

CULMINATING PROJECT:

CERAMICS MAJOR

by Mark O. Huckabee

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Faculty Sponsors:

Grant Hargate

Hans Levi

Myron Kozman

Faculty Advisor: Grant Hargate

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Thesis Statement

“A Case For Functional Pottery and Hand Production Approach”

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I. Introduction

The Master of Arts degree is required for teacher certification in Missouri. The degree is necessary to instruct at the college or University level. These are motivating factors for seeking this degree. This graduate study and focus show a culmination of fourteen years of study in ceramics.

The work created for the degree requirements is different from work I made one year ago or ten years ago. The pieces I create are based on visual images from the past. My work is always changing. The differences range from pronounced to slight. Most changes are with my forms; the evolution of glazes and oxide brushwork follows at a slower pace. The differences in form and glaze treatment range from pronounced to subtle. I am always searching for changes in my work; this keeps my pieces from becoming static and predictable. When some glaze ingredients such as Albany slip became extinct I had to create a whole new palette of glazes and oxide solutions. Factors such as this dictate change upon my medium causing me to adjust.

I have been rewarded with the opportunity to fire and construct several types of kilns. The fuel source from most of these kilns is natural gas or propane. I have participated in the wood firing process which is rewarding and physically demanding. In addition, I have fired salt kilns with spectacular results. The kilns that perform best for my glaze pallet are gas. I limit my electric kiln usage to bisque firings.

The forms I make often begin on paper. I visualize forms and then transfer the images to paper. I refine the shapes by sketching them in various points of view. The forms come to life in the clay when I sit down at the wheel. To reduce my work to a visual experience is to deny its full potential. The sketches I create are studies of current forms.

These studies allow the exploration of ideas and form visual images which will be shaped on the wheel. I use a camera to capture pottery images. The photographs serve the same purpose as my drawings. Both of these methods influence how I look at my work and its creation on the wheel. In order to get in sync with the wheel and clay I throw a series of mugs or small tea bowls before moving on to other forms. One of the most important things is to know what your going to make before you sit down at the wheel. When I throw the same shape in series it evolves throughout my work cycle. The possibilities are revealed only after I have made the piece several hundred times.

The tactile senses are important to understanding my work. How a mug fits in the hand can enhance or cause a negative responses. The user must decide if the work is a good fit and if the piece will function in his environment. My concern is for the aesthetic qualities of the functional vessels. Imagination, concentration, investigation, experimentation, and discipline, are important factors in balancing the tactile and visual elements.

I first studied ceramics at University of North Texas with Elmer Taylor. He was an apprentice of Michael Leach, son of Benard Leach. The Leach family has been influential to many potters pursuing functional forms by offering apprenticeships since the 1920's. My undergraduate experience focused primarily on functional forms used in the preparation, storage, and presentation of food and beverage. I was interested in these forms and how their character and spirit are revealed through daily use. I have committed to making these types of functional forms since 1981. I would not be comfortable in a more abstract expression of form. I would call my work functional expressionism. It is

my own interpretation of the forms I make. Though my forms are recognizable it is the interpretation that is paramount.

I taught high school art in Texas both full and part time beginning in 1981. Teaching allowed me to maintain a steady income and still produce a limited number of forms. I have marketed my work primarily through galleries. In addition, I participate in numerous group shows. My greatest potential is reached during periods when I can work full time on my work.

Focusing on Functional Forms

Functional pottery is not unique but the visual elements within the forms and on the surface should enhance using the vessels. My forms are meant to be incorporated into peoples lives. My concern is for the aesthetic qualities of these vessels and how they fit into the functional equation. "With each discovery, come more questions. With patience, answers follow."⁵

I choose to produce a limited number of functional vessels. These vessels are meant to be handled and interacted with. The visual and tactile experience of hand crafted work enhance the whole dining experience. "The potter's attitude to his materials and technique should be as respectful as a gardener to his plants and should work with not against nature."³

Pottery that is produced by mold and press methods do not promote subtle characteristics. "A machine cannot imitate the expressive irregularities of hand made pieces."³ Clay forms produced by hand and wheel show small differences in size, form, and glaze surfaces. I am very conscious about size shape and glaze consistency. Every element of my form must be analyzed in order to balance its expressive character. These factors are most important when producing matched sets of pottery such as dinnerware, tea sets, and baking dishes. Forms which are cradled inside one another also require this approach. Individuals who purchase handmade pottery are usually aware of the small differences in each piece. I must educate new customers in regards to hand crafted versus machine made.

Functional pottery will continue to change in character through daily use. As pottery is used it will show indication of wear; chips on the rims of plates and bowls are often the

most obvious. Certain glazes may craze due to repeated heating and cooling cycles; this effect can be quite beautiful. Some physical changes might be pleasing to some but other users are less enthusiastic, however, these are natural factors in the life of functional pottery. I enjoy witnessing the new expressions a pot may take on. The pot could maintain its original surface characteristics with restricted use. My clay body and glazes are very sturdy and change very little even with heavy use.

I have a coffee mug that I use daily that is particularly pleasing to use. I made it over a decade ago and fired an experimental glaze on the surface. The glaze has not changed with the exception of a couple of chips. It remains the same as when I first took it out of the kiln. This piece and others have enduring value and interest because of their daily incorporation into my life. Forms that are honest and inspire human response day after day will be recognized and valued. "A good pot, like a person, reveals itself gradually through continued contact over long periods of time."⁴ Good work does not always involve drastic change. I am comfortable exploring only functional themes and the nuances that exist in simple forms.

Limiting Form and Surface Decoration

Changes occur very slowly in my forms and glazes. This gradual evolution works best for me and my work. I am not consciously looking for new forms and glazes; they happen in natural cycles. I do not want my work to become static and too predictable, therefore I am constantly searching for ideas that will help my work achieve its greatest potential.

“With experience the potter gradually learns to thread his way through this complexity of means, and eventually he will find himself able to give up willingly certain areas of technique which are uncongenial to him. To reach this point it is necessary to try many things and to experience failure as well as success.”⁶

Limiting the number of forms forces my attention toward refinement of existing forms. These small refinements are a result of daily use in my home. Some changes are a result of consumer suggestions because their requirements for my work are different than my own. Often times the only difference in a form is the size; the most obvious example of this is in the production of my casseroles and steamers. For many years I marketed only one size of each of these forms. It was the result of many requests from families both large and small that their needs were different. I now make three sizes of casseroles and two sizes of steamers.

Glazes must be simple and direct. The surface must invite a deeper investigation into the visual and tactile realm. I use only a half-dozen glazes on my pottery. The surface variations of a single glaze are more intriguing to me than multiple glaze pots. I am more conservative with oxide brush decoration on top of the glaze. “If it is true that nothing betrays a man more than his handwriting, this is doubly true of brushwork. In the flow of

the soft point his character is revealed. Decision or hesitation, sensibility or dullness, breadth or narrowness, tenderness or sentimentality, are all nakedly exposed.”³ From a marketing standpoint multiple glazes with oxide decoration are most popular with my customers. I should not expect the people who buy and use my pots to share the same bias of form and glaze that I have. In addition, I will not produce work which is dictated solely on the trends of the market. There must be a balance to the relationship.

I run test glazes with every firing in search of new discoveries. Most test glazes do not warrant further exploration. If an initial test glaze is interesting I will test it again on top of a base glaze. Firing glaze on glaze creates new colors and values; also, varying the thickness of glazes show value shifts. Glaze tests are refired in different locations in the kiln producing different results. It is a good example of why repeating the same process but in a different way allows a potter to know more about the potential of a glaze. Glaze search could be a full time pursuit. Moderate testing on tiles with each firing is better suited to my production cycle.

The form is always the strongest aspect of my pots; by limiting the glaze the pots maintain a more pure quality. The glaze, besides rendering the pot nonporous, should play second chair in accompanying the form. The glaze surface should not compete with the form but merely accent the contours.

Personal Objectives

My objective is to continue to promote hand crafted pottery in contrast to industrial production of work. All manufacturing processes are done by hand. This type of limited production is also in contrast to the needs of the majority of consumers. I enjoy the labor intensive aspects associated with the work. It is the work processes and personal reward of producing the highest standard of hand crafted work that is the key objective in my motivation. It is the quality of craftsmanship I want to project not an ostentatious personae of the work. I must do work I believe in. I want my work to be accessible to everyone.

I want to continue to throw a limited number of forms. This allows me to explore each shape and its evolution's more thoroughly. By throwing the same shape in a series each piece evolves throughout the work cycle. Since my focus is on functional forms it is important that each piece be compatible with one another. I can have more individual freedom through decorative ware such as vases, platters, and large bowls. In a set of dinnerware uniformity in size and glaze application is important for storage and presentation purposes. Casseroles, steamers, food service bowls, are sometimes added later to a dinnerware set. The glazes and forms should be consistent so they not only blend with the pieces already purchased but enhance the group of work and presentation of food.

Changes in form are slow to occur. I critique my forms constantly during the production cycles. I have revelation in my work and take risks that I hope will inspire or even provoke change. I am not reinventing myself, I'm just restless with one avenue and

must make an occasional turn. I want to know that there are unlimited possibilities to the forms I produce. The rhythm of the work cycle and physical encounters excite me.

Interaction with the fire and trying to control the kiln atmosphere causes anxiousness and uncertainty in knowing the final results of the firing process. The finished work keeps me searching for honesty in my work.

From a marketing standpoint my objective is to sell my work while maintaining the highest standards of craftsmanship. Commission work can create new challenges outside of my usual forms.

The surface is secondary to the form. The glaze and decorations are intended to nourish the pot without distracting from its intended purpose. Distractions can be both visual and tactile. Functional forms must balance both elements in order to provide the aesthetic intention related to food and beverage preparation, containment and presentation.



Influences

I grew up in the Texas panhandle, I learned to love the harshness of the plains and the beauty of the obtuse differences that exist in the geological formations. These images still impact my way of seeing. I feel connected to the land in a spiritual way. Clay is a natural connection to my inner voice. I also lived in New Mexico and visited the ancient ruins of the Anasazi Indians. Pottery shards litter the paths that these early inhabitants walked. The broken shards reveal a level of craftsmanship that was exemplary. The attention to surface decoration is extraordinary. I feel a connection to these early craftsmen in shared values in these functional forms. My creative spirit is nurtured by past encounters with these landscapes. "I think the weakest pots are those being made by people who deny historical reference and only look at what is fashionable today."¹

The decision to pursue functional forms was my own. I was fortunate that my first ceramics instructor had made the same choice. His attention to detail and craftsmanship were stressed to students. I maintain that focus today throughout my production.

It is important to show precision in my work. I learned the importance of precision and craftsmanship from my father. He was an engineer but also built cabinets and furniture of impeccable quality. I was taught how to use hand tools when I was young. I learned that a great deal of precision can be achieved from old tools with much practice. You must pay close attention to detail during every manufacturing step. These lessons had a significant impact on how I approach craftsmanship in ceramics.

I worked in a cooperative for two years. This exposure helped educate me in the business aspects of selling art. It also allows artists to share the responsibilities of a

business. Each artist is given the freedom to produce their own work; individuality is not compromised for the sake of the group. The diversity actually strengthens the group by providing more purchasing opportunities for the customer. This is a comfortable arrangement for some craftsman. The cooperative expands the networking base and venues to sell. "Professionalism in marketing is something that has not really been resolved. We've all worked out our own systems. We don't know if they're good systems. We do it by trial and error. So the opportunity to compare notes with other artists is usually of paramount interest."²

Conclusion

Appreciation of my pots is sometimes immediate, but I believe a deeper understanding of their value is obtained through visual and tactile interaction. Their incorporation into peoples lives reveals the form and allows its expressive characteristics to unfold. My pieces are easily recognizable and the purpose of each form is never in question. The expectations of functional pottery demand that it perform the task in which it was intended. Spouts on teapots should pour correctly; handles and lids should fit the form and balance during the use of the form.

The interaction with the fire is necessary and will always hold a deep fascination to me. Fire in itself is engaging, the ability to influence the glaze character during this time gives me a sense of control. My role is essential to directing the fire and achieving the desired results in my work. I adjust the burners to influence the kiln atmosphere is by instinct. Reducing the oxygen in the kiln forces iron in the clay bodies to the surface. The iron interacts with the elements in the glaze giving the surface more character and richness in color. If I was less active in the firing process the results in my glaze surfaces would be less dramatic.

Working in clay requires a great deal of tenacity. Successes are balanced opposite problems which arise in the materials or the production cycle. Being a problem solver is a necessary role of a potter; you either accept it or go mad. Sometimes doorways can be opened by accident. I have concluded from these experiences that the challenges keep me interested in the search for changes in work and how it is produced.

I know a lifetime will not be sufficient time to search all the possibilities in functional forms and glaze. I am satisfied that my expression of forms will continue to unfold and evolve as long as I can throw clay on the wheel and light the kiln burners.

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Thesis Exhibit and Catalog of Slides

1. Teapot, stoneware, multiple glazes
2. Teapot, stoneware, feldspatic glaze
3. Teapot, stoneware, temmoku glaze
4. Teapots, stoneware, multiple glazes
5. Pitchers, stoneware, multiple glazes
6. Pitcher, stoneware, multiple glazes
7. Pitcher, stoneware, feldspatic glaze
8. Pitcher forms, stoneware, multiple glazes
9. Bean pot, stoneware, feldspatic glaze
10. Vase, stoneware, feldspatic glaze
11. Vase, stoneware, multiple glazes
12. Vase, stoneware, feldspatic glaze
13. Steamer, stoneware, multiple glazes
14. Bowls, stoneware, multiple glazes
15. Plate, stoneware, multiple glazes
16. Bowl, stoneware multiple glazes
17. Pitcher study, charcoal
18. Pitcher study, charcoal
19. Teapot study, charcoal
20. Teapot study, charcoal