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The Ceramics Experience

By

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art

Idaho State University

Spring 2017

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To the Graduate Faculty:

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	v
Images	vi
Thesis Abstract	1
Introduction	2
The Intimate Vessel	3
Lilies	5
The Utilitarian Vessel	8
Conclusion	13
References	15

Josh & Casie Quirez, images 1.1-1.3



1.1



1.2



1.3

Matt & Laura Cutler, images 2.1-2.3



2.1



2.2



2.3

Racheal Mayer, Tirezheh Eslami, Rebecca Merkley, images 3.1-3.3



3.1



3.2



3.3

Images from show, 4.1-4.10



4.1



4.2



4.3



4.4



4.5



4.6



4.7



4.8



4.9



4.10

The Ceramics Experience

Thesis Abstract--Idaho State University (2017)

This body of work critically examines the experience of observation and use of handcrafted ceramic art in an environment of mass consumer culture. Individuals will live with the work for a period of time and relate through video documentation their experience. The intent of this project is to understand the difference between the often flawed and unique qualities of handcrafted ceramic art versus the mass produced sterile consumer ceramic object.

Utilitarian ceramic art is unique in the way people interact and experience the work often being very intimate. This kind of interaction provides the opportunity to create a connection between the user and creator of the object.

Introduction

In the early twentieth century the boundaries that defined art were challenged, and since that time the field of art has grown immensely. We live in an age where art is vibrant, alive, and thriving. It is in this context that I have the opportunity to develop my own work as an artist. The contemporary perspective that I choose to engage in my own work is an investigation into the art experience of utilitarian ceramics.

In his book *Art as Experience*, the author John Dewey critically looks at the art object and attempts to shift the understanding of what is important and characteristic about the art process from its physical manifestations of the 'expressive object' to the process in its entirety. This shifts the fundamental element from the material 'work of art' to the development of an 'experience'.(Dewey) This change in emphasis does not imply that the art object has lost significance, but that its importance is emphasized. The art object continues to be recognized as the primary source from which the art experience originates. In my work, I create ceramic objects that fulfill a utilitarian need as well as provide an aesthetic experience. I choose to engage with pottery because of its distinctive characteristics in how it is experienced as an art object.

My work explores the relationships that are formed with the handmade ceramic vessel from the perspective of both the maker and user. Through making sets of pots and giving them to individuals to use and keep, I have been able to document their real life experiences. I have also created a body of work that communicates a personal narrative that further emphasizes the connection between user and maker. Through this work I

examine the importance of authenticity, connection, generosity, and self-expression.

The Intimate Vessel

Pottery possesses unique qualities. It possesses traits that set it apart from most art media in that it is intended to be used and lived with in a hands on experience, and that interaction is associated with our most basic survival needs. We interact with it on an intimate and personal level. Peter Pinnell uses an interesting and humorous way of describing the different objects that we view. He says that some things we view we would not nudge with our foot. We may nudge things with our foot that we would not touch with our hands. We may touch things with our hands that we would never hold to our chests. Some things we may hold to our chests that we wouldn't put in our mouths. Pottery is one of those art objects that are experienced differently from many other art objects. It is one of the only things that we would interact with on an intimate level, often holding it closely in our hands or bringing it to our lips. This unique characteristic of pottery is its most powerful quality.(Pinnell)

Critics have said that the utility and functionality of ceramic art is its biggest crutch because it puts limitations on the art form. Yet it is this feature that sets it apart. The use of the objects puts them within close proximity to the user on an intimate level. One of the most important and unique characteristics of ceramic art is how relationships

with the work are developed through their use. Once an object has pierced the bubble of the human comfort zone to a more intimate level, it has the potential to have a powerful impact. We often develop bonds with pots that are unlike the relationships we would develop with a work of art intended solely to be viewed.

Living with pottery opens up the possibility for it to communicate in ways that are different from other art forms. Through the use of form, volume, weight, balance, color, and texture, the ceramic art object interacts in a language that is specific to the art form. Through its weight a cup can suggest delicacy, or strength and durability. That same cup can also suggest abundance or scarcity depending on volume, but in order to truly grasp the significance of those elements, the vessel needs to be picked up, held, and used. When all of the elements of art are combined, a simple cup can communicate effectively, but in a significantly different way compared with other forms of art.

I recently purchased a cup from a wonderful ceramic artist, Lorna Meaden, and this cup has become one of my most treasured art pieces. The tall porcelain cup that has a variation of compressed lines in the surface with a light green celadon glaze, she fired it in a soda and wood atmosphere. The cup's form and decoration remind me of a classical appreciation of pattern and the slight moving glaze grounds it in a contemporary approach to surface. Through the use of this cup, I developed a relationship with it, and my experience of performing the common and mundane action of drinking was elevated. I would often find myself looking through the cupboard for it, rather than using the most readily available cup. My experience of use is enriched every time I drink from Lorna's vessel, and it is experiences such as this that I want my work to invoke in others.

Lilies

The things which I find interesting and I want to express in my art work come from a very personal part of who I am. One of the lovely characteristics of ceramics with which I choose to engage is generosity in the art form. Through the use of form and function, pottery can express a need to be giving. The Platter, for example, is a large open form with a space for holding contents intended to be shared with others. Through the use of the open space, the form serves as a canvas for expressing personal and social ideas. In the series titled, "Lilies", I use the platter as a vehicle for referencing a personal narrative of independence as well as addressing common acceptable social norms relating to masculinity and femininity. I also use classical decorative techniques to communicate memory.

I grew up in rural southeast Idaho. Wilderness and nature are a very important part of who I am as a person because I would often retreat to those spaces as a way of escape. My father at the time worked from an office out of our house. He would often leave early in the morning to organize his construction crew and then return later in the morning to complete office work. During the summer when I was on break from school, he would return home and put me to work doing something around the house. Play was the most important thing to me as a child. I hated work, and I would do everything I could to avoid having to mow the lawn, sweep the driveway, or some other meaningless task that he would concoct for me to do. To clarify, these tasks were only meaningless in the mind of a child. After he left in the morning I would make an effort to make myself

scarce, so I would often grab my old Crossman pump-action pellet gun, or my fishing pole and walk down to the river to spend the day doing what I wanted to do.

There on the bank of the irrigation canal that resided next to my house, I would pass by a wild patch of orange lilies. They bloom all summer long, closing their flowers at night and opening back up as the sun would warm them. The patch constantly renewed its flowers throughout the summer; as one would come to an end in its life cycle, another would begin to open up for the first time. Whenever I passed by these flowers, I marveled at the natural beauty that was taking place just outside my house. In reflecting on my desire to be free, these lilies have become a personal symbol of freedom. I hold the imagery of these incredibly symmetrical yet naturalistic flowers with deep fondness.

The choice to use flowers as a part of my expressive palate is a decision not taken lightly. After completing undergraduate school at Utah State University I moved back to Southeastern Idaho. I felt a need to remain involved in the making process so I reconnected with my friends who were still making pots. One of my friends looked at the work I was doing at the time which had floral elements in the decoration and commented that these pots don't look like "Dustin" pots. He described them as being too "feminine." As human beings we tend to oversimplify the world around us, breaking things down into easy to understand categories such as; Democrat vs Republican, blue vs white collar, secular vs nonsecular, and masculine vs feminine. These social constructs limit the definition of who we are. Flowers, for example, have both male and female reproductive parts. They are incredibly colorful and emulate beautiful mathematical symmetry. Flowers are some of the most amazing plant life on the planet, yet as a society we have

labeled flowers as feminine, which is an artificial projection. Through using the imagery of the lily, I am making a deliberate decision to oppose the social stigma that flowers are merely feminine. They can stand to symbolize a variety of other things based on an individual's personal experience. As a feminist, I am creating art that communicates the importance of equality along with exposing improper social stigma.

The techniques used for decorating the platters are significant to the meaning of the work. I am using cobalt blue painting and carving techniques that were used anciently by multiple civilizations. The use of these methods gives the work a sense of timelessness. If I were to depict the lilies as they exist today with the vibrant orange petals and lush green stalks with materials which are available now with modern advancements in ceramics, the imagery would be immediate and confrontational. However, I am using monochromatic techniques that relate a sense of memory through the timeless quality of the decoration. The reference to the past in this work is significant because as a child I saw the lilies as beautiful, but never made the connection with what they could represent. Only upon reflection on the past do I make the important association with the lilies as a symbol of freedom, and defiance against oversimplification. Through the lens of self-reflection I discover the symbols that represent the ideals which are important to me as a person.

The utility and form of the platter expresses my ideas contained in the Lilies series, and they imply humble generosity and the intention to share. It provides the user with an experience of discovery when imagery is slowly revealed as its contents are being consumed. It is this experience which is unique to pottery that I find so fascinating.

The Utilitarian Vessel

The utilitarian nature of ceramic art relates to domesticity, which influences my work. My large family often shared time together around the dinner table in a kind of ceremonial fashion. In reflection, these moments were the only times that we would all come together and often these were the times when the most significant bonding experiences took place. In these moments we have shared our successes and our hardships that are the most memorable and influential experiences of my life. Within my own family today dinner time is when my wife and three daughters come together and share a meal, and this is usually the only time during the day that we are close. I choose to create art that elevates the experience of dining together and promotes the creation of bonds between people.

As I described in my relationship with the cup made by Lorna Medean, I want to understand the significance of this kind of relationship others form with handmade pottery. To facilitate my work I created several sets of ceramic utilitarian ware, and gave them to individuals to keep and documented their experiences. This body of work is referencing art that is created to evoke an experience within a social context outside of the institution. The theoretical background for this work is related to relational aesthetics. Nicolas Bourriaud, the author of the text *Relational Aesthetics*, wrote, “the role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever scale chosen by the artist.”(Bourriaud 13)

The first people invited to participate are Josh and Casie Quirez. Casie works in the disability services department at ISU, and we met on the commute from Idaho Falls to Pocatello. I asked them if they would participate because they were about to go through a major transition in their life with the birth of their first child. The Quirezs tried to have a child for several years without any luck, but around the time that I was first planning the project I heard the news that Casie was pregnant. I finished the first set and gave it to them just a couple weeks before the birth of their daughter. Their set is quite large and consists of six piece place settings containing large and small plates, a bowl with a wider salad bowl, a tall cup and a mug. In addition to the place settings I included several various serving pieces. I hoped to immerse them in a multifaceted range of the utilitarian experience of pottery.

After a few months of use, I interviewed Josh and Casie to learn how they were effected using the pots. One of the first things they noticed was transitioning from a light, thin, and fragile set of dishware to the thicker pots took some adjustment. They don't own a dishwasher, so hand washing the heavier pots caused some mild fatigue. Secondly, they noticed they were a little more careful with the work because they know that breaking one of the handmade pieces would result in losing something irreplaceable. Since the time they received the work, they have only broken one cup, and that was due to learning what their daughter was capable of once she became more mobile. When I gave them the work I asked them if they would try to use it as much as possible.

This first set marked a beginning in understanding the relationships that are formed with pottery. Something that I learned from this experience is the paramount

importance of creating quality work that fulfills the needs of the individual. The design, size, and functionality of this set contained flaws that caused Josh and Casie to not develop the kind of attachment that is often typical with handmade pottery. Casie shared a story with me about how their daughter broke one of the cups and one thing I noted from her story was Casie's reaction. She had the kind of reaction to breaking the cup that you would expect from breaking any other type of vessel purchased from Walmart. Rather than a sense of sadness from the loss she was apologetic. Casie was concerned about my reaction rather than her own personal loss.

Casie's reaction is critical to this work because it emphasizes the necessity of the object. It is from the use and experience of the ceramic object that bonds are formed, but if the experience is not a positive one it will lead to a dissatisfaction with the work, and the artwork falls flat. It is difficult to create a strong aesthetic experience if the work is not well crafted.

The second set was given to Matt and Laura Cutler. Similarly to the Quirozs, the Cutlers were about to go through a significant transition in their life with moving to a second, more permanent home. Laura was also pregnant with their fourth child. In making the second set for the Cutlers I was significantly more attentive to the quality of the work. I used a porcelain clay and added a classically inspired surface decoration and pattern. The size of the set was similar to the Quiroz family's pots with some minor changes and I continued with a variation of the squared off design that was characteristic in the first set.

When I interviewed the Cutlers I found that they had a very different experience

with the work. Matt and Laura had developed a deep love for the pots, so much in fact that they would not let me transport them from their home to the gallery space for their display in the show. They didn't use the pots for every dining occasion in their home, but only used them periodically. Laura called the bowls, "the princess bowls," because when her girls were good they were gifted the opportunity to eat from them.

During the time the Cutlers had the work they went through one of the most difficult challenges they have faced. When they went to visit the doctor to learn the gender of their baby, the doctor discovered an abnormality with her heart. This news and the months of worry to follow caused Laura to develop mild depression. They stopped using the pots as they tried to adjust to the possibility they might lose their child.

After giving birth to their daughter, and several surgeries, they were able to bring their daughter home. After an adjustment period, they had a family dinner using the pots and Laura described the experience as a healing event. She felt that using the work restored a bit of normalcy to her life. She was grateful for the chance to sit down with her healthy family and spend time with them after receiving a new appreciation for doing something that most people take for granted. The work reminded her of the most important thing for her as a person, her family. Laura described the set as referencing the family because of the size of the set and the pieces included. The pots became a symbol of what was most important in the Cutler's life, and they are precious to them.

The last set was given to colleagues of mine in the graduate program at ISU. With this set I wanted to create a different kind of experience that focused more on the individuals participating rather than creating work that was exclusively informed by my

own aesthetic tendencies. Through casual conversation I was able to determine some characteristics about ceramic objects that they found appealing and created work focused around those characteristics.

The individuals involved with the last set are Rachael Mayer, Rebecca Merkley, and Tirezheh Eslami. As a way to build community and create bonds between not only the artist and user but also between the three individuals themselves. I took design ideas from each and created a set composed of three pieces for each of them. Rachael described her ideal vessel as a tumbler with an indented hand grip, Rebecca described a tall mug with a handle big enough for all her fingers and a thumb rest, which she called a, “thumb hat,” and Tirezheh described her vessel as a wide mug with a handle and a lid. Each one received the vessel they described as well two other vessels the other two designed.

One of my goals with this last set was to try to lose myself in creating something for someone else in an effort to find myself. This does sound counterintuitive, but by doing something selflessly I was able to learn through personal experience ways to create a strong connection with other people, and potential ways to heal damaged relationships. Another important goal was to put this experience in the realm of art. The connection created through sharing the work is a crucial part of the art. The boundaries that define art within the contemporary landscape have been so dramatically expanded that an artwork must be interpreted far beyond the physical manifestation of the object itself.

When I interviewed Rachael, Rebecca, and Tirezheh they spoke of how the pieces affected their lives. Rachael said the vessels elevated the experience of performing the

typical mundane action of drinking. She was not only reminded of the friendship we share but also of the connection she shares with Rebecca and Tirezheh. The project created a lasting bond between all of them. Tirezheh described a similar experience in saying that the vessels allowed her to enjoy the act of consumption, but also bring her joy in remembering the relationship she has with the group. She was able to, “enjoy tea twice.” Rebecca spoke of how the set serves as a symbol of the friendships created during the often stressful time of graduate school, and it serves as a reminder of how we can rely on those friends to lift and support each other as we go through our time in graduate school.

Conclusion

Upon attempting to tackle this project I could not have imagined the outcome. This body of work was as much an attempt at research as it was a creative endeavor. My choice to only use well-crafted, thoughtfully considered forms in my project is a reflection of my dedication to the ceramic art object in its ability to stand alone. However, the artwork I am invoking is more than the objects I am creating. The artwork includes the object, receiving the object, use of the object, and the sharing of experiences gained through using the work.

Utilitarian ceramics has the power to be significantly influential due to the nature

of the objects created. The intimacy of the ceramic object puts it within close proximity, which allows subtle expression to have a significant impact. As previously stated, the influence of domesticity affects the decisions in the artwork I create. The sets of pots given to the individuals serve as metaphors for the kind of relationships I think are important, and it is often within the domestic setting these relationships are fostered.

As a graduate student at ISU I have experienced significant growth. My personal interpretations of political issues, social stigma, religious idealism, artistic understanding, and much more have gone through notable change. One of the crucial changes I experienced as a graduate student was to develop skills to question what I know. This questioning has lead me to strengthening my moral resolve, but change my political views completely. Through questioning norms I have discovered the importance of developing an independent personal perspective, which gave rise to further inspiration. It has also lead to the development of creating art works through giving my ceramic pieces to others. Through giving high quality, personal, handmade objects I was able to develop strong relationships, foster an altruistic environment, and highlight selfless acts as way to create art.

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