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### Show and tell

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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 Art

**Show and Tell**

Andrew Hagan Thrift Coombs Master of Fine Art -- Ceramics May 2008

Thesis Approval Committee:

Rick Hirsch, Clarence Sheffield, Julia Galloway, and Liz Howe



There are quite a few people without whom I never would have accomplished this body of work, and I would like to thank them all. My thesis committee, Rick Hirsch, Julia Galloway, Liz Howe and Chip Sheffield, thank you for all the hours spent looking at and talking about my work. Chip, thank you for your genuine and scholarly interest in my work and your enthusiastic, unwavering support. Julia, your tireless and selfless devotion to your students is remarkable, anything I needed – you gave, whether a pitcher demo, your tables, or insight into my work. Liz, your understanding of what it is like to be a student was invaluable; you always came through as a voice of reason during some of the hardest times. Rick, thank you for all the time and effort you have put in to help me get where I am. Tybre, thanks for all your help. Kristina, thank you for being there for me – building walls, waking me up, and getting my ass in gear when things were tough. And my parents, thank you for all your support, I never would have gotten here without you.

“For you will hear in them your own voice; you will see in them a piece of your life, a natural possession of yours”

– Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

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## **I. To Begin**

The following traces the development of my thesis body of work from the proposal into the final show. By retracing my steps, I hope to show the failures, successes, ideas, and influences that have become incorporated in the final work. The process begins with my thesis proposal:

For my thesis body of work, I propose to make utilitarian pottery. The work will consist of the most commonly used pots in our culture: cups, mugs, bowls, serving dishes, vases and pitchers. It is important to make these common forms so people will use my work. The physical limitations defined by functionality are the parameters within which I am choosing to conduct my investigation. Also in this work, I am trying to develop my sensibility to the material while searching for my aesthetic voice.

The forms of my pots will imply an anthropomorphic personality with playful, humorous characteristics using the plastic qualities of the material. The pots will have different personalities, so that there is a sense of interaction between them. The fabrication of these pots will be achieved through throwing and altering. Each pot will be finished in color that suits the personality of that pot.

My goal is that the pots will stand on their own in the gallery as beautiful objects; however, a new understanding of them can be achieved

through use. Hopefully, these pots will present my own voice within the history of pottery and lead their owners to an experience of beauty.

Over the course of the school year, the work developed, grew, and changed from this original proposal. However, two ideas remained central to the final work – the importance of utility and use, and personality, which later matured into identity.

My ideas on utility and use largely sprung from a conversation I had with Dr. Sheffield, which deeply affected how I view the role of pottery in the life of its owner. During our conversation, he told me about a bowl he owned, a bowl that was a wedding gift. He had used the bowl for decades at family dinners, but it had developed a crack. He continued to use it even as the crack widened, unwilling to replace it. As he told me about this bowl, his attachment to and investment in it were clear. As I reflected on this conversation, I was profoundly impressed by the connection Dr. Sheffield had made with this bowl; it was as if it had become a part of his family and had a fragile life of its own. Yet, how could an object come to life and warrant such personal investment?

I arrived at an answer to this question through considering the object as witness. Dr. Sheffield's bowl had been present for decades of family dinners, a witness to the growth and change of his family. The personal investment occurred over time, one meal at a time. He invested the bowl with the memories of all these meals, giving it a life through his own. The idea that a piece of pottery can come to life for its owner through use eventually became central to my thesis body of work.

## **II. First Work**

Though the first pieces I made for my thesis were far from the finished work, the lessons I learned from their faults were essential to arriving at my exhibition. This first work consisted of thrown and altered cups and bowls. The intention of the alterations was to give the objects a dynamic and anthropomorphic character, imbuing them with a personality.

The first problem was that the alterations pushed the boundaries of function and forced the user to consider whether the piece was intended for use at all. From this, I saw clearly that the work needed to be about function, that the relationship between an individual and pottery should be straightforward so that people would use the piece and invest themselves into it. This work was the beginning of my struggle with form.

The second problem with these pieces was even more fundamental. The personality and character that the altered forms gave the pieces seemed very superficial. The pieces had a veneer of personality, but no voice. The need for a sense of honesty, authenticity and sincerity – personality that sprang from deep within the piece – led me on an investigation toward the source of personality.

### **III. Personality, Local Materials, and Text**

In my search to create sincere work in which people are willing to invest themselves, I needed to develop a deep, personal connection to the work myself. I needed to listen to my own heart and find that with which I felt a genuine connection. I began this search by investigating materials from my home state of Virginia.

During a trip home I met with some childhood friends and dug red clay from a construction site near Warrenton, Virginia. Having lived in Virginia all my life up until arriving in Rochester, New York, I feel a strong sense of connection to my place of origin. By using earth dug from this place, I felt a similar sense of connection to the material. Although this was a connection that may not directly transfer to those who use my work, I felt it was a good way for me to develop a sincere relationship with the work. My place of origin is not simply part of my personality, but an intrinsic part of my identity.

The clay from Warrenton proved to be unsuitable for producing utilitarian pottery. Consequently, I began to use the clay as a slip over a white stoneware body. This combination naturally lent itself to sgraffito decoration, and using text on the work presented an opportunity to further invest myself into the work. Before pursuing my career in clay, I studied philosophy at The College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, VA. Text allowed me to make some of the rich content of functional pottery explicit. I began using text by writing about table manners. The self-referential aspect of writing about the manners that govern the proper use of the work struck me as both interesting and humorous, and most importantly, it was an expression of my personality. However,

it quickly became apparent that writing about table manners was too narrow a focus for the entire thesis body of work. The self-referential quality of the text was important to me, but writing about table manners was too ironic to arrive at the sense of sincerity that I wanted in the work. The fundamental problem was that writing about table manners imbued the work only with personality, but not identity.

A search for identity spurred further research into using materials from Virginia. Using research published by the Virginia Department of Mining and Mineral Resources, I was able to locate natural sources of clays that showed potential for use as a utilitarian pottery clay body. Over Thanksgiving break, I returned home and dug more clay in Stafford, Virginia. My father accompanied me on this dig. My father is a potter who earned his MFA from Virginia Commonwealth University and operated a studio pottery when I was young. He closed the shop in 1987 after seventeen years of operation. At the time, I was only seven years old, but being present in the studio had made a lasting impression on me. Even after closing the pottery, my family remained close friends with other area potters, and throughout my childhood I have memories of attending open houses and craft fairs in their warm, familiar company. While digging clay with my father, I felt a connection between my history, my identity, and my art work.

After returning to the studio and processing the new clay, I began to consider using text as a record. I began decorating work with text about the clay itself – when, where, and with whom I dug it. Digging the clay had been an important event for me, and recording the event in my work allowed me to invest myself further into each piece. The objects became my witnesses to the entire process of making, and the text was intended to make this process accessible to others. The work was finally beginning to



have a quality of sincerity. Through my pursuit of personality, I had found its source – identity.

My thoughts on the origin of identity were strongly influenced by Martin Heidegger's "Origin of a Work of Art," published in 1950, a text familiar from my undergraduate years at William and Mary and which I had revisited during my graduate school experience. Equipment – the tools we use everyday – uses up earth to some purpose; equipment is useful, yet it is eventually used up through the course of work. Art, however, shows a new possibility for the earth of which it is constructed, it opens up a world to us, redefining our ideas of the very earth of which it is made. An art work creates a new identity for the material from which it is created. Art does not use up earth to some end, rather it presents the earth to us in a new light. Utilitarian pottery is normally used as equipment – tools to help us eat and drink. I believe that pottery can become art by defining the identity of the earth of which that pot is made.

Although I had made a significant stride forward in the work, I was not satisfied with the text or the forms it decorated. They lacked clarity and were a poor expression of my sensibility of the material. The text, while full of possibility, seemed overwrought. During a critique, Dr. Richard Hirsch commented that, with the current text, I was in "emotional homeruns-ville." While this was an enthusiastic compliment, I felt that making such directly emotive work was not for me. For the identity of my work to feel sincere to me, it had to come directly from my own identity.

#### IV. Surface and Form

The clay from Stafford, Virginia presented interesting technical challenges. I succeeded in turning it from a nearly unworkable, non-plastic body into a highly plastic one by adjusting the pH. While the origin of the clay was important, the technical challenges were becoming a distraction from the aesthetic problems in the work. The forms of the individual pieces were unclear, lacking an internal logic. The text was functioning primarily as a record, or communication, not as a graphic element.

Discarding the use of a local clay body as a hindrance to the development of my work, I began using a white cone ten stoneware clay body. The use of Virginia clay was still an important piece of the identity of the work for me, and I returned to using the clay from Warrenton as a slip, which

I began to call Virginia Red Slip. I found that the slip responded well to salt-firing, producing a glaze reminiscent of the American folk pottery tradition, particularly the Leon slip glaze used at the Meyer Pottery in Texas from the late nineteenth to early twentieth



Jugs, Meyer Pottery, c. 1900-1940

century. This glaze became a very important part of the overall identity of the work. Because of the reference it made to American folk pottery, the glaze imparted a domestic and familiar feel to the work.



Coventry-type Scroll Jug, 13<sup>th</sup> or 14<sup>th</sup>

One of the major influences in the forms of the pieces is Medieval English pitchers. The shapes of these pitchers influenced the forms of the entire body of work. The wide bases of these pitchers convey a sense of stability. This stability was an important characteristic in achieving a domestic, comfortable feel in the work. For the pieces to bear witness to someone's life, those pieces have to be part of that life and stand up to use for a long time. When Dr. Sheffield's bowl finally does crack, he will no longer be using it and investing memories of countless

dinners into it. The sense of stability granted by the form's base conveys ideas of strength and durability. The rims of the pieces are rounded and thicker than the walls of the pieces themselves. Commercial "diner mugs" inspired the thick, rounded rims. The thick rims of these mugs are specifically designed to resist chipping, and through that design they counter any sense of delicacy.

To resolve the lack of clarity in the forms, I researched proportion, beginning with pottery from Sung Dynasty China. By researching these forms and measuring the proportions of the work, an internal logic to each piece became apparent. The constituent parts of the individual pots – the lip, foot, belly, waist, width and height – all represented



Mug, Ayumi Horie, 2006

clear, simple ratios such as 1:2 and 2:3. Looking at more contemporary pots, I found the work of Lucie Rie to strongly exhibit these internal relationships within each form. Forms that seemed to look “right” always exhibited some rational relationship of parts to the whole. I measured some of my favorite pieces from my

own collection, and found these same mathematical relationships in them. A mug of Ayumi Horie’s was four inches tall, three inches deep, and four inches wide with the handle – a 3:4 and 1:1 relationship. Using clear mathematical relationships allowed me to gain clarity of form that had previously been missing in the work.

The text on these forms had exclusively been in my handwriting. This decoration was lacking aesthetically, possessing little visual interest and no visual connection to the forms. Using large, block lettering to contrast my small, cursive handwriting created visual tension and interest. The block letters were large enough to wrap around the piece and make the entire word inaccessible from only one viewpoint. This abstraction allowed the letters to first function as a graphic element, then, upon closer inspection, function as a word. One of my strongest inspirations for abstracting the words this way can be seen in Charles Demuth’s *Figure 5 in Gold*. Demuth created this work as a portrait of



Charles Demuth, *I Saw the Figure 5 in Gold*, 1928

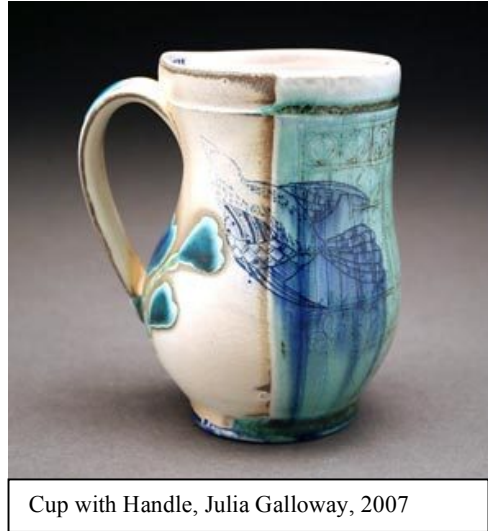
William Carlos Williams. In this work, the figure “5” transcends its mathematical significance to serve as an aesthetic element. As the figure is liberated from its mathematical significance, it becomes free to represent a new layer of content in the work – to represent Williams. One of the ways Demuth achieved this transcendence is through the large size of the figure. By using this technique on my work, I am able to initially separate the meaning of the letters from the aesthetic elements of those characters. This separation presents an opportunity for the viewer to become invested in the object as he picks it up, examines it, and discovers the content of the decoration.

Another influence in my treatment of the text is Jasper Johns’ use of alphabetical and numerical characters. Works such as *Gray Alphabets*, 1960, and *Numbers in Color*, 1958-59, abstract the characters and treat them only as an aesthetic element – separating them from any sense of meaning. Michael Crichton writes of this abstraction: “Such lack of context for the ostensible ‘subject,’ the painted figure, makes us acutely aware of the painting as a physical object.” [Crichton, 32] Pottery, by nature, tends to provoke an awareness of the physical object. By using words such as “cup” and “bowl” to decorate the pieces, I emphasize the utilitarian nature of the physical object and our interactions with it, heightening awareness of that particular object.

While the large letters allowed the words to become aesthetic elements of the pottery, the words still needed a visual connection to the form. The pottery of Julia Galloway offered me inspiration for resolving this disconnect. Galloway uses panels to break up the surface of her work. By breaking up the form, these panels offer logical places for other decoration to interact with the form. Panels of white slip, interrupting the

Virginia Red Slip background, broke up the monotony of my forms, offering a place for the decoration to become grounded in the form of the piece.

Taking another page from Galloway's notebook, the text was outlined in blue where it intersected the white panels. The blue on white decoration referenced the blue and white ware that originated in China and became popular throughout the world, symbolizing refinement and beauty. This reference contrasts the dark, varied slip, which references American folk pottery with its connotations of utility, familiarity, and domesticity. My use of these references sets the work in the context of historical ceramics, yet, through their contrast, makes the work an expression of my identity as an artist.



Cup with Handle, Julia Galloway, 2007

The blue writing on the white panel is further abstracted through the use of a running glaze over the panel. The glaze pulls some of the blue decoration with it as it moves down the piece during firing, blurring the original crisp lines of the letters. As the text is obscured, primacy is granted to the aesthetic element of the text.

## V. To Whom Am I Writing?

As the details of form and surface came together in the work, one of the last things in need of resolution was the content of the text. The text was first a graphic element, but the content is an opportunity to further invest my own identity into that of the work. The content of the text reflects the text itself. The large block letters on the pieces spell out the names of the pieces – “CUP” on the cups, “BOWL” on the bowls, and “PITCHER” on the pitchers. The handwritten text started as a record of my thoughts at the time of writing, but these thoughts lacked a cohesive relationship to the body of work. The pieces came together one day when Professor Julia Galloway happened to look at my work and remark in passing that it seemed like I was “talking to the pots.” Immediately, the content of the text became clear: I was talking to the pots, and the text is a record of my communication with each piece.

The record of my communication with the pieces was my opportunity to invest myself directly into this work. To give these pieces some sense of life, I would record information I thought the pieces needed to have. If the pieces came to life as witnesses through personal investment from an individual, the text could give the pieces an initial spark of life as a record of my personal investment. In bringing the pieces to life, I felt a responsibility to impart information to them. The large block lettering gave the pieces their most basic identity through their function. The handwritten text then gave the pieces a more individual personality from my own identity and personality.

John Baldessari’s *Teaching a Plant the Alphabet*, 1972, was influential to my communication with my work. In his video, Baldessari methodically teaches a small



houseplant the alphabet, letter by letter. While Baldessari's work is often interpreted as an exercise in futility, it suggested to me the possibility of anthropomorphism and suspension of disbelief. [van Bruggen, 78-9] In my thesis proposal I sought to achieve anthropomorphism through form, resulting in a cartoon-like anthropomorphism. In the final body of work, the anthropomorphism is entirely dependent on the role of the object as a witness.

The self-referential decoration strongly appeals to my sense of humor. It is also a common feature of many of the modern artists that I greatly admire such as Bruce Nauman and Bruce Conner. Labeling the pieces this way intrigued me. A source of inspiration is Bruce Conner's interest in his own name. His idea to have a Bruce Conner Convention, open to individuals named "Bruce Conner," is an investigation into identity. [Rothfuss, 161-2] My cups, for example, share something in common with all other cups, yet I am striving for these cups to have an identity of their own, unique within the history of ceramics. Each cup is identified by the same name, "cup," yet each cup has the possibility to become a witness to unique events and develop a life through those who use it.



## **VI. Display**

The final consideration for the thesis body of work was the mode of display. Because the work is brought to life and sustained through use, it was important to achieve a feeling of domesticity through its display. The work was presented in and on antique furniture – two dining tables, two end tables, and a cupboard. The furniture referenced a home, the final destination of the work. The work, however, was not shown in a home, but presented in the Bevier Gallery in the James Booth building at the Rochester Institute of Technology from 14 April through 7 May 2008. To make the presentation appropriate for the gallery, each piece of furniture was placed on a low white pedestal.

The two end tables were mahogany and the exterior of the cupboard was a deep brown walnut finish. These colors complemented the honey to dark red-brown range of the Virginia Red slip. To compliment the cobalt blue decoration, the dining tables and the interior of the cupboard were painted a slightly grayed, very light cobalt blue in an eggshell finish.

The pieces that made up the show were chosen for two reasons: utility and size. Cups, bowl, plates and pitchers are the most commonly used pottery in a domestic American setting. To give the show visual variety and interest, large bowls and demitasse cup and saucer sets were included in the show.

The show occupied two walls and a sixteen by sixteen foot space in the gallery. The two dining tables were centered in this space. One table held a large bowl and two cereal bowls, and the other held four stacked place settings – a dinner plate, salad plate, bowl and cup. The space was open on two sides, and bordered on one by windows and

on the other by an eight-foot tall, sixteen-foot wide wall. The cupboard and one end table were against this wall. The end table held a pitcher and a set of four cups, and the cupboard was filled with cups, mugs, demitasse and saucer sets, bowls and pitchers. The other wall extended eight feet back from the corner of the first wall, away from the window, further into the gallery. Against this wall was the other end table, holding another pitcher and set of four cups, and five plates were hung on the wall. Four of these plates measured ten inches in diameter, and the fifth measured fourteen inches. Across the largest, written in cobalt in large block lettering was the word “SHOW.” On two of the small plates I signed my name – “Andrew” on one, and “Coombs” on the other. On the last two plates I wrote the two paragraphs of my artist’s statement:

I am a potter. I intend my work to be used. I strive to address the subjects of presentation, utility, beauty, and craft in my work. Although I seek to make work that stands on its own, I feel that a piece is not truly complete until it is in use. The pot and its contents should exist symbiotically, each elevating the other to heighten the enjoyment of the meal.

In my current body of work, I am decorating the pots with layers of text. The text is a decorative element, as well as a record of my communication with the object. The words that I record on the surface of the pot are those that I would like to say to the pot as it begins its life. I believe pots become alive through use, as they bear witness to the life of the user. The words I communicate to the pots give them their first breath of life, which I can only hope will be nourished by the next owner.

## **VII. Conclude**

The process of creating my thesis body of work was a struggle. In writing this paper, I hope to have shared some of the failures and successes that led me to this body of work. Many of the lessons can be summed up as finding balance – between the technical and the artistic, conceptual and aesthetic, thinking and doing, personal and public, gallery and home. Balancing my interest in local materials with the aesthetic needs of my work, my philosophy background with my artistic endeavor, and blurring the words into decoration while leaving some legible – these were all essential elements to creating and showing a body of work that was personal and successful.

I feel the idea that the art can only become sincere and honest through my investment of my own identity into it will be central to all my future work. For the objects to have personality, it must first have an identity. For that identity to feel sincere to me, it must come from my own identity. I believe this to be the basis of my art, and I look forward to taking these lessons into my next struggles.











*Pitcher and Cups*, Title, Artist Statement, and Name



Title and Artist Statement





*Pitcher and Cups, Name*





*Pitcher and Cups*





*Cups and Saucers, Bowls, and Pitchers*



*Four Cups*



*Place Setting*







*Six Bowl Stack*



*Cup with Handle*





*Pitcher*

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## Recipes

### 8A Base

Frit 3110	36.4
Lithium Carbonate	8
Barium Carbonate	6.8
EPK	20.4
Silica	28.4

### Ayumi's Tuesday Base

Kona F-4	40
Whiting	10
Dolomite	15
EPK	15
Silica	10
Magnesium Carb.	10
Bone Ash	6

### Johnston Porcelain Glaze

Custer Feldspar	29.1
Whiting	10.9
Talc	10.9
EPK	25.9
Silica	20.0
Magnesium Carb.	2.9