the results. I don’t know what’s in store for me. I am hopeful that the results will be just as exciting.

Below is the statement that appeared with my gallery show. *Into the Fire* was on display in Burroughs Wellcome Gallery in Jenkins Fine Art Center from September twenty-seventh to October first, twenty-twenty-one.

I don’t know what the future holds for me. I don’t know where I’m headed, what I will do, or even what I want out of this life. My life, much like my artwork, is highly influenced by my setting and by those surrounding me. I am learning how to let plans

“fail” in order for other opportunities to succeed, and to let go of knowing what is to come in the future. This body of artwork is a practice in relinquishing control over the outcome, and accepting the influence of my environment and my past. Before these objects were pulled from the groundhog kiln at Luck’s Ware in Seagrove, NC, I had very little idea of what they would look like. Using a new clay body, a new studio practice, and an untested slip recipe for surface decoration, I am letting go of the expectation of knowing what is to come.

I make art for myself alone, to process what I need at that time. However, existing in a public space makes this process visible and interactive to all of those around me. Our modern world has made existence a public, published act. Part of my healing is allowing these inner parts of me to be seen by other people. I chose functional work as my canvas because I, as a human in a capitalist society, am expected to be functional. This expectation of functionality leads to bouts of hyperfunction and dysfunction, and that is reflected in my work.

Please feel free to touch, investigate, open, or rearrange the artwork in this gallery. Take care to not break or damage the work. Contact me for prices or questions.