Quiet beauty; A Contemporary vision of tea

James White

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.rit.edu/theses

Recommended Citation
White, James, "Quiet beauty; A Contemporary vision of tea" (1997). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by RIT Scholar Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses by an authorized administrator of RIT Scholar Works. For more information, please contact rit scholar works@rit.edu.
A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of
The College Of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Quiet Beauty; a Contemporary Vision of Tea
by
James R. White
May 16, 1997
Adviser: Robert Schmitz  
Date: 5-21-97.

Associate Adviser: Richard Hirsch  
Date: 5/21/97.

Associate Adviser: Max Lenderman  
Date: June 25, 1997.

Department Chairperson:  
Date: 6-07-97.

I, ______________________, prefer to be contacted each time a request for production is made. I can be reached at the following address:

James R. White  
6725 S.W. Preslynn Dr.  
Portland, OR, 97225  
Date: May 16, 1997
Acknowledgments

This Thesis would not have been possible without the support of the following people. My heartfelt thanks goes to them for all of their help. First and foremost to my parents, for their love, encouragement, opportunity, and patience. Truly, without them none of this would have been possible. To Bob Schmitz and Max Lenderman, who were always available for honest criticism, evaluation and support. My gratitude to Andrew Denney, my brother in clay who helped me see the light and was there no matter what. To Erin Lee O’Sullivan, Scott Place, and Christa Gearheart; friends through good and bad who have supported me through thick and thin. To Ken Stevens, who nurtured and encouraged my beginnings in clay and who has remained an inspiration to me. To Jerry who played the music and sang the songs; I will miss you. To Rick Hirsch, who took the time and went the extra mile to teach me about myself - I will never be able to express the enormity of my gratitude. And finally to that which I can give no name. Thank you.
### CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginnings</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Fresh Start</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Environments</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Second Plateau</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Final Product</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating An Environment</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Section</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographic Plates</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference List</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction

As I began the process of collating and organizing information relevant to my thesis, I became confused about the written form or structure it would take. Initially, in my mind, I began by creating boundaries in which an explanation of relevant areas would take place. I planned to do this under such headings as historical, technical, philosophical, etc. but as I continued my research, I was continually bothered by these demarcations and the larger problem of relating this to my process and work. I became aware that the vitality of the process I had just experienced would not be done justice in terms of explanation by a document that was organized in such a tight fashion. Consequently I found myself running in circles thinking of what to say and how to say it. It has been my experience with both the visual and musical arts that when stagnation occurs or further development stalls, adherence to the intellect is usually to blame.

Intuition has become a major player in my process and approach to ceramics, and I often forget that it is essential to listen to my intuitive nature as it applies to all aspects of my life. So, as I was preparing to write it became apparent that the structure I had created in my mind would have to change. I attempted to follow my own advice and reorganize my outline for this paper. This led to a thesis structure much more in keeping with the process that ultimately produced my body of work.

The structure of this thesis will start at the beginning of my time at the School for American Crafts and trace what I believe to be significant developments in the process of creating a profound body of work. Just as meaningful accomplishments will be documented, key references will also be explored as I became aware of their importance to my work. By organizing my thesis in this fashion I feel it will remain faithful to the processes and influences undertaken in my work.
Beginnings

This first section will deal primarily with activities and influences that I explored during my first year at R.I.T. I will describe my initial endeavors at graduate level work and outline the personal discoveries I made in relation to making teapots. In addition, I will give a brief history of tea and tea drinking. The latter parts of this section will be devoted to the technique, approach, and resultant products made during my first year of graduate school.

My investigation into the teapot happened quite unexpectedly. After spending the better part of two quarters searching for my voice in clay, I produced two small porcelain teapots. My professors, Bob Schmitz and Rick Hirsch, gave me the first encouraging critique I had been a part of since coming to R.I.T. These two teapots were decidedly rudimentary and crude in their form and functionality, but they provided the starting point for an investigation. Prior to my enrollment at R.I.T., I had produced some stoneware teapots with limited success at my former school, the University of Puget Sound. Both Rick and Bob heartily encouraged my exploration of the teapot and associated functional forms. With this began a study of tea wares and tea drinking. I was aware of the nontraditional place the teapot occupied in contemporary ceramics, but as a self-described "functional potter" I felt much more comfortable investigating historical traditional teapot images as archetypes for my work. As a precursor to all of this, I set about the task of learning what historical place tea drinking had in the world.

My research on tea drinking was directed almost exclusively toward Asia. I assumed that this was where tea drinking originated and found this to be true. An article by Simon K.S. Chiu contained in The Art of the Yixing Potter gave a historical outline of the origins and development of tea drinking in China. What follows is a brief historical summation based on his article. I learned that the consumption of tea began in China around 2200 years ago during the Han dynasty (206 B.C.-220 A.D.) Adopted as the beverage of choice in several Asian cultures, tea was used in many customs as well. The preparation and serving of tea underwent several transformations since the Chinese initially began drinking it for medicinal purposes. The influence of Buddhism and its utilization of tea as a meditative aid along with the rise of tea connoisseurs resulted in tea drinking being accepted as custom in most of China by the Tang dynasty (618 A.D.- 907 A.D.). It is a this point that specialty tea ware began to become available. Tea adherents felt (as some still do) that the quality of the tea was affected by the ware used in its preparation (Chiu et al. 1990, 22-31). These attitudes have continued up to the present
day. Tea society in contemporary Chinese culture is especially vibrant in Taiwan. Tea has also impacted and been a vital part of Japanese culture.

Tea first came to Japan in the year 729 A.D. (Hammitzsch. 1958, 63). Brought from China, it was also first used as a medicine but its consumption soon became more widespread. Zen Buddhism and the Japanese penchant for Chinese and Korean tea wares resulted in the synthesis of a particularly Japanese aesthetic of beauty, as evidenced in Chanoyu, the Japanese Tea Ceremony, and the utensils employed in its rituals (Hammitzsch. 1958, 63). The spirit of Zen and the Japanese aesthetic of beauty have profoundly influenced me. I will discuss this in more depth later in the thesis. As I learned the history of tea, in the studio I struggled with my material.

The material I am speaking of is porcelain. When I began throwing as an undergraduate it was using a high temperature stoneware clay. From a technical standpoint it was a very forgiving material. Mistakes could be made, but the idea could also be completed. My first experiments with porcelain were an exercise in frustration. I learned that the whole process of forming porcelain on the wheel required more patience, more concentration, and more practice than I thought myself capable of. My professors saw my struggles and advised me to back up. Rick suggested concentrating on the bowl form in order to gain an understanding of the material and a more concrete awareness of form. We all must crawl before we walk and walk before we run. In essence, I was learning to throw all over again. This period could be summed up in three words: practice, practice, practice. While starting from the ground up in terms of form, my other task, that of surface treatment, took a similar path.

My prior experience with glazes, and particularly high temperature glazes, helped me in this area. The traditional works I was investigating, primarily Song Dynasty porcelains, led me to celadon glazes. My previous instructor, Ken Stevens, had sparked an interest in me in these classic Chinese glazes. In addition, they seemed appropriate to my investigation of Asian ceramics and of tea wares specifically. I conducted many tests, and eventually produced several celadons that pleased me. My approach to working with clay merits discussion.

The way I had worked with clay up to and through this point was methodological. I enjoyed the challenge of repetition mostly because it allowed me to see measurable progress in my work. As a glaze technician it provided me an organized structure in which to formulate, execute, and analyze tests. The nature of my work to this point can be summed up in one word: testing. I was testing or learning about different forms and glazes; the archetypes for these were almost exclusively Asian. After relearning a great deal of information about form, I departed from my bowl exploration and began trying to
utilize these principles in the making of teapots. Credit is due here to Bob Schmitz, who was always willing to demonstrate techniques and evaluate my products and processes. I owe him a great deal of thanks for teaching me how to properly manipulate clay on the wheel. My initial efforts in throwing left quite a bit to be desired, but by the end of the third quarter I had made two or three teapots that exhibited relative competence in the area of traditional teapot forms.

This accomplishment marked what I describe as my first learning plateau. It has been my experience (particularly in playing music), that increases in my ability to do something happen in jumps. I will go along for a period of time making baby steps, when all of the sudden a large intuitive jump in understanding and ability will take place. For example, when I began to play music, learning a song took many diligent hours of practice and memorization. After much practice and teaching my ear to listen, I could hear a song on the radio and then with a minimal amount of error reproduce what I had heard. Often this would just happen spontaneously. This learning process parallels my experience in working with clay. The end of my first year at R.I.T. marks the first learning jump I made in clay. With the conclusion of school, I set about the task of relaxing my mind and body. The summer break however provided an interesting diversion which ultimately impacted my work in a large way.

Toward the end of my third quarter at R.I.T. I became friends with Andrew Denney. I was impressed with progress I had witnessed in his work over the course of the year and we seemed to hit it off well. I was intrigued with the historical investigation that he was conducting. He had become interested in making tea bowls as an undergraduate and had continued producing them while a graduate student. Fueled by the workshop that Toshio Ohi had conducted at R.I.T. earlier that year, Andrew had continued to refine his conception of form and surface in relation to his tea bowls. I found this interesting and with little else to do that summer we spent a great deal of time cranking out tea bowls, raku firing, and playing electronic hockey. The hockey element of this investigation may sound suspect, but it was during this time (primarily between periods) that we would have what became known as "bowl time." Andrew possessed in his collection quite a few nice examples of tea bowls. We would spend quite a bit of time holding, feeling, and analyzing their forms and surfaces. By doing this and trying to articulate to one another the qualities of each piece, I began to have a more clear understanding of the role that form and surface play in ceramics. Each week we would return to the studio and practice trying to implement the discoveries we had made. For me, producing these raku teabowls was a liberating experience.
The freedom I found in making these pieces stemmed from the rigid criteria I had imposed on myself during the previous year. My aesthetic during school had been confined to a tight, elegant, perfection. The best forms and surfaces I made during my first year reflected this. The material, scale, execution, and nature of the work supported this aesthetic. However, the tea bowl inquiry took me in a whole new direction. Andrew made me aware of an entirely different way of working. At the time, my understanding of this way working was limited. I was conscious that it involved an emphasis on the attitude of the maker in addition to a prominent reliance on intuitive faculties as impetus in the creative process. My approach to these tea bowls was a conscious effort to loosen up. It was also an activity in which I was trying to make something my way. When everything happened right (attitude, intuition, spontaneity) the work reflected this. I knew this was a different way of working, and it was a challenge. It challenged me because the process lacked definition. Aside from the general rules of ceramics, this intuitive creative process lacked the boundaries I had become used to and so reliant on. It seemed that rules kept changing or could be constantly adapted to fit the concept. This intuitive process would ultimately be at the core of my work and the vehicle by which my thesis work would be produced.
A Fresh Start

This section of my thesis will deal with the next phase of development in my process. The articulation of my thesis statement and a discussion of its parts will be made. Then I will outline the next period of development and show the influence that Chinese Yixing ware has had on my work. This period of development started at the beginning of my second year at R.I.T.

When I started my second year at R.I.T., I was feeling more confident about my ability to manipulate clay. I had a vague idea of what I wanted my thesis work to be, though Rick's challenge at the conclusion of my first year to produce work that was profound perplexed me. At this point my personal allegiance to functionality was still in tact. In fact this would remain so until very near the completion of my body of work. With this ideal firmly in mind, I submitted the following thesis proposal:

The purpose of this thesis will be to explore utilitarian tea ware. Tea and the utensils used in its preparation have long been a part of the human experience. I hope to make connections with the historical traditions of tea and tea ware in order to reinterpret its essence in a contemporary light. I will draw upon Asian influences, specifically Chinese, along with Japanese Tea Ceremony utensils and other tea wares in order to compose a contemporary visual statement with reference to the past. This will entail investigating appropriate forms and surfaces suitable for utilitarian tea ware. These forms and surfaces will reflect my own personal aesthetic of refinement, elegance, and beauty. This may also include presenting the tea ware in a compatible environment. This environment may take the form of a tea set which would include functional objects related to the act(s) of preparing and drinking tea.

These were the parameters I worked under for most of the duration of my time at R.I.T. My performance in the studio began to be influenced by new sources and my work reflected this. The first major influence on my work, alluded to earlier in this paper was the Yixing teapot. I was aware of the existence of these wares, but I had not devoted enough time to researching them. In an article by T.T. Bartholomew I found that these tea wares were highly valued by tea adherents due to their ability to retain the taste, color, and aroma of tea (Bartholomew et al. 1990, 42). In addition to their inherent functional brewing attributes, their visual qualities were also very appealing. "Since the early sixteenth century, Yixing potters have created hundreds of ingenious teapot shapes, and this individual variation continues to flourish in the workshops of Yixing. While some teapots are purely utilitarian in shape, others copy or stylize objects from nature
(Bartholomew et al. 1990, 43)." While there were exceptions, it was my observation that the majority of these ware exhibited an organic reference reinterpreted in the form of a teapot.

The information that I took from these observations of Yixing ware was a further understanding of the formal elements of my work at the time. My shapes at this point tended toward the organic, but were still ambiguous. In addition I found the challenge of making connections between parts to be very difficult. The visual relationship between handle, spout, and body eluded me for some time. It was mainly through looking at Yixing prototypes that I to a large degree solved this problem. The forms of my teapots still lacked vitality and originality. It was the Yixing tradition focused through the work of Richard Notkin that initially breached this barrier.

Rick Hirsch strongly suggested that I investigate an exhibition catalog titled Ceramic Echoes - Historical References in Contemporary Ceramics. The exhibition attempted to elucidate the connections that contemporary artists are making to tradition. Garth Clark states in his introduction that artists should be "...ready to absorb and then grow from that which they inherit. As such, tradition is a natural cycle wherein death facilitates the continuity of life (Clark. 1985, 25)." He insists that "...tradition remains the sustaining force in all art, without which all art is without context or basis of quality. Indeed without tradition there cannot be innovation (Clark. 1985, 25)." On a personal level I found this connection and reinterpretation particularly evident in the work of Richard Notkin.

Richard Notkin's ceramic art clearly exemplified this "echo" of tradition to me. His teapots of the 1980's contemporized the Yixing tradition, and this was the basis on which I first came to understand the connection between tradition and innovation. An exhibition of his work titled Strong Tea. Richard Notkin and The Yixing Tradition exemplified this in a concrete way. "In response to the rigorous formalism and subdued coloration of Yixing ceramics, particularly the teapots valued by Ming and Qing dynasty literati, Notkin reduced his palette, concentrated on intricate permutations of functional teapot designs, and found a voice particularly suited to his exacting craftsmanship, cerebrality, and reflective populist politics...When he adapted a Yixing like stoneware clay body that beautifully exposed minute sculptural details unobscured by glaze, comparisons to Chinese forebears were invited (Halper. 1990, 2)."

The catalog outlines the development and reinterpretation evident in Notkin's work. It does this mostly by depicting a number of his pieces next to their Yixing prototype. Nowhere was this more apparent to me than the relationship between the Yixing double chambered teapot and Notkin's piece titled Cooling Towers #24 (Halper. 1990, 25).
The reinterpretation I witnessed in Notkin's work opened my eyes to qualities lacking in my own work. The traditional teapot forms I had been working on exhibited competence in manipulating the material, but were visually static and in all fairness added nothing new to the teapot tradition. I became aware at this point that I needed to push myself to stretch out more in my work. I began to deconstruct the ideal of perfection as the guiding aesthetic in my work. This manifested itself initially in my approach to the surfaces of my teapots and then to an exploration of forms new to my work.

In looking at my work I began to notice a static, restrained quality too reliant on solutions used in traditional pottery. This led me to three specific changes in my work. First, I began to act on the forms of my pots. By carving and faceting with a trimming tool the deconstruction of a purely traditional aesthetic had begun. Second, I became aware that the traditional orientation of my teapots (the fact that they sat flat on the table) reinforced their static nature. To break away from this I began to add appendages to the bottoms effectively raising them off the table. While this helped break my traditional approach, it created some problems of its own as I will discuss later. Finally, I began experimenting with new teapot forms, loosely based on the Yixing double chambered teapot prototype. While none of these pieces were completely successful, they were a markedly different approach and thus were a significant step in the process of breaking old habits in the quest for my voice in clay. The notion of placing my teapots in a suitable environment was the next significant development in my process.
First Environments

My next task was the creation of an environment in the limited sense of a tea set. By this point, the relationship of parts (spout, body, and handle) was working much more effectively than in my first year. The challenge set forth in creating a tea set in my mind was creating a coherent design strategy that related teapot to cup and these to the tray that they occupied. This statement clearly exemplifies the functional constraints I had placed upon myself. This emphasis on function was to be one of the major obstacles I was to overcome. My first attempts at making tea sets showed some positive accomplishments, but in retrospect probably more clearly identified what was lacking in my work. It was through these initial environments that I arrived at the concept of lotus as overarching design strategy.

The two semi-successful tea sets that came out of this period demonstrated two major flaws in my approach to design. The physical reference in each of these sets was ambiguous. My intention had been purely organic, and the top portions of these pots reflected this, but the appendages or "feet" on the bottoms were visually far more figurative in nature. This resulted in an animated cartoonish effect that did not accomplish my intention. The second major problem concerned the relationship between the tray and its inhabitants. Again, the lack of design cohesion was readily apparent. I seemed to be using a different visual language for each portion of the equation. In addition, I experienced fully the technical problems associated with large, flat porcelain forms. During a studio critique at this time Rick suggested a specific organic reference, that of the lotus, in order to focus my vision and energies.

The image of the lotus is a beautiful and powerful one laden with symbolism. Apart from the inherent beauty in the flower, pads and pods, its connection to Asian ideas and images is unmistakable. I have to credit Rick with the initial suggestion of the lotus as reference and additionally for helping me to understand its connection to the ideals of the Tea Way that would become so important to my process. This would ultimately form the philosophical basis behind my work.

In order to grasp the significance of the lotus as a symbol, it became obvious that I needed to research Buddhism and its history in Asia. In a general sense the lotus serves as a symbol for all Buddhists, and this symbolic meaning can be understood and appreciated by a much wider audience. Gustie L. Herrigel in Zen and the Art of Flower Arrangement states that "The lotus for instance is regarded as the flower of religious worship. It is the symbol of purity and immortality. For it lifts itself, gazing
heavenwards, up from the turbid water, from the muddy earth, in clear colors surrounded by immaculately shining bright green leaves. Buds and rolled up leaves betoken the future. Full blown flowers reveal the present. The seed pods of flowers now withered speak of the past (Herrigel. 1958, 84)." This passage clearly shows the generality and appropriate nature of the lotus as metaphor for life. The lotus also has important symbolic value to other cultures and religions including both the Hindu tradition and ancient Egyptian culture (Campbell. 1988, 63). Buddhist art utilized the lotus as the throne of Buddha (Shambala. 1991, 129). It is clear that the lotus is and has been a potent symbol for much of the world.

Chinese ceramic history has witnessed the utilization of the lotus in both a religious and secular sense. "Production of ceramics decorated with lotus petals was probably influenced by the prestige of Buddhism. They were particularly popular on early fine green glazed stonewares made in Zhejiang province, and on later celadons from Longquan...Lotus petals on northern Song porcelains, particularly Ding ware, reflect the high regard for Buddhism in that period (Rawson. 1984, 122)." The secularization and use of the lotus as ornamentation was most likely due to the development of a lucrative Chinese export market (Rawson. 1984, 123). In either case it is apparent that the lotus in Chinese ceramics has a long history. Ultimately, I attempted to capture the essence of the lotus' symbolic image in my work.
The Second Plateau

This section of my thesis will articulate the next step of my development in the studio. It will cover my pre-NCECA conference confidence in my work and the post-conference reality of what lay ahead. A growing interest in the Way of Tea and the importance of Buddhism to it strongly influenced me at this point. In addition, an understanding of the parallels between my experience with clay and my experience with music as a player and listener provided a crucial link to understanding my process. My confidence in my own ability threatened to obscure my vision of what could be accomplished.

A very nice thing happened to me prior to the NCECA 96 conference; I was selected to represent the School for American Crafts in the NCECA juried regional student show. The pieces the jury selected were two that held far more traditional roots than the work I was currently doing. This honor proved to be a double edged sword. As an accolade, it was a tremendous honor to be recognized at this level. In relation to my current work and in preparation for my for my thesis show it blinded me to new ways of looking at things. I think that unconsciously when this happened I thought that I had “figured it out.” During spring break I learned most emphatically that this was not the case.

In preparation for my thesis show, Rick and I were discussing my progress, looking at my work, and thinking about the calendar. In my mind I felt that I was on the verge of being ready for my thesis show and thought that I had the goods to back it up. After this critique it became obvious that I did not. My design cohesion was not achieving the level of resolution necessary in a cohesive thesis exhibition. Rick strongly suggested moving the date of my show back to the final M.F.A. exhibition. This would allow me one extra month of work time. I did not like having to do this. It required a major change in attitude and working style. In retrospect it was a fortuitous decision and was the event that made me follow a different path.

One of the sources that had increased during my friendship with Andrew Denney was an increased awareness of ceramics related to the Japanese Tea Ceremony, and consequently, a growing knowledge of the Tea Way. It would be futile and impossible for me to give a definitive description of the Tea Way. However, it has affected me in profound ways and thus impacted my way of living. "A Way comes from somewhere and leads to somewhere. Its goal is the grasping of eternal values, of truth, mankoto. In the process it acts as strict guardian of tradition - which carries with it a valuation very
different to that in Europe. Thus in the Japanese view, it maintains an unbroken link between past present and future (Hammitzsch. 1958, 21-23)." The Tea Way is in antithesis to the western, scientific, intellectual approach to life. It is an attitude present in the way in which one conducts his or her life. "The quest for the Tea Way is nothing less than the quest for transformation -in the course of which one must allow nature to have it's way, and which may not be consciously sought (Hammitzsch. 1958, 76)." This idea of transformation in the context of the Tea Way instigated a conflict between my intellectual nature and the intuitive spontaneous side so vital to living the Way of Tea.

As I expressed previously, my reliance on an intellectual approach to my work had some benefits. But this approach also tended to place mental boundaries on my visual problem-solving faculties. I learned that the Tea Way valued intuition, spontaneity, and above all the experience of life. "A people whose thoughts are on the present live closer to their intuition that their intellect. They experience no abstract linear development from past to present or future, but a cycle in which change is an integral part (Holborn. 1978, 18)." I witnessed this approach to working with clay in a demonstration that Rick did for me. He explained that all I needed to do was make lily pads and flowers. For the demonstration he had me throw pad forms. After they had stiffened slightly, he proceeded to act upon them; pushing, pinching, prodding, and intuitively working from the experience in his mind of what the essence of a lily pad was. I saw in the process that Rick employed a reliance on intuition as a path to capture the essence of an object. Soetsu Yanagi articulated the importance of this in The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight Into Beauty. He states that "Intuition is vital to an understanding of beauty because it permits us to look directly at objects. In order to give free play to intuition, one must not permit anything to intervene between one's self and the object (Yanagi. 1972, 154)." In addition to this intuitive aspect of experience and action, I began to see the importance of spontaneity and the role of improvisation.

It was during my friendship with Andrew Denney that I became aware of jazz music and its embodiment of the ideas of tradition, intuition, improvisation, and spontaneity. As Andy talked of how these ideals were manifested in jazz music, I realized a parallel musical connection in my own life that exemplified in a personal way what he was talking about. Prior to and continuing during my experience with the visual arts, music has played a major role in my life as musician and listener. As a musician I was largely self-taught. Once I acquired a base of knowledge I began to learn very intuitively, "developing an ear," and the ability to decipher music that interested me simply by listening. There was one other factor that influenced me on a much larger
level. Beginning during my late high school years and continuing until the death of Jerry Garcia a great deal of my free time was devoted to following the Grateful Dead.

Aside from the usual commentary that I have become used to in regards to this musicological/sociological phenomenon, let me state clearly and emphatically that my primary attraction to the Grateful Dead was a musical one. Having attended over one hundred of their concerts in the past fourteen years and knowing about music, I feel that I have some qualification to speak about the unique attributes of their music. A combination of two elements present in their music attracted me. First, a good portion of their repertoire represented diverse genres in American music. Blues, country, and traditional folk songs provided a link to or “echo” of the past. These cover versions were not simply a regurgitation of old musical styles. The were reinterpreted in the context of the Grateful Dead just like jazz musicians might cover standard compositions. Second, the band was influenced greatly by improvisation and free form music. A hallmark of their sound in concert was the often seamless transitions between songs. They might play several different numbers, segueing in and out of different musical ideas. It provided for myriad musical permutations from concert to concert that neither performer or audience could predict, only experience. This resulted in performances that had the potential to be peak experiences or just as likely complete failures. The result was one of the most enduring and musically challenging popular bands to date. It is in this context that I became aware of the importance and wonder that intuition, improvisation, spontaneity, experience and ultimately performance play in creative activities.

It was through these contemporary examples that I began to understand the Way of Tea and started to change my working attitude and style. My conscience, in the form of Andrew Denney, would help to point out personal relapses into exclusively intellectual modes of thinking. I cannot emphasize enough the help our dialog has made to me and my work. Without it I would still be making teapots. Bolstered by these ideas, I was ready to meet the most difficult challenge of all, trusting my intuition.
The Final Product

This section will explain the actual process and results of the production of my body of work. Already aware of the historical significance of the lotus, I embarked on an investigation of the horticultural aspects of the plant. The lotus has three elements in its biology. It consists of pad, flower, and seed pod. In discussions with Rick, I identified the functional roles each part of the plant would take in the context of a tea set. The teapot would take the place of the closed bud, the teacup would serve as open flower, and pads would be trays for all. In addition, the seed pod would represent the tea caddy. The primary visual source I used in formulating my idea of the essence of lotus, was a water garden mail order catalog published by a company called Liliesons Water Gardens. This catalog provided a wealth of visual information on water lilies and lotuses.

The primary instruction I received from Rick at this point was to produce as much work as I could as quickly as possible. This required several things from me. It must be reiterated that I was still working under the premise of functionality as overriding design parameter. I intended all spouts to pour, all cups to be comfortable to drink from, and trays to provide a stable environment for all to rest on. This fundamentally challenged the new intuitive spontaneous working style I was trying to adopt. The frustration I felt when being told that the pieces did not look enough like flowers was immense. I labored under this self-imposed weight of utilitarianism until the very end. Ultimately, the non-utilitarian nature of my work was decided not by me, but by my kiln.

After consulting the calendar and working out a schedule, I produced pieces until it was no longer possible due to time constraints. My glaze strategy was very simple. In consultation with Rick, we decided that very faint soft overglaze colors on top of a white satin matte glaze would capture the essence of lily pad and flower, interpreted best in porcelain. I had tested many satin matte glazes and settled upon one that Scott Place had given me. I ran numerous tests to determine the consistency of the glaze and felt confident it would act as expected. In short, everything did not turn out as planned. The firing of my work resulted in my soft satin matte exhibiting a thin, dry underfired finish. I can only speculate on the cause of this. Either the glaze application was too thin or the kiln was underfired; or possibly a combination of both. In either case I am the one responsible. In addition, the functionality was marred by the glaze crawling in most of the spouts, resulting in teapots that did not really pour. The results were less than pleasing. They say the darkest hour is right before the dawn, and in this case it proved to be true.
While I was doing the initial glaze firing, I had begun to run tests on overglazes. At this point the only source of truly bright color I was aware of were the leaded Amaco versa color overglazes. I purchased these and began conducting more tests. Using these leaded products bothered me. The product indicated that it was not to be used for spray application, and I knew this would be the method I would use. While trying to find a local source for the Amaco products, I inquired about the possibility of using some other non-toxic commercial product to add color to my work. One of the owners of Tom or Nick’s Ceramics in Rochester told me that he had heard of people applying Duncan E-Z strokes underglazes as overglazes and firing them hot. After the purchase and testing of these products I found his advice to be true. At or above cone 1 the underglaze would flux slightly and adhere to the dry matte surface of my pieces. This proved to be an amazing stroke of luck. While the palette of Duncan E-Z strokes colors was limited, it contained all the necessary colors to talk about flowers.

When I began the coloration of my pieces it was with some trepidation. I have never considered myself to be a colorist. My traditional approach to glazing allowed me an easy solution to this anxiety. The application of a celadon or shino glaze leaves little room to think about color. I relayed this apprehension to Rick and he gave me a brief discussion on color and painting. When we were discussing the possibility of using overglaze color, Rick’s overriding concern was that the colors were “mixable” so that a customized color palette could be used. This seemed to mimic the approach that he used in his own work. He has stated, “I mix my ‘sigs’ to get particular colors not obtainable through the use of one stain itself, just like mixing paint (Speight et al. 1995, 306).” He encouraged me to use a range of colors, custom mixed, to provide depth and visual diversity. Above all he said “have fun and just make them look like flowers.” With this thought in mind I approached the pieces, devised different color strategies for individual “sets” and set about the process of coloring. I think that I should stress that up to this point I had little experience with color and also very limited use of and airbrush. This may have been a windfall in the sense that when using the airbrush I was not concerned about technique. I was simply looking at the visual information and attempting to make flowers. Color proved to be a major player in the success of my work.

As the finished pieces came out of the kiln it was obvious that color helped tremendously to articulate the forms. In addition it gave the pieces a lively vivid quality. Now, with all the players “suited up”, the challenge of creating and environment for them to inhabit lay ahead.
Creating an Environment

This section of my thesis will discuss the process through which I discovered how to create an environment. I will explore the influence of the Japanese Tea Garden and the personal realization of what I had actually created.

My original conception of how my body of work would be displayed was admittedly simple. Until the completion of my pieces I was still working under the belief that my work was functional in nature and should be displayed as such. For example, set #1, set #2, and so on. Andrew and I began to look at the work all together on table, and the realization that these pieces in concert with one another created the illusion of a lotus pond. With this realization and the subsequent mixing and matching of pad to teapot, cup and so forth, the stage was almost set to be installed in the gallery.

The idea of creating an environment was still relatively new to me. Having labored under my self-imposed functional constraints, the notion of providing one cohesive visual environment took some prodding to achieve. My mission was to suggest a picture and provide an arrangement that visually captivated the viewer from a number of different vantage points. I aspired to accomplish in my environment what the Tea Garden did for the Tea Ceremony. "From the symbolic point of view, it is the first step on the way to enlightenment. It is here that self absorption begins, that the heart is purified, and that the great forgetting takes possession of man. With every step along the garden path the heart loosens its links with the world (Hammitzsch. 1958, 85)." The challenge was to give a suggestion that drew in the observer for any different number of reasons, but all experientially based. In doing so, the goal of getting the observer to investigate the environment was achieved, opening a visual and metaphorical dialog. No longer was the observer in a gallery. The suggestion of lotus pond and teapot transported them to a different place, a place where my environment elicited experiential memories in them and as a result created a new experience. Just as the Tea Garden helped transport those who walked upon its stones into a place where worldly troubles could be suspended, it was my intention to provide a rest stop from the craziness of contemporary life.

As I began to understand what form my environment would take, I also saw the lessening importance of personally viewing these pieces as functional tea sets. Practically speaking, they were not functional due to their technical flaws. On the conceptual side I finally let go of function, accepted and was happy with what the objects
wanted to be. When I stopped looking at them as functional teapots and started looking at them as lotus flowers, their beauty became more evident to me.

When the installation began, two other factors came to bear. I had been unable to produce pad forms over 6-7 inches in diameter. In order to provide some visual diversity, Rick suggested producing some larger pad forms out of another material. Wood seemed to be the most workable choice. I made these larger wooden pad forms and painted them to reflect the watery nature of the real lotus environment. The color on these was chosen to compliment the color of the pedestals. The pedestal color was the other factor that affected the installation and final visual appearance. I decided to paint only the tops of the pedestals to suggest a pond type environment. The bottom four sides were white and the tops were a blue green teal color.

The process of installing pedestals and work was a recapitulation of my whole process. We looked at the allotted space and started to play spontaneously. I was already happy with several groupings of pieces, and we started with those. Some of these groupings were placed on the larger wooden pads and some rested directly on the pedestal. When they were placed, Andrew, Rick, and I intuitively arranged the remaining work in order to fully engage the allotted space and capture the environment. There was no specific formula to the placement of the pieces, but it was not random either. It was an exercise in intuition, improvisation, and spontaneity. Given a different space and the same pieces, a markedly different performance might have evolved. This completed the process, utilizing a similar approach in each aspect of development. The results have taken a while to sink in. The idea at completion had drastically evolved from the initial concept.
Summary

The body of work I produced was different than my intended goal. Where initially I had worked to present teapots in a compatible environment, ultimately the environment itself became the focal point. As individuals, these pieces can and do stand alone. However, the impact of the environment they created as a whole was far more profound. As an environment their impact was increased by several factors. First, the reference to tea is significant because it works at several different levels. As teapot forms, the long, rich, history and tradition of this beverage and its wares are celebrated. Continuing on a deeper level, tea references the Tea Way, a Way of living and experiencing beauty in daily life. This is symbolically evident in the use of the lotus as metaphor for life.

This metaphor works on both a universal level as well as a personal level. My journey in clay was started as a personal endeavor to find the “answer.” As I have produced my work, I have come to feel that there is no “answer,” because the questions keep changing. I feel lucky to have had the opportunity to explore life in this realm. Through this process I have gained a greater appreciation of beauty not only in my field, but in the everyday experience of life. While comprehension of the depth of my work may vary, I believe that my interpretation of beauty through the medium of clay has resulted in a contemporary vision of Tea, of quiet beauty in our modern world.
Technical Information

Clay Bodies

I utilized several clay bodies in this thesis exploration.

Δ 9 porcelain - really not a very good porcelain. lots of specks. Actually a proto-porcelain.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clay Body</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pioneer Kaolin</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grolleg</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XX Sagger</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ky. Stone</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaopaque</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custer Spar</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SiO2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mullite</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Porcelain #2 - Δ 8-11. Similar to Tom Coleman’s recipe.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clay Body</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>EPK</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SiO2</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custer Spar</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bentonite</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Glaze

Lehman White  Δ9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clay Body</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dolomite</td>
<td>15.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talc</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kona F-4</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spodumene</td>
<td>7.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPK</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SiO2</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+Opax</td>
<td>14.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rhodes 32 White  Δ 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clay Body</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Custer Spar</td>
<td>49.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whiting</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OM#4</td>
<td>25.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dolomite</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>+Opax</td>
<td>5-10%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overglaze

The overglazes I utilized in this project were the Duncan E-Z strokes brand. They were applied with an Airbrush and fired to Δ1. The pieces were then sanded with silicon carbide sandpaper in order to reduce any tooth the surface retained from an incomplete melt of the underglaze.
PLATE 1
Reference List


