2002

Actuate

Tracy Shell

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

Recommended Citation
Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

The college of Imaging Arts and Sciences

In candidacy for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Actuate

By

Tracy Eileen Shell

November 2002
Final Approvals

Chief Advisor: Richard Hirsch
Date: 4/7/03

Associate Advisor: Julia Pallacy
Date: 4/7/03

Associate Advisor: N. Rea
Date: 5/7/03

Chairperson: Michael Rogers
School for American Crafts
Date: 5/18/03

I, Tracy Shell, hereby grant permission to the Wallace Memorial Library of RIT to reproduce my thesis in whole or part. Any reproduction will not be for commercial use of profit.
Date: 11/18/02
Thesis Proposal

Questioning and exploring what specific components are essential in making expressive utilitarian pottery is the core of my thesis investigation. I am curious to discover what characteristics of hand made pottery elevate these objects to treasured possessions while remaining utilitarian. Gaining an understanding of the delicate balance between engaging form and practical function will be at the root of this thesis journey.

As my pots are intended to entice physical interaction they shall be designed to live harmoniously within the landscape of the contemporary home, complementing and enhancing food presentation and consumption. The work will possess strong forms that are soft both visually and tactily. Creating work that is physically and visually comfortable is, I believe, of utmost importance when placing it in the context of the home. Glazes will be velvety using a minimal palette. The form will be primary and I feel the glaze surface should not overwhelm it.

Growing up on a series of military bases where all the buildings looked like they were poured from a mold I developed a need to customize my environment. My thesis work will be created in an attempt to personalize daily
activities in the home. It is through frequent use that I see my art as having an impact.
Introduction

An art historian seeking to measure the artistic tendencies of humans through the ages would incontestably select the works of the potter. The making of pottery is one of the longest-lived art forms of which we have continuous knowledge. The first known pottery tradition is associated with cave-dwelling communities in Anatolia around 6500 BC with the first painted wares surfacing in Egypt and Mesopotamia about one thousand years later. The earliest pots were utilitarian in form with surface decoration fulfilling an important aesthetic role. Through unification of form and surface the utilitarian aspect of ceramics has traditionally been a wellspring for invention and expression. (Jacquemart, 13) Initiated by necessity, works of pottery have customarily been formed with the intention of pleasing the eye and elevating the mind and spirit.

Eight thousand plus years down the time line of ceramic history I feel a connection to these early pots; I believe things made of the hand transcend time and place.
Personal History

"People content with low-grade tableware can only produce low-grade food. People raised on low-grade food can only become low-grade people." Rosanjin

Three weeks after graduating with my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree I was on an airplane to Fukui Prefecture, Japan. Invited by Japanese Cultural Living Treasure and eighth generation potter, Juroemon Fujita I spent three years as an apprentice in his family’s workshop. While the workshop is predominately a production pottery, the studio’s signature wares are large anagama fired, coil-built jars that were historically used for storing products like rice and saki. It was the unique coil building method, called negitate, that first drew me to Japan. As a result of being exposed to Japanese culture and customs however, I soon became interested in utilitarian pottery.

During my first few months in Japan I became fascinated by the amount of modestly priced hand-made pottery available to the average consumer. It was then that I began to understand how the subtle features of pottery are revealed through daily use. I became a student of utility, form and function. I found myself suddenly awakened to the every day experiences I had once
overlooked. Realizing how beautiful a hand made objects could be I began to ponder how the handle of my hairbrush felt in my hand. I noticed the design of my coffeepot and how it dripped a little. I wondered why I consistently choose to drink coffee from one cup while I drink beer from another. I Suddenly I found myself paying attention; really paying attention.

I became aware of the unique pleasure derived from using hand made objects. As craft holds a predominant place amongst the traditions still practiced in Japan most households own and use hand made pottery on a daily basis. Seeing such unique items being casually used surprised me initially. These were not precious objects placed on display only to make an appearance on special occasions. Being raised in a household where "nice things" were rarely touched, this seemed radical, somewhat decadent and ultimately exciting to me.

During a Japanese meal both hands should be in continual action. I was taken by the manner in which the Japanese have constant contact with their eating utensils. It is thought rude if one does not hold one’s plate or drink from one’s bowl while eating. This interactive custom creates an intimacy between user and object therefore, careful attention is placed on how a pot is balanced in the
hand, how it will feel when it reaches the lips and whether or not the foot is substantial enough to hold without burning the hand. Looking back I realize that participating at a Japanese table taught me how the best utilitarian wares, both historical and contemporary, speak about humanity and of a common origin shared by makers and users.

Through my experience in Japan I have witnessed thousands of years of historical pots and the effects are evident in my work. I learned to understand subtle beauty in Japan and I feel this beauty exists in my thesis work. In the traditions of Japan I found a belief system that made sense to me personally. A belief that utilitarian pottery should appeal to all the senses, it should be sincere in its intent and it should be designed to withstand the demands of frequent use. I have lived with this tradition and feel comfortable adapting similar philosophies of utility, as Soetsu Yanagi states, “Tradition never asks who is enlisting its help,” and “the power of tradition enables them to accomplish great work.” (Yanagi, 136) I believe I have the power of this tradition behind me.
Personal Beliefs

As I have become a maker of utilitarian pottery I feel it is a privilege to make work that will transform routine activities, such as eating and drinking, into aesthetic experiences. Based on the philosophy of John Dewey, I believe that the distinction between aesthetic experience and common activity is not as great as is usually assumed. Dewey states that a work of art is not a picture, statue, poem, or symphony. These so-called works of art are what he refers to as the "products" of art. Dewey would say that the true work of art is the experience it evokes. A.H. Johnson summarizes this concept succinctly by saying, "Thus a musical score is not a work of art for a music lover until he plays it or experiences it in his imagination. Until that occurs it is merely a symbol of a work of art." (Johnson, 22)

I believe a work of art is revealed when it spurs action, whether it mental or physical. Pottery does this naturally. It becomes entwined with our human experience when it is put into operation. The implicit qualities of pottery invite physical interaction and, along with many contemporary makers, I believe that the unique characteristics of wares grow more personal with daily use. An intimate relationship or continuum of aesthetic
experiences finds sustenance in the simple act of use. Utilitarian objects operate to their fullest potential when in action and once in action pottery becomes a vehicle for sustaining beauty and culture in the home. It is important to me that my work becomes activated in the domestic context. I believe that art is an important ingredient in the home environment and in most average income homes craft is the only form of art. (TAC p.9) This is why I make utilitarian pots.
The Work

"A baked clay vessel. Don't put it in the glass display case full of rare objects. It would show up badly. Its beauty is allied with the liquid it contains and the thirst it quenches." Octavio Paz

My thesis body of work is fueled by the desire to explore the relationship between engaging form and practical function. This thesis process has been an investigation of what characteristics elevate useful objects to treasured possessions while still embracing their utilitarian properties. As my pots are intended to enliven daily activities, they are designed to live harmoniously within the landscape of the contemporary home. With this body of work I have strove for strong forms that are soft both visually and tactiley. Expanding interior volumes coupled with sensual curves hope to entice intimate contact. I used satin-matte glazes that pool and move slowly over the surface of a pot suggesting a sense of casual motion. Color choices evoke a sense of quietude, often seen in Japanese ceramics, which compliments rather than imposes on an environment.

I am intrigued by the elusive idea of comfort and found myself contemplating this concept in the work. Creating work that is physically and visually comfortable
is of utmost importance when placing it in the context of the home. It is in the home that I believe we are most at ease and open to experience our environment. I researched pillows, bedding and other linens for solutions on how to create a feeling of comfort. This can be directly seen in the soft pillow lids and napkin-like cut outs on the saucers and trays.

Through the thesis journey I experimented with many forms that serve various functions and decided to concentrate on pieces associated with the act of drinking. As these are typically the wares that, in America, are handled, passed at a table, and placed to the lips, I felt them to be the most intimate of all utilitarian wares. This resulted in a body of work consisting of drink service sets; pitchers and tumblers, teapots, teacups and saucers, coffeepots and mugs, and cream and sugar sets with trays.

All work was wheel thrown and altered after being taken off the wheel. Through a cut and paste process I used a stamp, inspired by Japanese textile patterns, to add linear details to the rounded forms. Cutting away from the thrown pieces and adding stamped slabs caused some dynamic irregularity in the forms. This added a sense of softness which I found to be both tactily and visually interesting. The stamping also created areas of relief giving the glazes
a chance to pool; expanding the range of colors on the surface of each ware.

Because the work was made to be utilized in a domestic setting, I used two custom-made cabinets for display purposes. The cabinets, which were designed to be a cross between a pedestal and a bookcase, were placed in a pleasantly small space in the gallery. This conveyed a feeling of warmth and intimacy reminiscent of a kitchen or small sitting room. The space itself was quite comfortable and the work too within it.
Influences

Working in a post-modern era where it is common to borrow from various places and time periods, I find inspiration in both historical ceramics and the work of my contemporaries. Early twentieth century potter George Ohr has been a great influence on my work formally. He is known for pushing the plasticity of clay to its furthest limits. Therefore his work often has the feeling that it may collapse at any moment. I find the idea of a hard material like fired clay appearing to be on the verge of collapse an interesting one I wish to explore further. I too am trying to push the natural limits of my material to achieve a sense of softness in my work.

I have also been looking at the work of contemporary potter Takeshi Yasuda which displays qualities similar to the works of George Ohr. Yasuda’s forms also seem stretched to the absolute limit but unlike Ohr, who played a precarious game with utility, Yasuda’s work is fully functional. It is obvious that Yasuda is a student of ceramic history. His surfaces are reminiscent of eighteenth century English cream wares and Chinese tri colored wares associated with the Tang dynasty while the forms he creates are playfully unique. I enjoy the playful quality found in
both potters' work and will continue to explore this aspect in my own pots.
Conclusions

As a utilitarian potter readying myself for the a career, after being shielded by the title of student for so long, I am contemplating where my work fits in within the realm of contemporary art. When thinking about what purpose useful hand made objects serve in the twenty-first century, I believe it is largely about beauty. On the subject of beauty in contemporary art, potter Louise Harter says, "It is not fashionable, it isn't hip, it is rarely even considered an avenue of conversation relevant to art made in our time." (CAP p.153) I conclude that contemporary pottery seeks and finds relevance in beauty where contemporary art may not. Potters understand beauty to be a necessary ingredient of life experience. I, along with my contemporaries, am driven by the desire to keep the vocabulary of beauty alive in art.

"All artwork is about beauty; all positive work represents it and celebrates it. All negative art protests the lack of beauty in our lives." Agnes Martin

When I first read this quote I was delighted to realize that my work is about both beauty and the lack of it in contemporary society. I make pots to satisfy both a physical and aesthetic need. I make pots with dreams of pleasing the senses. I make pots in hopes of elevating
mundane situations to treasured moments of meaning. I make utilitarian pottery using it as a vehicle for innovation and expression. I make work knowing that someone somewhere will pause, even just for a moment, and understand something about beauty.
Technical Information

All work was made from a cone six porcelanous stoneware body.

EPK  35
Tile 6 Kaolin  15
Neph Sy  23
Flint  22

All surfaces were covered with cone six glazes and fired in a light soda, light reduction atmosphere.

Hamada Base
Custer Feldspar  53
Whiting  9
Zinc Oxide  9
Barium  21
Ball Clay  1
Gerstly Borate  20

Light green adding
2% Rutile
1% Red Iron Oxide
2% Copper Carbonate

Light blue adding
2% Rutile
1% Red Iron Oxide
.25% Colbalt Carbonate

Rutile Yellow Liner
Custer Feldspar  57
Whiting  19
China Clay  14
Zinc Oxide  9
Flint  6
Rutile  5

Some Bright Green
Custer Feldspar  45
Whiting  7
Ball Clay  13
Strontium  35
Zinc Oxide  10
Rutile 2%
Copper Carbonate 5%
Red Iron Oxide .25%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Quantity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fake Ash Base</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barnard Clay</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ball Clay</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wollastonite</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerstly Borate</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rutile</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For blue adding
.25% Colbalt Carbonate
References

1. Cardozo, Sidney/ Hirano, Masaaki. The Art of Rosanjin: Japan: Kodansha International Ltd. 1987