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PICTOGRAPHIC PORCELAIN

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate
School of the University of Colorado in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts
Department of Fine Arts, Creative Art

1995

University of Colorado at Boulder
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PICTOGRAPHIC PORCELAIN

By

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Alfred University, 1989

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the Graduate
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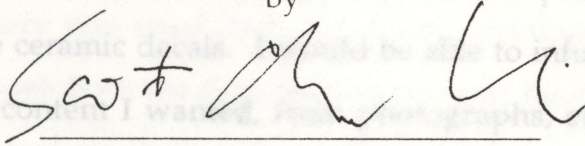
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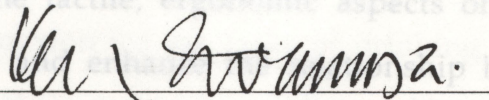
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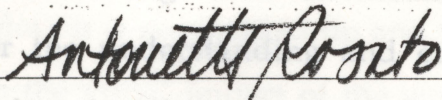
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When I began graduate school I was very concerned with issues of functional pottery. I was interested in the experience of using the objects I created. However, I soon discovered that my conception of functional pottery was too narrow. I realized that I was becoming far more interested in how my work looked than in its utility. I wanted to explore how my pots could function conceptually, visually and theoretically rather than merely as vessels for food and drink.

Most of the historical pots that interested me used imagery as a vehicle for expression. I realized that one way I could incorporate imagery into my pots was to use ceramic decals. I would be able to infuse my work with whatever kind of content I wanted, from photographs, etchings, and text to portraits and narrative. One of my main endeavors for the past two years has been to learn how to make and incorporate ceramic decals into my work.

An old argument says that functional pottery is an art that is experienced haptically. The tactile, ergonomic aspects of the work are experienced through time and enhance the relationship between object and owner. The handmade pot forces us to attend to simple aspects of our daily life such as drinking and eating. Thus the handling of the work becomes a requirement for the understanding and enjoyment of the object. Throughout my education in ceramics, these defenses for functional pottery have been repeated so often that I feel they have become clichéd. My observation has been that a lot of studio pottery produced in the last five or ten years that subscribes to these precepts all looks the same. The writer and art critic Peter Schjeldahl comments on these assumptions in his article "Ceramics and Americanness" :

"On the mocking side, seriousness about pottery stirs satirical thoughts of self-righteously insular utopians, unconscious of their privilege, who flaunt bumper stickers recommending wood fires as an alternative to nuclear power plants. It suggests humility pumped up to a fetish. The Platonic product of such a world view is an object smallish, brown and morally overbearing." (Schjeldahl, 1993)

I still believe that touch is an essential means of appreciating and experiencing pottery. However, ceramic history has shown me that there is far more that functional pottery can express. For instance, Pre-Columbian Moche pottery was used daily for eating, drinking, and even music-making, but through both the figurative shaping of the pots and the graphic depiction of images on their surfaces, it was able to express every aspect of their life and civilization.

In many ways, my MFA work has been a response to what I felt were old and tired ideas about what functional pottery can and should be. While my work is designed to be utilitarian this does not mean it is for daily use. My pots can function for the tasks of drinking, the display of flowers, etc., and I want their use to be a pleasurable experience. The quality of usefulness is twofold. It is visual as well as physical : one can see how well a pot will work before it is ever picked up and held in the hand. I am mainly concerned with the visual impact of the work. For instance, the delicacy and preciousness of my cups is reflected visually as well as physically, and makes the use of them more an extravagance than a casual moment.

As I create my art I am constantly aware that I am entering into a history which spans thousands of years and includes almost every civilization on earth. My work includes two specific references from

ceramic history. The first is ancient Greek pottery. These pots fascinate me because each one contains such a wealth of information. The images on these surfaces generally consist of pictures and narratives framed by meandering patterns that marry perfectly to the pot's form. They tell us a great deal about Greek civilization, from daily tasks and rituals to mythological tales. The forms of the pots hold information about their specific function, such as storing water or serving wine. I am interested in this utility in relation to the elaborate pictorial painting on the pots. Of this Arthur Lane writes in his book Greek Pottery :

"It had been no mean achievement of the Greek potters to reconcile the threefold demands of utility, of form, and of decoration, when each demanded so much....It is a convention of our day that not even ornamental pottery should be too heavily charged with ideas; we prefer to see in it the easy, sensuous qualities of colour, texture, and rhythmic design, innocent of ulterior meaning. How often it is said that Greek vase-painting is excellent, but too good to be on pottery. Yet it was designed for pottery, and for technical reasons could have existed nowhere else." (Lane, 1948)

I have also been influenced by the porcelain produced by European factories such as Sevres and Meissen in the 17th & 18th centuries. These elaborately elegant, often ostentatious objects are so precious, they virtually deny use. Yet they are clearly designed with utility in mind. The cups and saucers are particularly attractive to me because of the way they combine imagery with a functional pottery format. It is the beauty, elegance and refinement of these works that draws the viewer towards them, and makes them objects to be "read" — to be looked at closely. In

doing so, one can imagine using them. This becomes a part of their visual and physical quality. It makes the actual use of them more enticing.

One contemporary artist whose work clearly addresses this issue is Adrian Saxe. His porcelain work draws from and modernizes the European factory ceramics I have discussed above. In considering Saxe's work, Peter Schjeldahl created the phrase "the smart pot," the definition of which was extremely influential to me in determining the kind of work I wished to pursue in graduate school. In his essay, "Adrian Saxe and the Smart Pot," Schjeldahl writes:

"The smart pot is an academic object positing an imaginary academy, the brains of an imaginary all-embracing civilization. The smart pot is so removed from innocence, so thoroughly implicated in every received notion of nature and culture, so promiscuous in its means and open in its ends, that it's almost innocent all over again – like Magellan leaving by the front door and circumnavigating the globe to come in the back. The smart pot is tantalizing rather than pleasing. It hangs fire. It is not "art." *The smart pot X-rays hoary art-versus-craft distinctions to reveal their confusion of values: values of prestige fouling up values of use.*

The smart pot accepts the semiotic fate of everything made by human beings, the present wisdom that every such thing is consciously or unconsciously a sign. Given the choice, the smart pot opts to be conscious. It represses no meaning, however disturbing. *Is the gallery ceramic now a sign of wealth and taste, a snob-appeal material mascot? Very well, that will be foregrounded....* The smart pot escapes the smarmy corruption symptomized by appeals to 'quality,' a code word of insecure wealth, by plowing straight through it. It is glamorous and untrustworthy, like a pedigreed dog that has been known to bite. *The smart pot's attitude to history is similarly double-edged: enraptured and cannibalistic.* " (Schjeldahl, 1991; italics mine)

of the images are clearly visible. Also, pots and photographs are both incongruous. I have always been fascinated by photography and images. I felt that bringing this field together with functional ceramics would present me with a considerable challenge. It also would provide me with the potential to create pots that are primarily visual in their emphasis. I became convinced that the use of photographs would be liberating, allowing me to bring new kinds of meaning, and a different kind of voice, to my work. Using pictures, my work could depict an almost unlimited variety of things, from Greek pots to homeless women. I realized that in doing this I would be learning what amounted to be an entirely new language. Searching for and deciding upon images became one of the major endeavors of my work. In a sense, I had to develop my own language for using imagery on pots, creating my own "grammar" and "vocabulary" with which I could work. Pictures can have many different meanings: symbolic, iconic, personal, etc. Choosing which images to use has been one of the most difficult challenges I have encountered. For example, in "Burger Vase" I juxtaposed three different images: a hamburger, a human heart, and ants, to make a type of visual sentence or joke which alludes to mass consumption and health. I also see the process of selecting and applying images as akin to writing poetry. Images, like words, have symbolic and metaphorical qualities, but their meaning is mutable and referential. If the pots represented on this vase can be viewed in relation to the picture, I am also very interested in the apparent incongruities of my work. The images I use are mechanically reproduced, through the computer and photographic processes, but are printed and applied by hand. The pots which house these often-repeated, reproduced images are also made by hand. It is my intention that both the mechanical and hand-made qualities

of the images are clearly visible. Also, pots and photographs are both incongruous and strangely related. Pots are physical records of the hand's touch, while photographs are visual records of a moment, communicating through the perceived reality and truth of what they represent. Their "reality" can also be reproduced.

The vase titled "History" presents several interesting issues. This piece is a white porcelain vase whose shape resembles an ancient Greek krater. The neck is decorated with images of gears which move around the entire piece. In the center of each side are images of two historical pots, each flanked by two repeated images of different pots. One side has an image of a Mimbres bowl flanked by falcon-shaped, proto-Corinthian pitchers. The opposite side illustrates a Greek vase made and painted by Exekias flanked by figurative pre-Columbian effigy vessels. The spiral handles reach over the rim and are lustered with 24-karat gold, as are the rim and bottom portion of the pot.

This piece holds several layers of meaning. The image of the Exekias vase refers both to itself and to my own vase form. The Mimbres image informs us of a different heritage than the one represented by the Greek vase. It also speaks about something the Greeks could not, because it did not yet exist. I find it interesting that only now, through photography, can these two forms come together so specifically in a single object.

All of the pots represented on this vase can be viewed in relation to the piece itself. They are all objects from different areas of ceramic history, a subject which this piece not only represents but also in which it actively participates. It speaks about ceramic history through its images and classical form, while at the same time its identity as a pot makes it a part of that same history.

There is also a curious dichotomy between hand-made and machine information contained in this piece. The gears adorning the neck clearly refer to a machine but are depicted on a hand-made object. The images all represent things made by hand. Yet the images are reproduced by a machine, then applied by hand. This multi-layered, almost convoluted series of concepts is what I had hoped to achieve in this piece.

"Faces" is a small demitasse cup and saucer. The form of the cup is completely covered with images of faces. These individuals bore no relationship to each other until they were pictured here. The faces are mostly anonymous, although a few are well-known and recognizable. They are not meant to be seen as individual portraits, but rather a collection of faces. They overlap and blend together to become almost a decoration, though a few are larger and seem to compel more attention. However, these images' function is beyond decoration — they carry meaning because they depict reality as photographs. Each face is individual and therefore carries emotional resonance. Faces are never entirely neutral; we interpret and react to them instinctively.

In contrast, the images on the saucer of "Faces" carry different meanings. The saucer's center contains an image of a face from a Pre-Columbian sculpture, illustrating a different way of holding meaning or capturing personality than the photographs on the cup. The saucer's outer portion holds a Mimbres design, which serves partly as decoration and partly as a reference to ceramic traditions and history. Both images refer to different ways that our lives were recorded and interpreted in the past.

The scale of "Faces" is in miniature. The Greek heroic amphora is here diminutive, only three inches tall. Because this piece is also a cup and saucer, it merges traditions and creates a different functional and cultural

identity — ancient Greek earthenware meets eighteenth-century French porcelain.

While critically examining the vase entitled "Forty Years," I have discovered some elements that I feel are unsuccessful. One side of this vase depicts my grandfather as young man and his brother Murry shaking hands; on the reverse side are three pictures of Murry standing in the same position, each taken about twenty years apart. I found these four images very compelling. The three pictures together form a triptych of sorts that describes and records Murry's life and personality. I thought they were interesting enough to sustain the piece, even if viewers were not aware of their identity. However, I feel the piece needs something to indicate who this was, what the handshake meant, etc. Both photos are framed with gold but the space in between was left empty. I also feel that this gold frame was not enough to support the images and that something more was needed.

The cup and saucer "Golden Flight" is also problematic for other reasons. I believe that it moves too close to actually becoming its "referent" of a kitsch object, and too closely follows cup and saucer conventions. While the thrown shape and handle of the form show their hand-made origins, the pink color and the decoration too closely resemble flea-market type factory products. The images of gold dragonflies that decorate the piece are difficult to read, becoming more of a pattern than a set of discrete, recognizable images.

In the past two years the forms of my pots have become far more refined, especially those of the cups and saucers. Form is an aspect of my work with which I want to allow myself more freedom and experimentation. I do feel, however, that the forms of the vases, while

somewhat successful, are too referential of Greek vases. I want to approach form from a more individual perspective, to develop my own "classical" forms rather than merely borrowing them from the Greeks.

In reviewing my thesis work, I have answered many of the challenges that I had set for myself, such as expanding my conception of functional pottery, bringing a new content to my work through images, finding and organizing methods to collect and use images in my work, etc. Many new questions have arisen through this work. How can I make images speak more clearly and more specifically? What other forms and formats can I utilize? I am also becoming more interested in creating a vocabulary of images from my own photographs. In this way my ceramic work can become like a diary, not only recording my history but also my current and future experiences.

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