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Gesture Pots

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by

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I throw clay on the floor and throw clay on the wheel. I deliberately stay with forming processes that are fast and uncomplicated. Forms come on the wheel as if by magic. Sometimes the pot looks as if it had taken a deep breath. Perhaps I did. Like a midwife I clean up, then look for some implement--a wand--and use it to push, pull, tap or draw up, or wedge under, or pierce the clay to let it know it's alive and we're playing a game together. Then I take out my sprayer, one or two brushes, and the colorant (a slip or engobe) and the pot (bowl, plate or cylinder) either remains still or turns while I attempt to do something appropriate. If I am really alert, the pot initiates the action (by being obvious about itself) and I respond.

To Mother.....

who married a gesture pot

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Figure 3 and 10 are to be replaced. 5-21-77. B.E.H.

ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

My thesis proposal is to integrate form and decoration in the process of making pots. The forms primarily are wheel-thrown, creating a volume rather than a function. I explore various means of linear embellishment by using a combination of tools and techniques that both in timing and in the gesture itself seem appropriate to the form as it evolves. I use red and white earthenware clays and produce at least twenty forms to support my thesis.

Two terms integral to my work are "process" and "gesture". Each has a specific meaning to me. A process is a rule, an interesting image, or a direction defined in simple terms that will focus the intellect and free the intuition to work naturally and spontaneously. Processes in the body of this report are concerned with how to form and decorate pots. Each one contains latitude for interpretation. With each one the focus changes. A result of the process of applying and releasing pressure with a brush to a wet pot can be seen in Figure 2. My interest and awareness of process comes from John Rolland. I took dance improviation from him this fall at the University of Rochester. He uses process to teach dance. As an example, here is a process for three people: Change levels in space while maintaining some form of contact. In both dance and clay, form and embellishment can evolve together.

Gesture has three aspects. (1) Gesture is a movement in space and time. (2) Gesture is an image of a movement in space and time. Gesture is intuitive, not intellectual. (Pose is intellectual.) For example, when I finished throwing the cylinder represented in Figure 2, I took a slip-laden brush in each hand and moved with respect to the pot. The movement and the marks and the altered form are all aspects of one gesture. (3) Gesture is being attuned to what one is doing. This aspect of gesture is the most provocative and the most elusive. My first experience with being attuned came in Painting Class where I would go regularly to familiarize my mind and my arm with gestural drawings in preparation for painting on pots. In being attuned, there seems to be no distinction between what one sees in the model and what appears on paper in line and brush stroke. The experience has occurred with clay. Then usually I am at the wheel and have the appropriate materials at hand.

Linear embellishment should be integral to clay forms. If the pot is decorated at the time it is formed, the two aspects of the pot share spontaneity. If time lapses between form and linear embellishment, there is more likelihood of discrepancy between the two. Process takes thinking out of creating. Process becomes a structure composed of the time, the tools, the clay, and the basic premise from which to work. The intellect can and should be at ease. In this atmosphere gesture, especially

"attunement", begins. From this environment come pieces which are successfully formed and decorated. They are called gesture pots.

PROCESS

Process is a concept that has evolved in the performing arts in the last fifteen to twenty years; in music with John Cage, in dance through Merce Cunningham, and in theatre beginning with the experiments of the Living Theatre. Process involves a surrender of the conscious will and a freeing of the dance, the play, the music, the pot or the painting to spontaneity. Process leaves the audience, the performer, the potter more in accord with the natural processes of the universe. In process, creativity is less a matter of one's own efforts and more an attunement to the world outside. It is through process (through the focusing of the intellect), that spontaneity remains with us longer and it is through process that intuition gains some respectability. Process is enlivened from the natural expression of the individual participants or components.

I used process, hesitantly at first, as a means of generating ideas. The results for days, weeks at a time, were nonsensical. Hesitancy and anxiety over outcome reveal a lack of commitment to process. Improvement came as I began to see results more humbly and objectively and to see in the results the motive and the resource for continuing. Color, rhythm, size and justification became motives for succeeding processes as evidenced by the next four examples.

1. Color

The discovery that I could produce reds relating to fire and hearth on my simple flowerpot earthenware gave me my first impetus and direction. The iron earths (yellow ocher, iron oxide, the siennas, and the umbers) deepen and intensify the color of the clay. These garish colors on wet pots become subtle gradations of iron red when sprayed unevenly with a lead-bearing frit and fired in an electric kiln. The process work that followed involved masking areas of a pot and spraying with the iron earths. Resources used to mask were an open lacework material, torn paper, cut cardboard, straw, solid objects, anything I could get my hands on. (Figure 3)

2. Rhythm

Attempts were made to use the same colors on slabs to create landscapes. The garish colors on the wet pieces seemed appropriate but, after the firing, the slabs were lifeless. They had been conceived haphazardly. There had been no rhythm to my movements in forming the slabs as there has come to be when I throw on the wheel. "Hamada places great emphasis on what he calls 'body knowledge', the knowledge that comes from doing,--preferably doing the same thing many times. As self-consciousness declines, the rhythms of the body take over and make their very special contribution to form and style."[1]

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[1]George H. Weltner. Shoji Hamada, Japanese Potter. M.F.A. Thesis. Alfred, New York, p. 46.

Wishing to explore the idea of body rhythms, I wrote a process and spent a day following its terms. I used white earthenware.

> Roll clay into coils. Establish a rhythm that you can hold throughout the day. Vary the tempo. Maintain this rhythm in forming the coils into rectangular reliefs. Be aware only of the rhythm and the progression.

Results were small and simple and quiet. (Figure 4) Another time I will write a process anticipating larger coils and involving three or four people. I would have them warm up for the rhythms by doing movement exercises.

3. Size

In the beginning of the year time was spent with a variety of fairly large complicated forms, but they seemed to need something so specific that I could not begin to guess what it was. I retain images of myself with shreds of paper in one hand and a large brush of dead white slip in the other, glowering at the poor pots. It was as if I were creating my own nightmares. It is necessary for me to stand up to throw more than eight pounds of clay. The original process was revised.

> Using eight to twelve pounds of clay, throw volumes you can relate to. Outline or impress something of yourself on the forms. Do this for one day.

4. Justification

Using various arm movements, I poured Redart casting slip from a pitcher onto a plaster bat. This form of linear embellishment often preceded the pot. When the slip lost some of its water and began to pull away from the plaster, it was flipped, applied to a damp pot, and integrated to the pot with fingers from the inside. The result is a pot with applied decoration. The next process seeks justification for applying the casting slip.

> Throw several pots establishing, as you complete the form, a reason for applying additional clay. Pour an appropriate amount of casting slip onto a plaster bat. Apply.

MATERIALS

Looking at process is looking at the natural expression of the materials used. Red earthenware clay and white slip were used this Fall. The concentration was on forming and decorating.

Red Earthenware Clay Body

200 Redart
50 North American Fire Clay
30 Kentucky Special Ball Clay
4 Bentonite

White Slip

Old Mine #4 Ball Clay
Opax (10%)

White slip worked well on naked, red earthenware clay but, once I became intrigued with the beautiful reds I could get in a painterly way, I had to respond in a potterly way with more appropriate materials. I continued to use Old Mine #4, but dropped the opacifier and added 6% Boraxo to flux the surface of the slip. Something of the filmy quality of the soap stayed through the firing. It gave transparency and life to the brush strokes and worked intimately with the clay. (Figure 2) Old Mine #4 plus 3% rutile brushed, then fired on my pots, was soft and gauze-like. If I used burnt umber in decorating a pot, I preferred a slip with 2.5% iron chromate added to Old Mine #4.

Winter Quarter I began to use white earthenware clay and colored slips, stains, sulfates, and engobes. Each piece was an experiment with form, with decoration, with appropriate glaze and technique of application, with kiln placement and/or was a color test. For example, I made a thirteen inch plate with a smooth, gentle curve to the rim; cut it from the wheel and pushed a wedge about halfway underneath. I sprayed the surface lightly with a sulfate, then filled a chinese brush with a color I wanted to test. It was a copper stain with equal parts of silicon carbide. My feeling was that through local reduction I would get some form of copper red. The mark I made was very nice. It related well to the form that rose as a result of the wedge, and the movement I made with my arm to produce the brushmark also touched the rim of the plate with the brush. The copper reduced beautifully in the electric kiln. There was a bonus, a circular, violet coloration, because another plate was placed on a stilt above it in the kiln and some of the metallic vapors were caught and remained on the clay. However, the background color of the plate turned drab yellow. This was caused either by the light spray of sulfate or the Frit 3124 plus kaolin mixture that I tried on all of my plates in that firing. The point is that what might have been a very good plate remained just one more experiment. (Figure 5) What follows are the materials lifted from the chaos of that period.

White Earthenware Clay Body

20 Goldart
20 Kaolin (EPK)
25 Old Mine #4 Ball Clay
10 Mississippi M and D Ball Clay
18 Nepheline Syenite
12 Spodumene
5 Flint

3% Silica Sand
1.5% Bentonite

Clear Matte Glaze, Cone 04

36 Kingman Feldspar
16 Whiting
31 Frit Pb-545
5 Kaolin
7 Flint
2.5 Bentonite
3.5 Borax

This clear matte does not drastically change the surface of the clay. Neither does it affect in an unpleasant way the sulfates, stains, and iron earths. I use the glaze as a linear embellishment (for example, I glaze half the pot) as well as a surface embellishment and prefer the glazed and nonglazed areas to be compatible. The glaze is appropriate for once-firing and is lead safe.

It was necessary for me to distinguish between an engobe and a slip in order to understand how to mix a color palette that would be appropriate to use on clay with and without a glaze. According to my definition which follows, I chose to work with engobes. A slip is a clay with or without a colorant mixed to the consistency of cream, usually. Its fired surface is dry, even powdery.

An engobe is a clay with or without a colorant, but with enough glaze components (usually boric oxide for use at low temperatures) in it to at least partially glaze its surface and heighten any colorant.

For my color palette I chose some prepared stains available in the studio and some iron earths. I added gerstley borate, or borax, or a frit containing a formula in harmony with the prepared stain and two percent gum arabic to cause surer adherence of the engobe to the clay body. According to the ratios I used my colors flux (begin to melt) at cone 04.

Here are three reds I am happy about. Raw sienna and frit 3396 in a one-to-one ratio by weight creates a rich undulating maroon when applied smoothly (put Karo syrup in the mix) and thinly. Iron sulfate and potassium aluminum sulfate in a one-to-four ratio by weight produces an orange red when liberally applied to dry white clay. (Figure 6) I have almost willed a manganese-aluminum pink into existence, but it needs a glaze containing calcia and potash in a seven-to-three ratio by weight, so it is not yet suited to my purposes.

I used many of the sulfate recipes in Kathy Reed's senior thesis (1975). I developed recipes high in alumina because I was looking for reds and pinks.

Orange-red sulfate at Cone 04

To 33 cc. water add:
11 gm iron sulfate
44 gm potassium aluminum sulfate

Dry black matte at Cone 04

To 100 cc water add:

156 gm potassium-aluminum sulfate
67 gm manganese sulfate
9 gm cobalt sulfate
15 gm iron sulfate

Blue-grey matte at Cone 04

(similar to a watercolor wash)

Add 100 cc water to the previous recipe

Sulfates are elusive. Time, temperature, and atmosphere affect them. They become invisible once they are applied to the clay. Having been completely frustrated in bending them to my purposes, I now use them by themselves. I use very strong applications and day-old solutions if the color is critical. On my last pieces, those composed on the slab roller, I let the sulfates do as they would. They were brushed (usually) on bone dry clay, two or three times. The results were worthy of the term process.

This year I have fired my pieces almost exclusively to cone 04 in an oxidation atmosphere. There are three reasons for this. One, the focus of my experiments is on clay in the wet state. I can learn as much about how the experiment is going from eliminating the bisque and firing to a relatively low temperature as I can using a firing method which employs more energy. Two, a greater range of colors is available to me at cone 04 oxidation. The colors will change in the firing, but in this temperature and atmosphere, once you have established your palette,

colors do not burn out and they fire consistently. Three, such a firing method seemed the most comfortable and the least uncertain way to succeed this year. Colors in the reduction atmosphere of a gas or wood or salt or vapor or raku kiln often fade or disappear completely. Other beautiful things happen, but at the beginning of the year I did not think I could deal with the mysteries of such firings.

PRODUCT

The following are brief statements on my four most successful processes, the results, and photographic references.

Bowls: Throw small bowls from the hump using less than two pounds of clay; retain the breathing imagery. Have total color palette available. (Figures 1 and 7)

The red earthenware bowls had been highly successful products. The marks "read" well off the dark background. The same is true of the shadows created from indentations in the form and the spraying techniques. However, color relationships in all the white bowls had no subtlety. The marks themselves were self-conscious, unrelated to the clay. Fortunately a solution has come recently in the form of a clay test. (Figure 8) One and one-quarter teaspoon iron chromate per pound of white earthenware clay fires to a pale blue-grey, medium blue-grey with glaze. My color palette is unified and strengthened on this background. The new clay color calls for an open form and suggests a more sophisticated product than the red bowls.

Plates: Work to achieve a 14-inch to 16-inch plate. Sustain production, manipulating each one from underneath. Paint total production as one, two, or three series.

Originally I decorated plates as soon as they were formed on the wheel. (Figure 9) The results of decorating three to five plates in a series with inclusive arm movements or gestures looked forced. A series of six 14-inch plates was decorated from sketches of birds in flight (originally conceived in a circular format). The most successful plate from a design and color standpoint (Figure 10) was not adversely affected by the manipulation from underneath which, in other instances, has asked that the rim be altered in addition.

Cylinders: Take two days. Throw cylinders using eight pounds of clay. Use body strength as needed. Lean on and away from the clay. See and emphasize relationships between the pieces.

These pots were bisque fired and glazed in a traditional manner. The color relationships were better than in the case of the bowls. The main difficulty was in conceiving them as cylinders to the extent that it was written into the process. As it progressed from the wheel head, the forms and the brush strokes were integrated and flowing. I did what the process called for, but I should have conceived them as forms, not cylinders. (Figures 11 and 12)

Slabs: Choose three materials to impress on clay with the slab roller. Establish a sequence of operation, placing finished slabs in the clay beds[2], selecting some, discarding others until six slabs of similar feeling exist.

Let them dry thoroughly. Apply sulfates for color and highlight.

This process must have been well conceived because I stayed with it. There were good results in each series. (Figures 7, 13 and 14)

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[2]Using wooden two by fours, I made six frames two feet square and stretched muslin over them. They made excellent beds for clay slabs. They could be manipulated from underneath and dried evenly on the muslin. Six slabs were formed, decorated, and set to dry in a day's time.

Figure 2. Red earthenware vase (11 inch).
White slip plus Boraxo

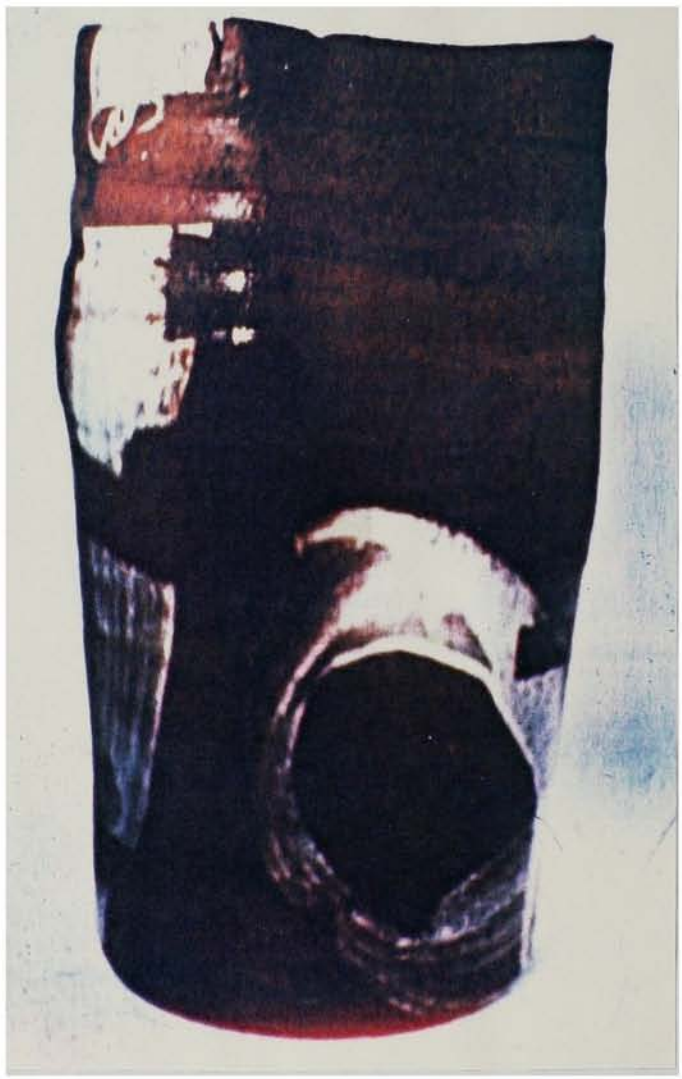

Figure 3. Torn cylinder, earthenware. Burnt umber sprayed on unmasked area

Figure 4. Rhythmic coils.

Figure 5. Plate (13 inch). Experiment with color, glaze and kiln placement.

Figure 6. Slab impression (detail).
Iron and potassium-aluminum sulfate (red-orange) with potassium dichromate (olive green).

Figure 1 (Frontispiece). Red earthenware bowl. Iron oxide sprayed outside. A blow to either side of bowl altered form and coloration.

Figure 7 (Right). Red earthenware bowl. White slip applied over iron oxide with two brushes simultaneously as pot rotated.

Figure 8 (Below). Bowl with blue, copper green (not shown) and raw sienna engobes. Iron chromate added to white earthenware (cf. Figure 11). Glaze covers half the form.

Figure 9. White earthenware plate, 12 inches.

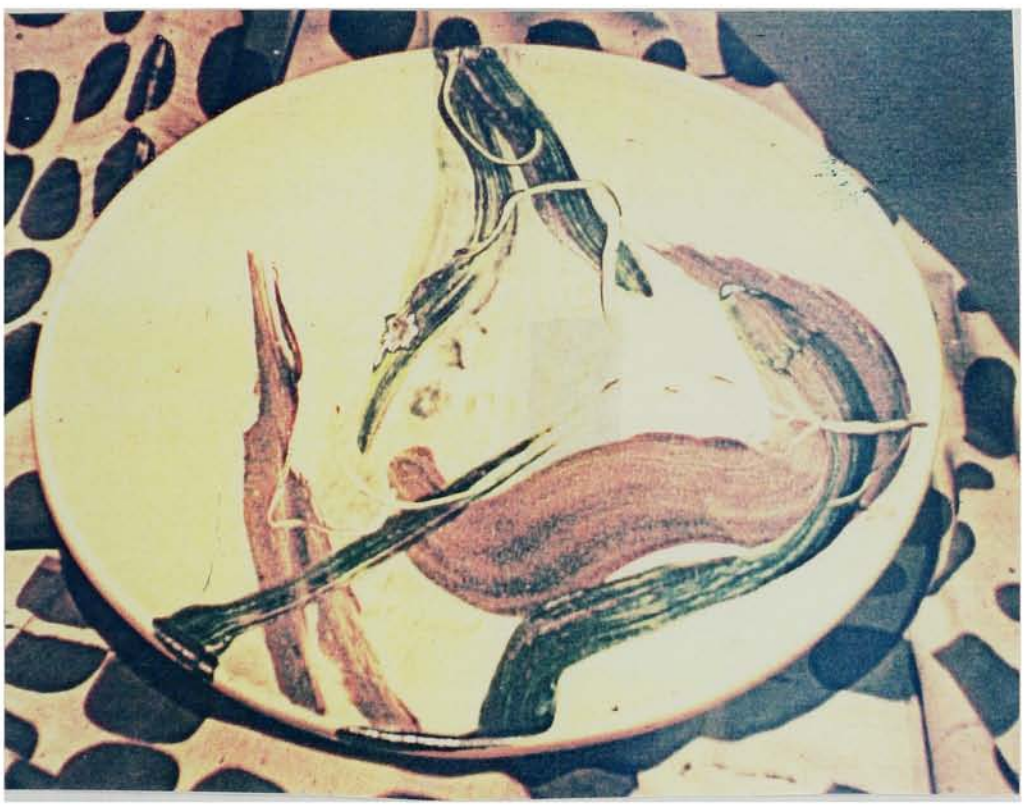

Figure 10. White earthenware plate, 14 inches.

Figure 11. White earthenware vase, 11 inches high.

Figure 12. White earthenware vase, 13 inches high.

Figure 13. Slab impression.

Figure 14. Slab impression.

CONCLUSION

Concern with process and gesture ultimately yields a blend of the two aspects of any ceramic piece, form and decoration. To be alive to the possibilities that present themselves through process requires awareness. Mental clarity comes from knowing the materials--where they are and what they will produce. Knowing the materials minimizes the distractions. Development comes as a dialogue is established with the results of the experiments in the process itself.

There was anxiety in not being able to previsualize my ceramic pieces, but through process and gesture came some results which were better than I could imagine. Spring Quarter, when I was more trusting of process and gesture to resolve the elements of form and linear embellishment, I relaxed my attitude that the pot should be decorated at the time it is formed and left some aspects of decorating for another day.

The essential drawback encountered this year was in not having a thorough understanding of the ceramic materials appropriate to the work I was doing. What was learned about ceramic materials has outweighed the frustration of not having the right clay, engobe, and sulfate at the right time Winter Quarter.

Gesture, the impulse to movement, breathing, balance, stillness, coincidence--these simple elements are what

concern me. Without intending it to be so, my most successful pieces reflect these concerns. So too, when mind and body are focused, decoration becomes a natural outgrowth of form in clay. Process has its own momentum and is not easily manipulated. To consistently produce gesture pots requires experience, time, dedication, and confidence.

I have a feel for where I may be going in clay because I became further involved in process as it is used in dance. I took part in the Nancy Topf Workshop at the University of Rochester this February. For the last five years Nancy has taught and choreographed her own work. Previously she did repertory with Merce Cunningham. Her most recent dance-game is called "Concentric Circles". Dancers are given elaborate instructions concerning sequences to follow while working in concentric circles, but the ultimate choice of movement and timing is given to the dancer. This enlivens both the face and the presence of the dancer. Each rehearsal and each performance yields different relatedness between the dancers. The walk, the run, the jump is the dancer's sole mode of communication. The dance is further enlivened by the simple detection of each dancer's feet as he or she walks and runs in the rhythm of the whole. In addition to the patterns and dynamics of the dance itself, an onlooker, thus established in simplicity, could enjoy the beauty and naturalness of the young, the partially dance-trained bodies, the special clarity of each in movement, and the eyes reflect-

ing the ease of performing the rules of the program.

Nancy Topf's dance-games evolved over a four- to five-year period. She has traveled and done workshops abroad. Her scope is international. In her hands process seems effortless.

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