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Constantly containing

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Constantly Containing

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Thesis submitted to the
College of Creative Arts
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Visual Arts

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Abstract

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Joshua Adam Manning

This thesis is the documentation of three years of research and experiences within the field of functional ceramics. My research at WVU has led me to discover new influences, processes, and, in essence, a professional voice with which to speak in the field of ceramics. Also of importance is the personal exposure to the Chinese culture and its continuous history and relationship to ceramics. Within this documentation I have explained how a semester in China has transformed my aesthetics both formally and conceptually. I have also expressed my personal revelations about function and how it has become a driving force for personal expression.
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Introduction

This thesis is documentation of my work and its context within the broader realm of functional ceramics, both historical and contemporary. It is about function, material, inspiration, and personal experiences that resonate through the work.

Clay and its relationship to humankind, specifically through craft and function, has been a constant for pottery as a relevant form of artistic communication. It is an interesting experience to work with arguably the world’s oldest and continuously used material. The historical lineage that accompanies clay cannot be dismissed or forgotten. Clay has allowed the potter’s work to live long past one’s lifetime and, in some cases, outlast its social context. Examples of this are Jomon ware of Japan, Mimbres’ pottery of the southwest, and Song Dynasty ceramics of China. These ancient cultures produced pottery that was specific to their culture and society. Their pottery exists today because of aesthetic appreciation and therefore the pottery has superseded its social context. The history of pottery that exists today serves only as a glimpse into past societies and, to some extent, as reference material for the contemporary potter.

I strive to create work that has the communicative ability of my predecessors while representing my time and place in history. This thesis serves to explain my work in relation to ceramic history and its place in contemporary ceramics.
China and Its Impact

During my first semester at West Virginia University, I participated in the WVU ceramic China semester program. This experience was life-altering with immeasurable artistic and personal growth. The semester abroad informed me of innumerable facets of ceramics. In retrospect, I can say that I gorged myself with everything that I was exposed to: from Chinese ceramics to the culture at large. This included the earthy wood-fired water jars of Tianbao, the hand-stretched noodles in the food alley, and the pristine Imperial wares of the Song Dynasty. By the end of the trip, I was both physically and mentally full of China.

After only months of being back in the states I returned to my former practices and techniques of working in clay. There was a failure to relate my studio experience in China my with my work back in West Virginia. I attributed this to the lack of “mental digestion” of the semester abroad. Slowly but surely, and still to this day, the more salient factors of my previous experience began to surface within my work. Cognition of what I had witnessed abroad trickled in with formal developments first and then conceptual elements began to surface such as tem specificity. Formal elements like Chinese architecture began to surface within the lids of storage vessels. Furthermore, item specificity was a substantial realization that has progressively gained importance within my work.

Yixing teapots and the tea culture at large was the tipping point for recognizing what item specificity was and that it was practiced with such reverence. The concept of having a specific teapot function with only one given
type of tea has resonated with me ever since I encountered it. Then the large Pu-erh tea jars started revealing themselves from the corners of tea houses. I would see or notice the round cakes of Pu-erh tea and separately acknowledge the ceramic jars tucked in a corner. One day the two separate objects became synonymous with each other and one became a signifier for the other. I began to look closer at the ties between the contained and the container which I will discuss in more depth.

Producing items to house, contain, and otherwise complement consumables was not new to me as a person or as a consumer. This concept was however revolutionary to me as a maker of functional ceramics. China is where I first became aware of item specificity and its relevance to me as a potter.
The Work

My work is firmly based within the constructs of functional ceramics with an emphasis on quality craftsmanship. My influences are varied, ranging from Song Dynasty Cizhou Ware and Art Deco ceramics along with architectural elements of both eastern and western cultures. I am also inspired by the Arts and Crafts Movement of the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries, and indebted to the American Studio Pottery Movement which sprang forth from that broader movement. Some of the work is influenced architecturally via agricultural silos of the West and traditional pagoda structures of the East. These forms are of great interest to me because of their inherent conceptual significance, coupled with their physical importance as landscape icons and cultural identities. It is my hope to transfer and translate those powerful signifiers into the landscape of the kitchen.

I make pottery based upon personal experience, needs, and a lifestyle that considers the home a place for contemplation and personal connections. Containment and preservation of agrarian fodder and family victuals was commonplace in my youth and was always exciting for me. I attribute that life experience/lifestyle as the cause of my fixation with containment. The act of containing foodstuffs has always intrigued me on many levels. The inherent trust that is placed upon a vessel to contain and protect material goods of life is one of the more fascinating aspects of creating vessels for containment. With
that in consideration, containment has become the basis for my exploration of function.

My work is based on function within the kitchen, more specifically, the storage of staple foodstuffs and the distribution or containment of sustenance. Pieces are designed, altered and defined as item-specific containers like rice jars, noodle jars, and spice jars (see fig. 4, 6, & 17). Dry storage of goods is currently of great interest to me and has led to the creation of noodle jars, rice jars, tea jars, spice jars, and baking canisters. I have taken into account how these containers would complement a kitchen, what volume of dry goods would be on hand in a serviceable kitchen, and in what quantity these dry goods are purchased in from the grocery store.
Influences

I have acquired a range of influences by living within an agrarian community that has high degree of exposure to pottery. This community and environment had many influences, some conscious and others not, imparted upon me as I grew up. The potters most influential in my development shared a sensibility that there is a place for handmade pottery in contemporary society. This was the leading force in my aspirations to continue the timeless tradition of creating functional ceramics. I owe these potters my drive and desire to create functional pots.

Landscape, specifically rural Virginia, played a major role in my development of surfaces. Agrarian processes of tillage and/or harvest provide endless resources for color and line combinations. Along with that, the natural patinas of the seasons are a constant source of inspiration for me. My familiarity to, and fondness for weathered structures or fall foliage, have led me to the process of salt firing. By salt firing I can produce surfaces with subtle color variations (see fig. 5).

Some of my design aesthetics are drawn from the history of pottery that range from the Song Dynasty China and American Glidden Ware, which was a mid-20th century line of Art Pottery influenced by Song Dynasty pottery. The domestic ware of the Northern Song Dynasty known as Cizhou or Tzu’ Chou ware has been a constant reference for surface decoration and segmentation. The use of black slip and banding within the work creates a dynamic contrast with
the white background. This informed my use of segmentation along with my use of a matte black glaze as a major decorative component as seen my spice jars (see fig. 16).

Twentieth century designers like Eva Zeisel and Russel Wright, along with the “streamline” design movement have helped cultivate my formal sensibilities with their modern pottery designs. Zeisel’s curvilinear approach to pottery designs brings about a certain playfulness and depth of personality to her work. Her designs have maintained integrity and surpassed the dilemmas of efficiency and standardization which are essential to mass production. Her ability to give the work a life of its own through gesture and form is what I refer to in my altered bowls (see fig. 12-15). Russel Wright is best known for his functional kitchen ware that had a straightforward style. His space saving designs, like the stacking cream and sugar containers along with lidded pitchers designed to fit into refrigerators were created to be in harmony with the domestic environment. His designs of specific objects that fit into particular locations within the kitchen have been a constant resource for me.

Design sensibilities unrelated to ceramics or modern aesthetics are incorporated and borrowed from architectural elements that are specific to a given culture or style. I included the majority of these influences into the lids of my vessels. Two examples of this could be the addition of an oculus as a nontraditional handle or creating a tiered lid derived from Chinese pagodas (see
fig. 2). Components from grain and milk silos of the rural countryside have also
been a source of inspiration with their stilted feet and linear posture.
**Surface Treatment**

My surface treatments are a combination of applied slips and glazes. The exposure to a salt kiln’s atmosphere produces an overall glaze coating that modifies the applied slips and glazes along with the original clay body. Glaze and slip designs are added to the vessels by means of dipping, banding, pouring, and waxing. A single method or a combination of all four may be utilized to produce pieces that are subtle at first glance. However, upon further investigation, complex patterns and details become apparent to the viewer/user. Ultimately, it is my goal to produce quiet pieces that complement the home environment.

The act of dipping and pouring a kaolin slip over the work has led to an endless array of possibilities to produce organic linear patterns that mimic or trace profiles. The overall effect is like encasing the work in a variety of values that create a shadowed surface. Common studio practices, like dipping and pouring of slip, have allowed me to produce subtle surfaces. This discovery has been slowly evolving into what is now a common feature throughout my work (see fig. 3, 6, 7, and 8).

My glaze palette is comprised of four main glazes (two of which are liner glazes) and additional accent glazes. My four main glazes consist of a satin matte black, semi-matte white, translucent grey, and a glossy aqua-blue to green glaze. These glazes have been chosen based upon a variety of reasons; color, texture, and opacity. Then I focus in on the subtle qualities of the glaze
itself. For instance, the glazes that I use are all on the verge of surface alteration from either a matte to a semi-matte or a semi-matte to a gloss. When a flux (ie. salt) is introduced into the kiln the glaze surface becomes more molten and therefore glossier. This process is most pronounced in glazes which are on the verge of a surface change, from matte to gloss. This glaze modification creates tactile variation and visual depth. The salt tends to bleach or discolor the edges of ware which creates tonal highlights. The last detail, described here as highlights, is something that I have tried to exploit. The incorporation of angular details on round forms as well as cut feet and the paneled surfaces of my faceted jars encourage the tonal highlights (see fig. 10 and 11).
Salt Glazing

A glaze derived from salt, usually common salt, which is thrown onto the kiln fire. The salt decomposes and volatilizes, the most important product being soda which combines with alumina and silica from the hot pottery body to produce sodium alumino-silicate, i.e. glaze. The glaze varies from a light glossing to the surface to a twentieth of an inch in thickness... The volatile soda enters the pores of the body at a time when the body is still porous yet the alumina and silica are not enough for immediate combination... Salt glazing probably originated in the Rhineland. Here, stoneware was developed during the 12th to 14th centuries and salt glazing appears to have been a part of this development.¹

The salt firing process is undertaken in a 60-cubic-foot catenary arch kiln with four venturi burners. The kiln is a cross-draft kiln in that the flame, heat, atmosphere, and salt travel predominantly on a horizontal axis from burner tip to chimney. This horizontal flow creates a directional aspect to the work both tonally and tactiley. The atmosphere, in regards to an oxidizing or reducing flame throughout the kiln, is carefully controlled and monitored. Given the stoneware that I use and its iron content, I prefer to fire my kiln with minimal reduction and with reasonable control of temperature from top to bottom of the kiln. I fire in this way to avoid the reduction of iron in the body which produces an unsightly dark brown color in conjunction with the salt instead of the light tans and ocher colors that can be achieved with a neutral to light reduction. This firing style also keeps the aqua-blue green glaze from turning into a red glaze which happens in a reduction atmosphere.

The amount of salt can greatly affect the surface quality of the clay and glazes since salt acts as a corrosive on ceramic surface. I have experimented with various amounts of salt, ranging from five pounds to one hundred pounds, with mixed results at both high and low ends of the spectrum. I prefer a light salting due to the slight variations of color on the clay-body, slip, and glazes it causes. These subtle variations are more akin to the seasonal patinas of nature that are found in rural landscapes.

The amount of salt that I introduce into the kiln, ten to fifteen pounds (or one pound per four cubic foot) is about the middle of the road in comparison with contemporary salt glazers. In Contrast, North Carolina’s Mark Hewitt and Phil Rogers of the United Kingdom employ a more liberal approach to salting while artists like Ron Myers use just a dusting of salt for low fire work. I acquired my firing and salting style from what has been called “The Georgia Method” by Steve Davis-Rosenbaum in Phil Rogers’ Salt Glazing.2 “The Georgia Method” consists of introducing a marginal amount of salt into a kiln at peak temperatures while maintaining an oxidizing kiln atmosphere. This can be done with one pound of salt per three cubic feet up to five cubic feet of kiln space. This is highly variable depending on to the kiln and how seasoned it is. This style of firing comes to me through a personal lineage of potters which, began with Ron Meyers, Michael Simon, and David Crane who contributed greatly to my understanding of this salt firing style.

Scale, Function, and Intimacy

I design pots by considering the volume of food and translating that into the physical scale of its container. By doing this I have opened up many subtle possibilities of form. These insights into applied functions are the basic elements a potter must address to create truly distinctive and superior functional containers. This process of working backwards from the contained to the container has had a direct influence on how I perceive and approach scale within the work.

Clay and the relevance of scale, as with any media, carries an important internal and external significance based upon a host of factors. Some of the internalized aspects of the material are its rarity, be it natural or artificial, and whether or not it has a historical precedence. All those factors are applicable to creating basic assumptions about ceramics as a material and its relation to scale. The relationship of the hand becomes the internalized method of determining or analyzing the scale of functional pots. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl describes how this scale of work, which is related to the hand and pertaining to functional ceramics, is perceived by the American culture in the Seventh Annual Dorothy Wilson Perkins Lecture Series at Schein-Joseph International Museum of Ceramic Art at Alfred University:

Then there is the near at hand, from arm’s length in. This zone is completely disfavored in our culture, almost to the point of numbness. It’s where eyesight begins to give way to touch, where eyesight blurs and fingers take over. This is true even when things appropriate to this zone, like ceramics, are shown under Plexiglas.
That’s frustrating because the things were made to be touched; but we imagine the touching. You see where people stand when they look at things in a show of ceramics – they stand up here. If the objects were sculpture, even of the same size, say by Brancusi, people would be a step back.³

Although Schjeldahl’s analysis of our culture’s current perceptions of functional ceramics is less than ideal for the potter of today, there are insights to be gained about how our culture communicates with pots as opposed to objects within the zone “near at hand.” I prefer to consider this zone that Schjeldahl speaks of as an opportunity to reach an audience on a more personal and intimate level. Pots have the ability to reach into the personal lives of individuals on a daily basis due to the basic human need for nourishment and containment.

Physical interaction is crucial because the art of pottery is a process driven by function in tandem with nourishment. That process of function and interaction can reasonably be assumed to be passed down for generations. It is an act that has followed humankind throughout the ages.

In Philip Rawson’s, Ceramics, he concludes that intimacy is one of the more influential aspects of ceramics: “This intimate connection with a potent aspect of daily life and experience is what gives ceramics its particular aesthetic interest.”⁴

Drinking vessels are perhaps the most intimate pots due to the duality of touch that occurs both in the hand and on the lips during consumption. Pots beg to be handled and touched; the sense of touch becomes just as important as sight when interpreting pots. This begins to create a vernacular vocabulary of tactile senses to accompany an established visual language.

With item specificity in mind, it is a conscious choice to start from the contained to reach the design of the container. This linear approach to developing designs has transformed and dictated the scale of my work. Scale and its relation to contained items have been integrated into the work and now play a decisive role throughout the work. Scale is intrinsically bound to function and intimacy. I have been able to achieve functional works that are intimate by addressing and defining the physical characteristics of the piece; explicitly the contents and their physical demands for scale along with its relation to the body. The “near at hand” that Schjeldahl speaks of is where my pieces thrive and find intimacy in contacting the hand with a tactile language that speaks of function.
Conclusion

The culmination of three years of exploration, experimentation, and guidance within the field of ceramics has left me with the skills and experience necessary to problem solve through the difficulties that constantly emerge within the field of functional pottery. Travels to China, kiln building, peer critique, and a glaze technology course are just a few of the experiences that I have taken part in to prepare me for what the future holds for me as a young potter.

While at West Virginia University I have expanded my knowledge of ceramics through Chinese culture and ceramic history, which in turn has had a discernible affect on my work. Along with that, my scope of influence has broadened tremendously from one of singularity and regionalism to having an integrated palette of global experiences from which to draw inspiration.

The research that has accompanied the past three years has answered many lingering questions. Like all research it has opened up an array of new questions and possibilities to explore. This has been the paramount result of my graduate studies; the ability to recognize answers, develop new questions, and continue to further my research and cultivate the work.
Bibliography


Appendix: Figures

Fig. 1  Floor Jar 22”x 15”x 13”
Fig. 2  Floor Jar 20”x 15”x 15”
Fig. 3  Floor Jar 21”x 14”x 14”

Fig. 4  Rice Jar 13”x 11”x 11”
Fig. 5  Rice Jar 13”x 12”x 12”
Fig. 6  Noodle Jar 13”x 5”x 5”

Fig. 7  Platter 4.5”x 14”x 15”
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Fig. 12 Small Oval Bowl 3”x 3”x 4”  
Fig. 13 Small Oval Bowl 3”x 3”x 4”

Fig. 14 Oval Bowl 4.5”x 9”x 7”  
Fig. 15 Oval Bowl 5”x 10”x 5”

Fig. 16 Spice Jar 3.5”x 2.5”x 3”  
Fig. 17 Spice Jar 3.5”x 2.5”x 3”
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2008 17th San Angelo National Ceramic Competition, San Angelo Museum of Fine Arts, TX
2007 WVU Annual Graduate Show, Laura Mesaros Gallery, WV
2007 *Wood Fire Invitational*, The Clay Place, Carnegie, PA
2006 *WVU - JCI end of Semester Show*, Jingdezhen Ceramic Institute, China
2006 16 hands Apprentice show, Over the Moon Gallery, Floyd, VA
2006 *Art and Design Graduate Student Exhibition*, Carroll Reece Museum, Johnson City, TN
2005 *Alumni Show*, Armory Art Gallery, Blacksburg, VA
2005 *The RAND Gallery*, Meadows of Dan, VA