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Geometric and organic imagery

Douglas Charles Kenney

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

"GEOMETRIC AND ORGANIC IMAGERY"

BY

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Date: 6/8/89
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INTRODUCTION

My purpose for attending graduate school was to increase my growth both as an artist and as an individual. Before coming to R.I.T. I had seven years of ceramics experience and I understood how a new environment and interaction with new people would assist my personal development. Moreover, the Master of Fine Arts degree would strengthen the quality of my work and provide me with the credentials needed to instruct at the university level. Considering the potential options an M.F.A. degree would give me, production pottery lost its appeal. I applied to graduate schools and was accepted at R.I.T.

After some experimentation in the first year of graduate studies, I selected the plate form for my thesis project. My intent was to explore decoration on the plate’s surface as a means of altering visual perceptions through painting, relief, and graphic design. I wanted to create tension and depth by the layering of geometric designs on an organic, textural background. The Raku firing process was selected to help integrate the design elements through glaze crackling which produces color modulation and enhances surface characteristics.
Sources

A. Raku

Raku, which has become my primary firing technique, is an antique firing method that was developed for the making of ceramic objects for the Japanese Tea Ceremony in the sixteenth century. Although Raku in Japan was as much a philosophy as it was a way of glazing and firing clay teabowls, it has been interpreted by Western cultures in a variety of ways. American potters did not become truly involved with Raku until 1960. It was around that time that Paul Soldner began doing Raku while teaching at Scripps College in Claremont, California. His pioneering use of a post firing reduction process added a new and interesting characteristic to his work. The reduction process brought about desirable effects in both glazed and unglazed areas of his forms. Soldner’s work integrates the ideas of control and spontaneity. The control aspect results from his positioning of figurative cut-outs on the ceramic forms, whereas his spontaneity is achieved through both the construction of form and his loosely applied slip decorations. The combining of glazed and unglazed areas contributes to the natural effects of the Raku firing process (see plate 1). By the early and mid sixties, Raku had become very popular in Southern California and soon spread to other parts of the
country.

Being also from Southern California, I feel some of the concepts behind Soldner’s work apply to what I did for this thesis. One of the more 'controlled' and deliberate aspects of my work involves masking off geometric patterns that are to be airbrushed with underglazes. Unconstrained splashing of underglazes in these masked areas is a way of counterbalancing the careful and intricate cutting and placement of tape. Subtle crackling from the firing, in addition to the visual depth achieved by unglazed areas, are the main reasons I use the Raku process.

B. Oriental Art

During my first quarter at R.I.T., I took an oriental art history class that also influenced my work tremendously. It was mainly the exposure to Chinese paintings of the sixteenth century, with their sense of space and depth relationships between foreground and background, that I feel most directly relate to my current work (see plate 2). Another aspect of these paintings that strongly appealed to me was the quietly powerful way they expressed elements of nature.
C. Nature

Although I find the history of the Raku process and my study of Oriental art to be interesting and significant, it is the environments and subtleties of nature that have influenced my work the most. My backpacking and camping throughout the Pacific Northwest and the Canadian Rockies has provided me with a broader, more complete perspective of the visual arts. Through the use of natural patterns, textures, and colors, my intent is to represent, or in some way convey, my past travels through places such as the Sierra Nevada mountain range in California. I feel that being in the wilderness has encouraged a special bond between nature and myself. It is this bond which motivates me to do the kind of work I am now involved with. Because of the incredible energy it generates, the Pacific Ocean has been a particularly important source of inspiration for me. The misty sea breeze, the waves lapping the shore, and the wide-open expanses of water provide the fuel for contemplation and introspection. It is from natural patterns, textures, and colors that I draw most of my ideas.
D. Abstract Expressionism

I feel my working in this unforced, natural way is somewhat similar to the approach taken by artists of the American Abstract Expressionist Movement. Because of his manner of paint application, I am especially interested in the work of Jackson Pollack. His paintings display a freedom of movement created by a drip technique that is unique to his work but similar to my own style of working. One obvious difference between us is, of course, the fact that his works are done with paint and canvas while mine use clay, underglazes, and oxides (see plates 3 & 9). He painted on large canvases placed on the floor, while I use an airbrush and rely on the texture of the clay to retain viewer interest. I also use more subdued colors than Pollack, and they are only applied, via his technique, to specific areas that have been masked-off on the surface of a plate. "Pollack's method of painting involves loading up a brush with paint and rapidly swirling it until the paint runs out. This same procedure is then repeated with other colors until the canvas is covered and the desired composition has been achieved" (2:133).

In addition to technique, the subject matter of Pollack's paintings is also quite different from mine. His works are created without drawings or preconceived ideas, although he did have some idea of what they would look like in their finished state. His method of applying paint is loose, almost primitive in nature, whereas the decorations on my plates are rather
controlled and come from sketches. Pollack thought of his work as intuitive and he had no fear of destroying the image. He was therefore able to incorporate the idea of accident in his paintings. In contrast to this particular aspect of Pollack's work, I notice certain unplanned events in my pieces and try to integrate them into the rest of the design. Although my exposure to his art has had an impact on the way I decorate my plates, I consider my work to be both unique and the result of my own values and experiences.

Hans Hofmann is another abstract expressionist who has influenced the work I am now doing. I also believe his philosophy about painting and art in general draws many parallels to my own way of thinking. Hofmann said "Nature is always the source of my creative impulses" (5:11). His paintings depict uninhibited gestural strokes of color in contrast to geometric, rectangular shapes (see plate 4). "The juxtaposing of these organic and geometric designs thus creates an illusion of depth in the paintings. The term 'push and pull,' which Hofmann used to designate simultaneous operation of flatness and depth, has become well-known" (5:27).
E. Architecture

Having stated many of the 'natural' influences of my work, I must also point out some of the more man-made sources that, although they are different, are nonetheless equally important. Being raised in the city of San Diego, I have found architecture and geometry to be a potentially strong source of inspiration for the designs I do on my plates (see plate 5). The skyline of the city and the flashing of the sun in building windows are, to me, strong indicators of the presence of human civilization in the environment. The rigid silhouette of the buildings against the undulating hills in the background, creates a fascinating harmony between the old and the new and the natural and the man-made. It is this relationship between organic and geometric that I find particularly applicable to the body of work done for this thesis. These formal concerns, intermeshed with new sources of imagery obtained from R.I.T., have helped lay the path for my current work.
The Work

When I first started graduate studies in 1987, I began to realize that computers were an integral part of the institution. There is a computer card catalog system in the library and there are computers in many of the classrooms of the art department. Being in such a high technology environment, I began to develop an idea which involved the incorporation of this 'high-tech' knowledge into my artwork. Knowing that micro computer chips are made largely from silica or clay, I got an idea for creating a body of work that would document the development of ceramic history. I was interested in interpreting the progress of ceramic applications as they change day to day and year to year in order to satisfy the needs of the consumer. As with my present work, the plate form, with its flat, accessible surface, became the means to communicate these ideas through painted imagery.

In order to display my idea to the viewer, I have not been concerned with the functionality of my pieces. Since flat, painted surfaces seem to be most easily seen when hung on a wall, I decided to give my work a vertical reference rather than a horizontal one. The architectural concerns within the plates designs integrate with the wall on which they are displayed. "One aspect of pottery's uniqueness comes from the development
of an aesthetic of nonfunctionalism" (3:25). Another reason I
did not want to address function with these plates was because I
felt they were more about painting than about traditional
ceramics. "Many contemporary clay workers are constantly making
judgements and decisions while trying to produce a
three-dimensional object that clearly communicates an idea to
the viewer" (4:21).

As mentioned previously, the imagery I used during my first
quarter at R.I.T. followed the theme of old and new ceramic
uses. I used hard-edged rectangular shapes as symbols of the
computer age. Lines referring to architectural references led
to an integration of the rectangular patterns. In order to
impart or suggest the development of ceramic history, I used
photo-silkscreen techniques to produce images such as the
pottery of ancient Greece, different kinds of functional pieces,
and electronic computer chips. These images, along with the
rectangular shapes in the background and the crackle of the Raku
glaze, combined to produce a sort of three-dimensional collage
effect (see plates 6 & 7). As I continued to develop the
decorations on my plates, however, the silkscreening began to
reveal certain weaknesses. Comments from some of my fellow
graduate students, such as "It looks like wallpaper!" by Harry
Welsch, led me to think that perhaps there was a better way. It
may be that the silkscreens became a sort of crutch to help
compensate for a lack of fresh ideas at the time.

During the summer of 1988 I returned to San Diego to take a
ceramics class at the university. While there, I was able to concentrate on developing a new attitude and approach to the plate and its decorations. One instructor pointed out that many of the patterns I was using did not relate to the roundness of the form. When I came back to Rochester in the fall, I started to use circular images to help balance-out both the form and the other designs (see plate 8).

With the intent of creating a sense of ambiguity in the work, open spaces on the plate’s surface are meant to encourage viewer interpretation. In other areas of the forms, I use colors and textures similar to those found in Southern California. Except for the areas of splashed color, to create tension and interest, my work has begun to have strong landscape characteristics (see plate 10). "The Zen concept of harmony can sometimes be achieved by exactly balancing opposing forces, such as a single splash of glaze on a controlled, regular form. This effect can be compared to a single raindrop on a rounded stone" (1:48). When properly integrated with the rest of the work, the splashed decoration thus becomes a valid aspect of the entire design.

The Raku firing process greatly enhances a plate’s surface appearance; however, in terms of form, there was still another step needed in the work. I considered breaking the roundness of the plate in some way to bring an added dimension of interest to my work. I accomplished this by breaking off, when leather-hard, a piece of an edge and attaching it again in a
different way from how it was (see plate 11). This process brought a 'real' depth to the work, which I found interesting in contrast to the implied depth created by the painted designs.

Technical Information

Instead of using a somewhat more predictable firing process, my choice of the Raku approach resulted in many technical problems. Clay, for example, had to be specially formulated to prevent cracking. Another cause of cracking involved the making of the plate forms, which were made from rolled-out slabs that were then jiggered by hand on the wheel. Because slab-rolled forms are not as strong as thrown forms, I had some problems in carrying them through the firing without breaking. I found, however, that adding coils of clay along the rims of the pieces helped to prevent many of the frustrating cracks.

Before the slabs were jiggered, they were covered with kaolin, ball clay, and redart to emulate the scaly skin of lizards. The 'lizard skin' texture, which is very likely an offshoot of my experiences in the deserts of the American Southwest and Mexico, provides visual and tactile qualities to the finished piece. Oxides, mason stains, and copper filings combined with dry porcelain trimmings were all rolled in the slab before jiggering. These imbedded textures resulted in a
tactile surface on the platter, and could only be achieved through the use of plaster molds. After drying, the plates are bisque fired to 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. After this initial firing the forms are airbrushed with commercial underglazes. Masking tape and stencils were used to isolate selected areas for airbrushing. Through trial and error, I developed a white crusty glaze which I used in different areas. By not using glaze in certain areas, a transparency that gives an illusion of depth is created. The Raku process accentuates the unglazed areas in the secondary reduction to provide subtle tone gradations from grey to black. A Soldner clear glaze is used around the rims of the pieces to provide the crackling effect I find so interesting.

Except for the forty-five minute cooling period after the proper temperature is achieved, the glaze firing takes about two hours. When they have cooled enough to be removed from the kiln, I take the pots out, put them in sawdust, cover them with cardboard, and then bury all of this with dirt. Buring them in dirt helps to slow down cooling, in a sense annealing the clay, in order to reduce thermal shock. Afterwards, the piece is scrubbed with an abrasive dishcleaning pad and a bit of detergent. In addition to its cleaning the piece, the scented detergent also helps disguise the smoky smell of burned sawdust. The piece is then fitted with wire so it can be hung. I feed a strong cable through the three sets of holes I put in the foot of the piece specifically for this purpose. The ends of the
cable are crimped, and the plate is ready for exhibition.

Conclusion

A unity of form and aesthetic function in the plate series had been achieved by the time of the thesis show. The work displays painted qualities that are derived from my past experiences. Positive viewer responses to the work encouraged growth and persistence. A feeling of accomplishment has been attained, and it is this that has been my goal since coming to Rochester Institute of Technology.

The theme of old and new ceramics was transformed into an abstracted version, but the initial concept was nevertheless maintained. Most importantly, efforts to redefine the plate form led to many new discoveries from which the work for this thesis evolved. As for the future, the plate will be further abstracted by manipulation of the rim to bring it into a more sculptural realm.
Bibliography


