The Satisfaction of Unexpected Discoveries

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The Satisfaction of Unexpected Discoveries

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The Satisfaction of Unexpected Discoveries

It is the journey that affects me the most and the small glimpses into new possibilities that help me grow. The inability and desire to never reach the journey’s end, compels me to continually push my work and aesthetic in new directions, slowly finding my own path through clay, my creative processes, and making pottery.

As Susan Orlean describes in her book *My Kind of Place: Travel Stories from a Woman Who's Been Everywhere*, “I love the jolt you get from traveling. I love the freshness and surprise of being in a new place, the way it makes the most ordinary things seem extraordinary and strange.” Traveling the world is rich, rewarding, surprising, educational, and inspiring. It grounds me and connects me to the rest of humanity.

The anticipation and adventure of traveling to or through any new place is always full of unexpected discoveries - the awareness of new aromas in a market place, the bold tastes of local favorites, the humor in a bus painted with several vibrant colors, or the inspiration taken from the patterns and colors of a tiled wall in an ancient city. These are the special moments of enlightenment that push me to the next level of exploration and understanding. These are revelations about my own aesthetics and artistic desires that I allow to inform my pottery.

“Its discoveries enliven me, they in some way prove ‘life-enhancing’. The term was Nietzsche's. He composed an essay in which he distinguished between collecting facts like an explorer or academic and using already known facts to the end of inner, psychological enrichment. Entitling his essay “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” Nietzsche began with the extraordinary assertion that collecting facts in a quasi-scientific way was a sterile pursuit. The real challenge, he suggested, was to
use the facts to enhance ‘life’. He quoted a sentence from Goethe, “I hate everything that merely instructs me without augmenting or directly invigorating my activity.” ¹

I too am not after merely facts but ‘life experiences’ to inform my work and shape me as a person. I have realized that the journey is a process of discovery and the process of creating is one of the exhilarating parts of self-discovery. Seeking out new information and experiences is part of my personality and I often force myself into new and extreme situations in order to discover the ‘life enhancing facts’ that will enlighten and enliven my person and my work.

Traveling helps you think and forces you to change. “Journeys are the midwives of thought. Few places are more conducive to internal conversations than moving planes, ships, or trains. There is an almost quaint correlation between what is before our eyes and the thoughts we are able to have in our heads; large thoughts at the times requiring large views, and new thoughts, new places.” ²

As Alain De Botton writes in his book The Art of Travel, “There is a psychological pleasure in takeoff, too, for the swiftness of the plane’s ascent is an exemplary symbol of transformation. The display of power can inspire us to imagine analogous, decisive shifts in our lives, to imagine that we, too, might one-day surge above much that now looms over us. The new vantage point lends order and logic to the landscape.” ³

Ceramics is wonderfully full of unexpected discoveries. As with my other adventures and explorations, my work in ceramics has been wonderfully full of unexpected discoveries; the way two clay forms placed together beautifully creates subtle relationships, how a glaze can run into another and create a third color. As a maker, I
find the ceramic process can surprise and reveal secrets about its character as well as your own that one would only learn from continually exploring the medium.

The exploration of ceramics has included memorable breakthroughs that occur at points where I feel that I am 'lost for good'. Most likely I have been pushed outside my natural tendencies or comfort zone. I fret and squirm, my senses keenly aware. When I have struggled with form or surface decoration for months and nothing seems to be working properly, I have landed in that new country lost in a city with people I cannot easily understand. It is essential to push a little harder, try a new technique or philosophy and come to that cherished place of unexpected discovery. It is a moment I didn’t plan for yet a moment worth struggling for or traveling for.

**Inspirations that Influence**

It is my goal to allow my ceramics to embody my love of life through an abundance of color, layered pattern, and generous utilitarian forms. Although travel is the primary inspirational force in my life and work, other forms have also served as important resources in my journey.

*Quilted Influences*

Old American quilts have inspired me for decades and influenced the aesthetic within my clay work. When I was a teenager I learned how to quilt. It was an exercise that reinforced my interest in the juxtaposition of multiple colors and patterns as well as creating useful objects by hand.

The Gees Bend quilters are the ideal example of the freedom a quilt structure can give an artist. The Gees Bend quilters were able to be inspired by traditional quilting patterns
that they grew up with but stretch and change the patterns and orientation of design to suit their life experiences. Because they were extremely poor, they often used what fabrics they had on hand in their quilts, juxtaposing wild patterns with worn jean segments all within the structure and utility of a quilt. The Gees Bend Quilters created functional artwork based on their personal history just as I also create functional artwork to express my own personal history.

Gees Bend Quilter, Lola Pettway, Housetop Variation, 2002

One of my early bodies of ceramic work was created by cutting-up pottery forms in the same way that I would cut up fabric to create a quilt. The individual pieces, uniquely textured with stamps, carved with fabric patterns were then reassembled to construct a new form in the same way that individual pieces of fabric would be assembled to create a classic American quilt.

I could break-up the tightly thrown forms with bold cutting actions yet retain the utilitarian intent by reassembling them with their new patterned sections. The pieces would never be the same as the original form but they would possess a new energy and active surface. New glazes reflected the vibrant colors used in old quilts to brighten up and warm a cold winter’s day, oranges and blues, reds and yellows. There was a strong
aspect of play captured within the work through the color, design and juxtaposition of patterns within the reassembled pieces.

Bold tulips were cut from the form and then reassembled at a slightly higher or lower level to create the main focus of interest, while on other parts a delicately stamped with a carved tulip design. This body of work was the first time I began carving stamps and using a vibrant new palette of mid-range oxidation glazes, which became a signature element of my work.

Creating black line boundaries to decorate within is a discipline also learned through the study of quilting. I discovered not only a need but a desire to divide the surface space of a piece of pottery in the same way that one would draw lines in which to color. I reinforced these non-arbitrary boundaries by using thin black slip lines. Usually I divide the surface of a vessel in an asymmetrical way creating interest in the entire surface rather than on just one side. This division of space helps dictate the change in glaze color by creating a natural place and space for one color to end and another to begin. It is also a place to begin and stop a specific pattern and start another as well as a place to brush on underglazed patterns. I enjoyed working on this series and I believe that my enjoyment and sense of play revealed itself in the work.

Spain and the Islamic Influence

Between my first and second years of graduate school, I headed to Spain where I had been accepted as the Artist-In-Residence at the Fundació Josef Llorens Artigas. Spain has always been a major influence on my life since I was an exchange student there at the age of 16. The opportunity to do ceramic work in a country that had had such a major influence on my development as a teenager was an opportunity I could not pass
The Fundació Artigas is located on the outskirts of Barcelona and is where Juan Miró used to work alongside his potter friend Josef Artigas. Evidence of the two artists collaborations pepper the grounds in the form of sculptures and fountains.

During the months working at the Fundació I created a series of items with which to enjoy a traditional café con leche. I created mostly tumblers, cream and sugar sets, and pouring pots that were highly influenced by the Spanish culture and environment. Abarellos or historical medicine jars, which can be seen in museums as well as pharmacies, were forms that I also appropriated to use in this body of work. Joanet Artigas, the director of the Fundació, also proved to be inspirational through his love of bullfighting. Every Sunday he would head down to the bullring, a Hispano-Islamic Arena with a façade covered in intricate, colorful Islamic tiles. Bull’s horns began showing up in my work as well as architectural aspects from the tiled exterior of the Arena.

Antoni Guadi’s Modernismo buildings that dot the streets of Barcelona were also highly influential in my work. I modeled new plaster stamps after Gaudí gates, translating enjoyable afternoons at Gaudi Park Guell into an increasing ability to juxtapose diverse patterns. The park is full of mosaics, which like quilts, combine shards of vibrant local ceramics into exuberantly playful patterns. I was profoundly inspired by the idea of covering an entire surface with information.
I began looking at the surface of my pottery like I would a blank canvas, breaking the architecture of the forms up into four sections; a strong, distinguished foot that I could texture, a narrow base, tall, voluminous body section that was the majority of my surface area, and a bold lip. I was able to use the skill of deconstruction, patterning, and reassembling to create these pouring and drinking pieces in a way similar to working with the quilted work.

*Contemporary Artistic Influences*

Just as I can easily see how traveling, collecting quilts, and living in Spain have strongly influenced my life and ceramics work, I would be amiss if I did not also recognize the contemporary artists who have inspired me. I am most influenced by artists who I have met in person. This is not to say that I haven't drawn on historical painters like Matisse, Picasso, and Rothko, but my work is clearly influenced by those I feel are creating work within my own time and with whom I have had the opportunity talk and work with, and strive to understand.

The artist who has most greatly influenced my work is my graduate school professor, Julia Galloway. Galloway is the person who truly helped me find my aesthetic voice in clay. There were many unexpected discoveries that occurred in my work while under Galloway's guidance. While our work looks different one can still see the strong influences she has had on my style of creating. We both share a love of utilitarian pottery; we are makers, who find our passion and means of expression through clay. Galloway's elegant division of the surface space of her pots with pattern and grid structures has been influential in my own work.
The different ways Galloway has of creating her surface patterning and information are varied and range from inscribed lines to raised shellacked surfaces. The confidence of her brush stroke, creating fluid lines across a pot’s surface, is something for which I too am striving. The speed and volume with which she works makes me believe that in this contemporary world with all the obstacles I face as a woman and artist, being a studio potter, creating quality artwork, and making a living are all possible.

*Liz Quackenbush, Earthenware, Flower Vase*

Liz Quackenbush is another artist who is inspirational in the way she designs ceramic pieces that are functional, highly decorative, and very playful. Her work looks very different than mine in that it is low fire majolica with luster and low fire glazes but I look to her use of patterns to activate the surface as creative and bold. Quackenbush’s work
also possesses a strong sense of composition within a complexity of surface information and the same confidence hand that I recognize in Galloway’s work. She is another woman in the field who has found a way to be an artist, mother, and teacher, which I admire.

**Universal Patterns, and Surface**

It is important to consider the remarkable phenomenon of a universal pattern appearing in several different cultures and at different times by people who were not connected by any means of trade or travel. I believe this phenomenon has to do with the human trait and ability to appreciate nature’s beauty and the need to create patterns. Exactly the same patterns will show up simultaneously on opposite sides of the world. Many are simple, relating to nature or geometry, and sometime used in many variations, but they symbolize a primary connection between all of us.

These common patterns and designs can be seen all over the world in every medium. There is a four-petal design that, if repeated, creates interlocking circles based on a grid structure. I have repeated this pattern throughout my work, sometimes with stamps, other times with a brush, and often with a fine slip trailer. Sometimes I use several varieties of this one pattern in different sizes and with separate techniques. I have come to think of it as *my* pattern and relish the synergy I feel when I see it on a historic tin ceiling, in an Islamic building, on a Neolithic Chinese vessel, or contemporary fabric design. I rely on my knowledge of the history of ceramics, the arts and world cultures to find universal patterns that excite, influence, and guide me.
I have been influenced by the experiences of living and traveling in Spain but those influences are really connected to the larger circle of ceramics in world history. Spanish tiles, colors, and designs in pottery and tile work are bold in color and ornate in pattern. This is because they have been strongly influenced by the Islamic Moors who occupied Spain for over 700 years. In turn, Islamic ceramic history was strongly influenced by the Chinese porcelain trade. The Hispano-Moresque ceramics then influenced the rest of Europe, especially Italy and Portugal. Each culture borrowed from the other adding their own flavor or aesthetic to the work as it moved along the Silk Road and other trade routes. This became one of the ways that specific cultural designs and patterns matured and evolved as they traveled and the way in which more universal patterns also evolved over time.

The way patterns can simultaneously appear in different cultures around the world and continue to be used thousands of years later is remarkable and interesting. Patterns and ornamental design ultimately never stop traveling thanks to modern media. They have reached me today and will continue to inspire other students of the arts. In this day and age, images are far more accessible than they were in the past, therefore, I can be exposed to far more patterns and designs than ever before.

In *The Grammar of Ornament*, Owen Jones states that “From the universal testimony of travelers it would appear, that there is scarcely a people, in however early a stage of civilization, with whom the desire for ornament is not a strong instinct. The desire is
absent in none, and it grows and increases with all in the ratio of their progress in civilization."  

He then goes on to express those beliefs that I share about pattern and design in relation to history. “To attempt to build up theories of art, or to form a style, independently of the past, would be an act of supreme folly. It would be at once to reject the experiences and accumulated knowledge of thousands of years. On the contrary, we should regard as our inheritance all the successful labors of the past, not blindly following them, but employing them simply as guides to find the true path.”  

**Stamping**

In order to create detailed and intricate patterned surfaces I have adapted the historical technique of stamping. Stamping can be seen on vessels from the Warring State Period in China all the way through to modern day industrial pottery. I created stamps by carving out plaster cubes and rubber pads, a technique I began exploring during the quilt body of work and continue to this day.  

The speed at which I can create universal, repeating, bold patterns is in tune my working process. Stamping creates a wonderfully seductive place for the glazes to pool their rich colors. I use stamps of all sizes to create a sense of variety that will lead the eye across the surface and through the composition.

My ever-growing historically influenced stamp collection includes a stamp that repeats the pattern of a traditional quilt I own, while another repeats a scale-like pattern inspired by an Italian Renaissance platter. I originally learned how to create complicated repeating patterns while studying fiber arts for three years as an undergraduate at
Skidmore College. We were asked to create 5 yards of a five-color repeating pattern. This taught me how to take a pattern apart in order to create a stamp or stencil with opposite edges that when used perfectly, continued the pattern. Stamping allows me to create intricate detailed patterns and juxtapose repeating patterns in a time efficient manner.

Slip Work
Slip work, mainly in black, helped me create divisions on the surface of my forms within which I could pattern differently. I used black slip to separate patterns as well as to paint additional patterns. The use of slips or underglazes can be seen throughout ceramic history, from the Native Americans to the Egyptian, and from the Neolithic Chinese to Islamic Moors. I depend upon and enjoy the black line as a base structure for my patterns.

Color Influences
Often the first thing a viewer notices about my work is the color. I have selected a vibrant array of glazes that seduces the viewer, bringing them in for a closer look and allowing them a chance to enjoy the textured patterns and underglaze designs. Watery, runny copper blues slide into bright oranges and yellows, which are bordered by rich purples. My color palette has become one of the more striking aspects of my pottery emerging from the combined influence of quilts, my travels, and Hispano-Islamic pottery and tiles seen in Spain, Italy, and Morocco.

I also strive to incorporate those influences when designing my glaze surfaces. Second to color, my glaze selection involves both personal aesthetics and a conscious recognition of the surface quality of the glazes. I try to always use a combination of
translucent, glossy, runny glazes with matte, buttery glazes. The intention is to heighten the apparent depth of some stamped surfaces with the transparent glazes like Water Blue and other times specifically obliterate the stamped surface down to a shadow of itself by using thicker matte glazes like Lisa/Val’s Matte Turquoise. Some glazes have the wonderful effect of pulling cobalt blue out of the black underglaze and carrying it in blue streaks as the glaze melts down the surface creating an amazing soft blue smearing of a hand painted pattern. This was one of those unexpected discoveries made along the route of testing many glaze options.

**Utilitarian Form**

Utilitarian pottery has been the cornerstone of ceramics for 10,000 years. It is a history that is as rich as that of language. Like surface design, the history of pottery is as complicated as the cultures they represent. Ceramic forms act as the voice of the artist, with each touch of the hand, stroke of the brush, or choice of surface texture adding to the intention of the maker like words in a poem. The maker is aware that a bowl could exude generosity, playfulness, or aggression. Sometimes a cup can come across with such a strong personality you feel as if you were meeting a live being.

Utility has always been at the core of my work. I embrace the role of a utilitarian potter as an additional way to connect with people around me, to history, and to humanity in general. It is an honor to see my work incorporated into a family feast or as a key element in an intimate cup of afternoon tea. The forms I created for my thesis body of work were cups, plates, bowls, platters, and vases.

My love of utility also gives my work a purpose. My users understanding of my forms allows me to move on to exploring both functional variations and surface manipulations.
By creating pieces that are relatively simple and uncomplicated in form I am liberated to become more adventurous with my surface while not complicating the utility of the piece. I create forms that are generous in volume and able to hold edible delights. This compliments my personal desire to share generously of my food, my work, and myself.

In this respect, I also create in abundant multiples. It would not feel right to make just one bowl or one cup. I always make twenty or thirty at a time yet I consciously design each piece to function just as well on its own as well as in the group.

“The challenge of the contemporary potter is to concentrate on conveying thoughts and feelings, on transporting meaning from one mind to another through an intervening object.”- Wayne Higby, *Intellectual and Sensual Pleasures of Utility*

**Thesis Show**

My thesis show consisted of four major groups of work, platters, dinnerware, cups and vases. The relationship of the art to the gallery space was important to the overall experience of the work. I will describe the four different areas and how they were displayed.

“Wall of Platters” was the first large piece I completed for my thesis shows. The work consisted of 25 large platters (14 inches x 14 inches x 3 inches) arranged on five shelves (6 feet in length). Each shelf held five platters, and the shelves were mounted on a wall, one directly above the other. The platters were each individually created, designed, and glazed so no two would be the same. I treated each piece as a blank canvas to create compositions of texture, pattern, and color. The overall effect was eye
catching and magnetic. The longer the viewer took the time to see the piece, the more it revealed. In the end it uncannily resembled a sampler quilt hung on the wall.

“Dinner for Ten” was a generously proportioned set of plates and bowls. They contained the same vocabulary of patterns and colors as the platters on the wall. Each plate and bowl set was created to be a pair, yet each pair was different. They functioned like a dinner table of family members - each relating to the other but completely unique individuals. Often the patterns on the plates were repeated on the bowls, but most of the time the bowls reflected details of the plate’s design. The bowl was created to sit on top of the plate, two pieces creating an entire new pattern. Some sets were quiet and dark while others would have active surfaces with contrasting colors and abundance of detail. I imagine this set being used individually or collectively in a group. I displayed them mounted on a 16 inches wide 12 feet long shelf on the wall at table height (29 inches off the ground), with six sets of dishes on the shelf and six sets of dishes standing on end behind them like in a china cupboard.

“Collection of Cups” was a wall of four shelves, similar to the wall of platter shelves, but much smaller (4 inches wide x 4 feet long x 0.5 inches thick). On these shelves were a mix of tumblers and teacups. Each cup individually felt precious and beautiful, singing with life. The shelves were set at eye level which gave the viewers a chance to get up close and not only see the details but to pick them up and feel them, an important part of the utility of the pieces.

“Vases” were tall and full of flowers. Seven large vases were in the show, five of them displayed as a group in the center of the gallery space. Two had bouquets of fresh flowers from the farmer’s market, which completed their form and reinforced their use.
The vase form was important to the overall body of my thesis work because of its verticality. Everything else, other than the cups, which were small, had relatively low, flat surfaces. The vases allowed me to explore a vertical, round canvas as well as clearly defined architectural shifts of form. They had tall wide feet and wide rims that were a distinct shift in direction from the body of the vase. The intention for these vases was to be viewed from all sides, each side revealing a new detail of design. They were also important in balancing out the other works by being positioned away from the wall in a pedestal group in a more three dimensional way.

**Conclusion**

I purposely filled the gallery space I was given just as I fill the surfaces of my pots and in the same manner I fill my life with activities. My wheels are always spinning, my pots are full of information and interest, and my gallery space held the same vibrating energy between groups of work, colors, and patterns. I could feel the space almost pulsing with life and that was my intention.

This body of work focused on incorporating universal patterns and forms, and celebrating those colors and patterns influenced by the experiences of my travels and education. The work also addressed my desire to beautifully enhance the serving and sharing of food with friends and family around any table. I wanted the work to make the user smile. I wanted the user to reach for my cup first because it pleasures their senses and brings them joy. As a maker of useful objects, I want my work to reflect a playful love of life. Like many artists, I want to share myself through the sharing of my work. An entire series of newly carved stamps, added to those from the quilt work and Spanish work and helped me focus on a study of universal patterns for surface ornamentation.
What I love about clay is that it possesses a tactile quality, the ability to be utilitarian, and plastic qualities that allow for instant gratification. Very few other mediums can compete with this malleable quality. This instantaneous action/reaction between the artist’s hand and the clay is immensely rewarding. In my work there is a clear and present love of material, a desire to share of myself through the use of my work, to explore historical patterns, and an important sense of play. My work contains a clear and present love of material, a desire to share of myself through the use of my work, a need to explore historical patterns and the importance of a sense of play. Life experiences, moments of discoveries, influential artists and handcrafted objects inspire both my work and my continuing journey.

As Susan Orlean wrote in *My Kind of Place*, “Journeys are the essential text of the human experience- the journey from birth to death, from innocence to wisdom, from ignorance to knowledge, from where we start to where we end.”

2 De Botton, Alain, *The Art of Travel*, page 109-110
3 De Botton, Alain, *The Art of Travel*, page 54
4 Jones, Owen, *The Grammar of Ornament*, pg 31
6 Higby, Wayne, *Intellectual and Sensual Pleasures of Utility*
7 Orlean, Susan, *My Kind of Place*, page xiv
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