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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 Arts

A Recipe

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February 2006

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Date April 28, 2006

For Scott, my best friend, husband, and favorite person.

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PREFACE

There are moments in this life that I recall not as visual snapshots but as tastes and fragrances. They make sense to me, to who I am, in ways that I suppose are profoundly rooted. At the same time they are blessedly involuntary; for I cannot control when they spring up within me and take over. They are truly re-membered, that is, those moments seems as deeply etched into the matter of my body now as anything can be.
***Coming Home to Eat* - Gary Paul Nabhan**

My first memory was when I was about three or four years old. This memory includes: *bare feet in green grass, bright sun, shaded ground from cherry trees and my mother sitting in a lawn chair; her hands snapping green beans into an aluminum colander. In the periphery, are my sisters, brother and father; running, playing and tending to the yard and garden.* From this first memory, spring all my early childhood memories, where emphasis was on the out of doors and the dinner table. At night, my family would sit at the round table in our warm kitchen, reciting grace to begin dinner. Harvested from our garden were pots of salted green beans, buttery corn on the cob and ripe tomatoes. We were taught to rehearse with pride, the trees in our yard... “Sixteen magnolia, three cherry, two apple and one pear...” *Clinking glasses, shiny forks and spoons, long ladles, oven mitts, white tablecloths, cast iron trivets, salt and pepper pots, stacks of white plates, napkins in our laps;* objects of utility were the instruments and signifiers of family ritual.

These early childhood interactions and their instilled values are an integral part of my interests in making utilitarian pottery. It is through the act of making utilitarian pottery, gardening, cooking and sharing with friends that I connect to daily ritual both past and present, ultimately, honoring the connections between friends, family and memory.

INTRODUCTION

Plant life is visual, tactile, aromatic, fetching, and mysterious- beans that look like jewels; subtle grains; the strange beauty of seaweeds; the ingenuity of man-made foods like coils of pasta, myriad cheeses and the different hues and fragrances of oils.

- Deborah Madison, Vegetarian Cooking for Everyone

The summer between my first and second year in graduate school, I was fortunate to grow a garden on my friend's land in Naples, New York. Over that summer, I was humbled by the generosity of a garden. With a minimal amount of care, our garden yielded an enormous amount of peppers, tomatoes, herbs and flowers. An overwhelming sense of pride developed as I arranged wildflower bouquets, canned salsa and sat down to dinners of fresh salad, soups and pies. I had gardened all my life, off and on, but not since my early childhood had I been so closely connected with all the processes from seed to soil; harvest to table. Coming back to school that fall, I knew that my focus would be to represent the garden and its many gifts through my pottery.

In making pottery that would support this idea or concept, I sought out utilitarian items that would sufficiently express my sentimental thoughts on gardening. Based on the garden's generous harvest, my focus centered on items that are used for storage and display, specifically jars and flower containers. Formally, my work is inspired by a multitude of influences ranging from pre-historic utilitarian ceramics, modern industrial

design as well as my own intuitive responses to landscape & garden. As if concocting a new recipe, my approach to research has been to acquire a variety of intuitive thought and image, some acting as bits of spice, others as main ingredient, each equally important in their role of informing the objects I make. It has been my preference not to identify with one historical or contemporary influence in particular; although there are some areas in which I find myself inspired. Respective to this thesis, it is my attempt to document this formal 'recipe', beginning with pre-historical utilitarian wares and finishing with garden and landscape.

A RECIPE

*It contains nothing.
We ask it
To contain nothing.*

*Having transcended use
It is endlessly
Content to be.*

*Still it broods
On old burdens-
Wheat, oil, wine.*

Robert Francis- Museum Vase

*For it is always possible to trace back even the most elaborate of ceramic extravaganzas, perhaps through its historical development, to point where it's feet stand, as it were, on the ground of daily experience. **Philip Rawson, Ceramics***

PRE-HISTORY

From my initial inspiration in the garden, I developed an interest in early agrarian cultures and their ceramic wares, roughly, those between 800 BC and 4000 BC. I view this to be a special time in history, as well as in the history of ceramics. In my experience, gardening defines, in the most simplified of ways, what it is to be human. With this thought in mind, the historic ceramics of early agrarian cultures are symbolic of the earliest connections to the pleasures of raising one's food and thus of humanity itself.

Historic ceramics or ceramics that were in wide use, made their first appearance nearly 8000 years ago in the Near East, coinciding with the domestication of plants, such as wheat, barley, lentils and peas grown in the fertile crescent of the Near and Middle East.¹ The history of farming and gardens is extensive and much is written and mythologized on the subject. Essentially, agrarian life was rooted in the ebb and flow of the seasons. The act of raising one's food and eating was at first, a response to individual needs, gradually becoming a key element of group structure, influencing every aspect of life and social development.

Although, I've concentrated on examples of historic pots from the Near East, Egypt, and the Mediterranean, the physical characteristics described are not limited to these early cultures. There is an abundance of information on these historic cultures, their particular societies and material cultures; what is of interest to my work is to view these wares as a whole. Despite geographic and historical divides; there exist innumerable examples of swelling pitchers, simplistic jars, and generous cups, with their common depictions of stylized plants, animals, and humans. (Fig. 1-13)

Often thought to have survived through funerary or ceremonial rites, (indicating the spiritual connect to nourishment & life) these pre-historic pots, exhibit both a simplified and unassuming quality. They share among them a humble kinship with both man and nature, harking back to the prehistoric images found on cave walls and rock outcroppings.²

One such example of this connection is the Kamares Ware Goblet dated 1800 B.C. (fig. 1) Likely used in ceremony, this delightful goblet celebrates nature with its applied flowers and painted geometric and natural motifs. One notices the wide foot, and substantial rim providing durability beyond its use in ceremony. The fresh and uninhibited quality of early Kamares ware reflects the vitality of a culture immersed in its natural environment of island and sea.³

It is these items' perceived "*down to earth*" quality to which I find myself formally drawn. Interpreted from these works into my own, are the use of a rich earthenware clay body, generous proportions, and a large foot with a wide stance, *planting them firmly to the ground.*



Figure 1, Minoan, Kamares Goblet, 1800 B.C.



Figure 2, Earthenware Jar, Iran, 2000-1800 B.C.



Figure 3, Earthenware Goblet, Egypt, 3500 B.C.



Figure 4, Earthenware Goblet, Iran, 5500-5000 B.C.



Figure 5, Minoan, Kamares Ware, 1700 B.C.



Figure 6, Villinovan amphora, 700 B.C.



Figure 7, Greece, 3000 B.C.



Figure 8, Egypt, 3500 B.C.



Figure 9, Etruscan urn, 650-600 B.C.



Figure 10, Crete, 15th century B.C.



Figure 11, Crete, Storage Jar



Figure 12, Minoan, Kamares jar, 19th century B.C.



Figure 13, Crete, 15th century B.C.

INDUSTRIAL DESIGN

As we see, we project our style preferences- our moods- and those preferences become a filter, through which we select those things that correspond to the lines and shapes of our preferred style-whatever it happens to be at any given time...Our glances will naturally alight on something and pass where there is nothing. This is one of the most relevant aspects of design.

-Eva Zeisel, On Design.

Eva Zeisel explains in her book *On Design* that the root of twentieth century design, with its “limited language of rational lines and forms”, (*coinciding with the later named “Modern Movement”*) was in direct reaction to the comfort and sentimentalism of the nineteenth century.⁴ Motivated by “improving the efficiency of industrial production,” industry developed a division in labor. This resulted in, what Zeisel terms, as a division between the “technical form” and the “art form”. This division essentially severed the communication between the artist/maker and his public. Decidedly curvilinear and stressing non-emotion, the technical form was at first thought, by nineteenth century standards, “to be in need of beautification,” the results of which are the applied arts.⁵ (*Art to be applied to the surface of the useful technical form.*)

In time, Zeisel explains, with the modern movement came a change in aesthetics. The Dresden Exhibition of 1906 catalog states: “The elements of the technical form, insofar as they demonstrate the beauty of the solid materials, the suitability to a purpose, represent the highest of artistic forms.”⁶ Modernism rejected the overly ornate forms and

ornamentation of the preceding centuries and embraced the aesthetic of simple, bold form and muted color.

It is in this movement of aesthetic change that I find an interesting correlation with my own aesthetic values. Although, the modern industrial object was in opposite reaction to the comfort and sentimentalism of the nineteenth century, my understanding of early twentieth century industrial objects is through *experience*, as they were used in my childhood home and in that of my grandparents. Detached from any social or artistic movement, I developed what can be explained as a nostalgic sentimentalism, *to these so called non-emotional items of efficiency*, based on my generational experience of use and remembrance. The minimal forms act as signifiers, little symbols of memory and family. Pictured, are just a few of the popular items of utility produced by industry in the early and mid-twentieth century. (Fig 14-18) Not only were these utilitarian items a part of my family's household, I currently own and use some of them today.

Early modern design's softly geometric form, curvilinear line and lightly colored glaze palette, had great influence over how I chose to design my work. The soft, flower forms, repeated throughout the thesis are not only indicative of modern design's curvilinear line but are also intended to elicit a *sense* of nostalgia itself.

The flower motif used in the thesis work developed partly through design and partly through the actual making process. While I'd been searching for a form that would represent the garden, I had been enjoying throwing bottomless rings on the wheel and finishing them with hand built additions. At some point, I started slicing the rings into parts, curving them, and reattaching them. The floral form was a natural progression. The asymmetrical flowers are reminiscent of a popular Japanese design, originating from

the spring blossom of cherry trees. This design is used extensively in everything from children's toys to fine art, and is infused with many symbolic meanings, including the arrival of spring, youth, transience and melancholy.⁷ Purposely generalized, the flowers are intended to be symbolic in their representation of all that is past and present.

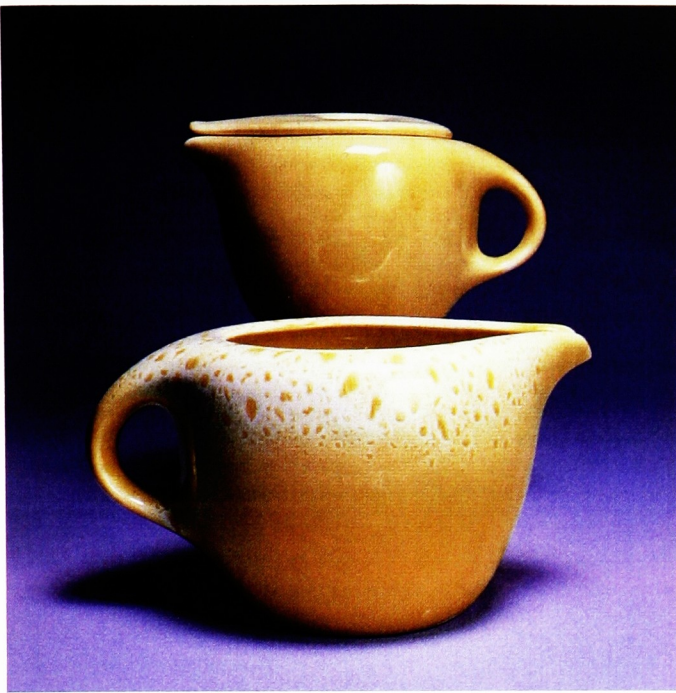


Figure 14, Designer, Russle Wright, 1937



Figure 15, Designer, Russle Wright, 1935-1940

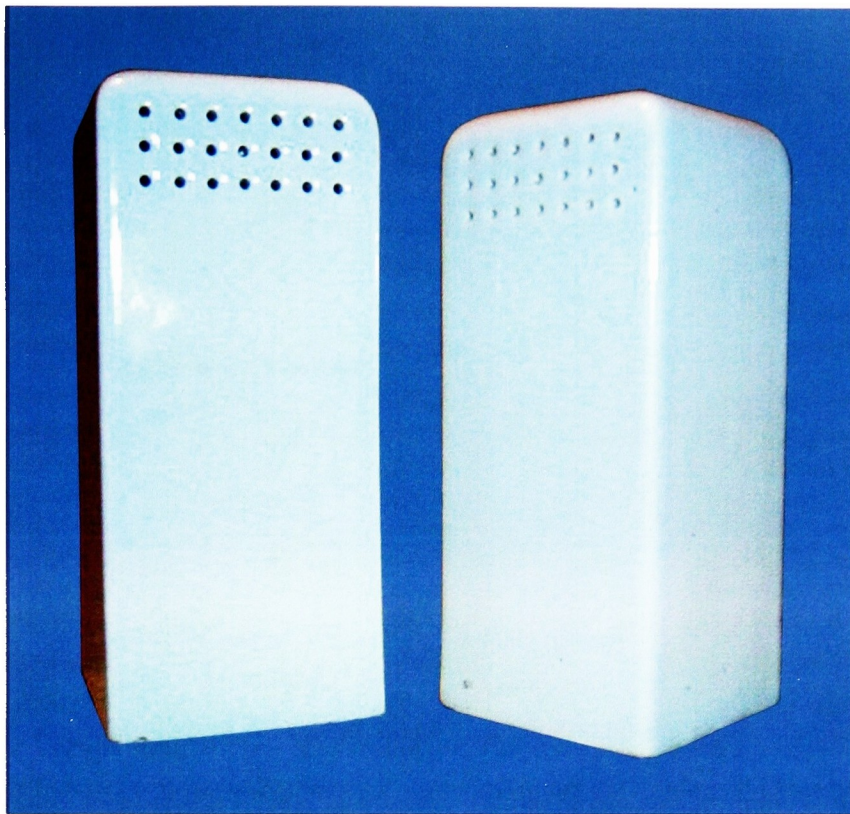


Figure 16, Salt and Pepper Shakers (1930-1940's)

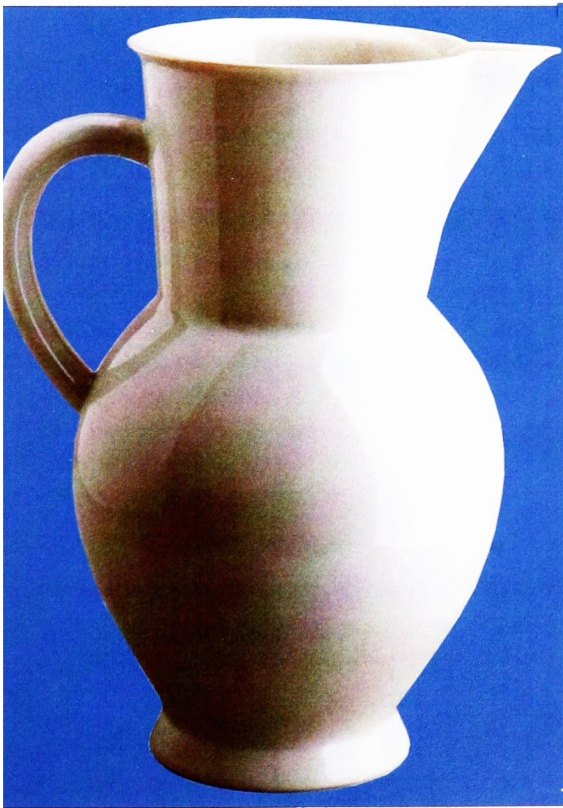


Figure 17, Pitcher (1930's)

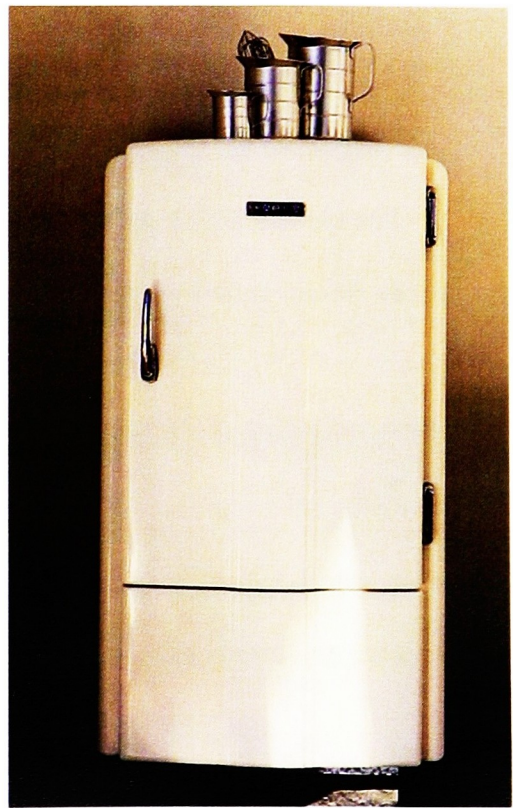


Figure 18, Streamline refrigerator (1950s)

LANDSCAPE AND GARDEN

To see the Summer Sky

Is Poetry, though never in a book it lie—

True Poems flee—

- Emily Dickison

As afore mentioned in the introduction, my understanding of landscape originates from the act of gardening, much of which exists as subtle impressions in my periphery. Not easily defined, the importance of its description is based on its employment in my glaze application and in the discourse for my creative process.

Essentially, my impressions from the garden, are images of foreground and background. From the vantage point of the garden, looking out over the landscape, the foreground reveals details of leafy greens, dots of ripe tomatoes, bright flowers and dangling green peas, while the background, visually distanced, is divided into blocks of color representing the trees and hills in their entirety.

In relationship to the thesis body of work, the background is represented in the glaze application of subtle blocks of soft color that traverse the surface of the pots. Finer detail is kept to a minimum, allowing the user to insert detail with flowers, beans, spice, or anything that strikes the imagination. A continuation of this idea is exemplified in the flower containers (plate 1). The surfaces of the containers are divided into

non-occupied areas of space to represent the background, while designated areas are provided for the insertion of detail. From this idea, developed the large two-piece flower container. (Plates 5&6) In this piece, the areas of detail and landscape were built separately. The larger field of color is exaggerated, representing the vast landscape and the round flower container is once again within the garden. This theme of foreground and background was carried through out the thesis work in both form and surface.

ARRIVING AT THE RECIPE

Nourishment- n. 1. Food, or the valuable substances in food that a person, animal, or plant requires to live, grow or remain healthy. 2. Something that provides a stimulating and healthy emotional or intellectual environment for people or animals.

Much of the work I made in graduate school concentrated on continuous questioning, research and a great deal of experimentation, *both* technically and conceptually. In the relatively short time of two years, what at first seemed like incongruent, non-related explorations, now reveal theoretical and visual similarities grounded in touch and curious introspection.

Before attending graduate school, my interests in exploring the ideas of nostalgia were firmly in place. For some time, I had found inspiration in the early modern designers, such as Russell Wright and Eva Zeisel and had applied those ideas to the porcelain pottery I made. With the desire to research similar subject matter with new and varied ways of making, I began with salt and pepper shakers. Finding new inspiration in the appliances of the early twentieth century, I departed from primarily wheel thrown ceramics to work that was minimally wheel thrown and more extensively hand built. I enjoyed making these small squared objects. A great deal of time was spent paddling simple wheel thrown cylinders into small squares, sealing their tops and bottoms and

delighting in the drilling of small holes, from which seasonings would pour. Working on small intimate objects was comforting and satisfied the ideas of nostalgia through their intimate size, relating them to other cherished objects or memories. Grouping sets of the shakers into “collections” furthered my interests in nostalgia and its possible manifestations. For a short time from here, I explored other small condiment containers, such as sugar shakers and butter dishes all with a penchant for the stocky, squared forms of washing machines, refrigerators, stoves, and toasters.

From these conceptually inspired beginnings, encouragement was focused on branching out and developing needed technical skill and knowledge. Rather than focusing on conceptual ideas, I spent the remainder of my first year exploring various ways of working with wheel thrown and altered forms. It was here that I encountered a wealth technical “failures” that were both informative and daunting. Learned from this, were a greater technical knowledge, a desire to learn more and the understanding that without an inspiring idea, I was in effect, *lost*. I enjoy the brainstorming aspect of design and creation. For me, thoughtful and challenging discussions of the ideas are not only more interesting than technically derived conversations but are indeed, what motivate me to work through technical limitations and to move beyond my preconceived notions of what an object can be.

THE FINAL THESIS WORK

Upon entering my second year, the endless potential of the garden had taken root. Not wanting to disregard my inspirations of nostalgia, I sought to fold these ingredients into the recipe. The work went through *many* permutations and developments as I grappled with both technical and conceptual concerns.

The thesis show consisted of a variety of differently sized storage jars, flower containers and a wall piece comprised of 35 smaller flower containers “floating” together in loose pattern. Some of the jars were kept lidded, while others lids were propped on the jar’s sides and filled with colorful contrasting beans. The flower containers were filled with a variety of flowers including daisies and tulips. I found this aspect of adding food and flowers to the work both pleasurable and informative. (Informative as to how I would make them in the future to better accompany their contents.)

The greatest assets the work possessed were an overall unified body of work and soft surfaces inviting to the touch. My personal favorites were the two opposing flower containers (Plate 1) and the larger landscape piece. (Plate 5) These two pieces introduced a new line of thought. In response to landscape, I began to designate the intended areas for placement of the flowers. From this line of thinking, I understood the strength of positive and negative space both in form and surface. I had only just begun to allow a portion of the pieces to remain ‘unused’, making way for new responses in surface decoration and color.

The second year was not without its technical difficulties. In the compressed time of seven months, I embraced the challenge of working in a new clay body, new firing temperature and glaze surfaces. All of this came with a host of problems not easily resolved.

An example of this would be with the use of commercial glazes. I had exhausted a vein of glaze research that was not responding to my expectations. Time being of the essence, I reluctantly employed the use of commercial under-glazes *or slips* and glazes. Although, I knew other artists using commercial glazes without regret and I knew it was an option I was not completely opposed to, it would be true to say, I wish I had more time to work on technical issues such as this.

CONCLUSIONS

ROOTS

*Draw over and dig
The loose ash soil
Hoe handles are short,
The suns course long
Fingers deep in the earth search
Roots, feel them out; feel through;
Roots are strong.*

-Gary Snyder

As an artist, I have come to understand my experience of graduate school and the thesis body of work as appropriately transitional. In the two years since the thesis, I have continued to working with clay and have opened to other ceramic techniques and applications including combinations clay with other media. Many of the questions I had at my final thesis have been answered, while more have been posed. With the advantage of time, I have enjoyed a slower work pace and have opened to more varied ways of creating. For me, the strong foundation of the thesis is endless with potential and acts as springboard for the generation of new works. I have become more observant of my overall creative process and appreciate the subtle progressions and simpler accomplishments of a crisp line or a fluid glaze. I am continuously inspired through my gardening and the many life lessons learned from such a simple pleasure.



Color Plate 1



Color Plate 2



Color Plate 3



Color Plate 4



Color Plate 5



Color Plate 6



Color Plate 7



Color Plate 8



Color Plate 10

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ENDNOTES

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(New York, N.Y. , Harry N. Abrams Incorporated, 1992) p.11, 13
- ² **Camusso, Lorenzo.** Ceramics of the World: from 4000 B.C. to the present
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- ³ **Tansey & Kleiner.** Gardner's Art Through the Ages
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- ⁴ **Zeisel, Eva.** On Design, The Magic Language of Things
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- ⁵ **Zeisel, Eva.** On Design, The Magic Language of Things
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- ⁶ **Zeisel, Eva.** On Design, The Magic Language of Things
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- ⁷ **Information Database:** Relationships with Nature: Cherry Blossom
< <http://Japanese.about.com/library/weekly/aa031900.htm/>>

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Jody Selin 2003-2004



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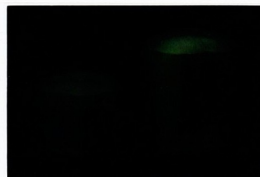
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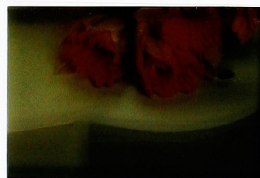
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