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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE CHALLENGE OF FUNCTIONAL ART

By

**Janice C. Anthony**

Date: September 1, 1986

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### LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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## INTRODUCTION

The original purpose of this thesis was to explore form, endeavouring to produce vessels with a sculptural, gestural character and yet make the pieces function effectively. I think this has been the major focus but another concern has appeared in the exploration taken on for this thesis. It seemed to be time to step out on my own and search for a personal aesthetic that was relevant to my experience and understanding of the world in which I exist.

## SOURCES

The prime motivating force for my dedication to ceramics has been, and will continue to be, a love of the material clay. The responsive character of wet, plastic clay and the multitude of ways to create form provide the potential for continual growth and development. During my career as a student of ceramics, I have tried several of the possible methods of working with clay; throwing on the wheel, constructing pots with thrown pieces, building with coils or slabs and various combinations of all of these processes. One thing that has been consistent in all these efforts has been the desire to somehow change the form originally created, not by surface texture or colour, but to actually alter the form itself by manipulating the clay. This is also a unifying link in many of my major influences and sources.

I have greatly benefitted from a working philosophy of two of my instructors at Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Walter Ostrom and Akio Takamora. In their work, both use tools and techniques merely as a means to an end not allowing the process to dictate the appearance of the finished piece. This involves knowing

the potentials of the materials and processes and constantly seeking new ways to use those potentials to further the aesthetic aims. These ideas seem to encourage that risk taking which is so essential to growth and change in any artist. In my own work this attitude has led me to be continually looking for ways to change the basic form I start with, to always alter its shape, cut pieces out, or add something to it.

Throughout my undergraduate and graduate programs I have been exposed to and gained great benefit from the rich historical tradition in ceramics. There is such a vast range of possible sources within this history that I feel there will always be a source of inspiration there waiting to be discovered. During the time of this thesis exploration there are of course a few that have been more important and should be specifically mentioned.

The casual elegance and full, elusive curves of early Yi Dynasty Korean pottery (1:1,2,6,17)\*, have always been a joy to me. At the beginning of my graduate studies I was working with more geometric and straight lined forms and it was a positive leap in

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\*Numbers in parenthesis refer to numbered references in the bibliography; those after the colon are plate numbers.



development to rediscover the Korean works. This led me to return to curved, voluminous forms that are much more pleasing to my eyes and more natural to my hands.

Consistent with my fascination with the qualities of clay, the Iga and Bizen tea ceremony wares of 17th century Japan (3: 41, 42,43,46,48) have also been a strong historical influence. These pots effectively display the character of soft, responsive clay and obviously were made by human hands in what only appears to be a casual manner. I am also drawn by the figurative proportions and animated quality of these pots, a feeling that I have tried to achieve in my own work.

A much more recent influence which has become increasingly strong during my graduate work is Minoan and Mycenaean art (2). In the pots and wall paintings there seems to be an essence that I respond to and that I am trying to attain. Perhaps it is that sense of being in touch with the naturalistic world. Or perhaps the appeal is in the carefree, spontaneous character of the work, the humor, the delight in the world and the delight in the objects.

One last important source has been the book Decorative Patterns of the Ancient World (4) which contains page after page crammed full of small, line drawings of patterns of many types from the ancient civilizations. I spent much time just casually looking

at this book discovering new things every time I picked it up. Then with one of those wonderful tricks of the sub-conscious mind the patterns began to appear on my pots, only I was making them three dimensional volumes in the walls of the pots. The process then became one of deliberate observation of the patterns, synthesizing them with impressions from my own surroundings and integrating the result with the form of the pot. In the end result I am not entirely sure which has the upper hand, the slab form that I start with or the voluminous patterns that move around the piece. I believe they have become interdependent, unable to exist successfully on their own.

All of these sources and influences have been important and will continue to be of great value but, upon reaching graduate school, it became apparent that they should be put into the background. I had gained much technical knowledge and skill through my undergraduate experiences and had benefitted by looking at the pottery of other times and people but that was not enough. I had to try to begin to find a symbolic language of form that would allow me to express my own thoughts and feelings.

## PROCESS

The beginning, of course, involved a search through various kinds of form and much internal confusion. There were so many questions: What to make? How to make it? What do I want to say? What is important to me? The best way for me to resolve some of these issues was to keep working, to let one pot lead on to the next until what is important begins to surface. This process keeps that all-important dialogue between my hands and the clay continuing and makes the response of the clay a part of the thought process. Gradually a method of construction developed using wet slabs to build simple cylinders, cones and triangular forms which would be altered to make soft, sculptural vessels. This gave me the answer to the question of how to make it, but the rest of the questions still needed much resolution.

It was quite apparent to me that form was the major emphasis in my work, but what forms to make? The first obvious decision to be made was whether to make sculptural or functional vessels. The tactile quality of clay is important to me and I want my work picked up and handled. I want the interaction of my hands with the clay to

be shared and carried on by the viewer/user. These concerns made it obvious that function was the only way to proceed.

This decision brought forward many important issues. I did not want the pots to just appear to function or to be about function, they had to be truly useable. The pots had to be comfortable to pick up, to pour well, to have a stable base, to invite the hands and be enjoyable to use. Good craftsmanship became a focus of attention. I had to develop techniques that would enable me to produce hand-built pots what would meet all of these critical standards.

While paying attention to craftsmanship and utility, I still wanted to retain and improve the sculptural, animated quality that had begun to appear in the pots. I had the beginnings of a language of form and did not want to sacrifice that to the requirements of function. That was the challenge, to make it work and still express my thoughts and feelings freely.

## THE WORK

### Utility

In many respects it is the pots themselves that most effectively show if the challenge has been met and the thesis proposal accomplished (see Ill.#1-4). Although I always think the pots yet to be made will always be better and it is really the ones still in my head that I want to show in the gallery, I believe I have accomplished many of the aims of this thesis exploration.

The physical evidence of use does show that the work meets the requirements of function reasonably well. However, that is the easier side of the issue requiring technical innovation, careful craftsmanship and much patience. The personal expression and feeling of the work has been a much greater struggle. As stated in the thesis proposal I have been endeavouring to create organic, volumetric vessels with a character of vitality and animation. In reality these aims quickly became more specific and more complicated.

One very important element of both the technical process and the aesthetics of my work reflects back on the previously mentioned attitude towards tools and techniques. In the making of these pieces I have tried to solve technical and construction problems in a way that would further the aesthetic aims. In adding feet to stabilize the mugs I have used them as a method of increasing the animation of the form. Rather than just drawing organic patterns on the forms I have turned them into volumes that, as well as establishing the final shape of the pot and integrating the form and decoration, add life and movement to the piece. This attitude of benefitting from what could be considered problems has become a major element of my decision making process. This is what has allowed me to incorporate the concerns of utility without compromising the aesthetic statement.

### Energy and Motion

Perhaps the primary aesthetic concern has been to always keep the pots energetic and animated, to make them look as if they just might decide to walk across the table. This has involved considerable attention to the stance of the pot, to have it stable on the stand or table and yet keep the contact light as if on tip-toes or posed to take a step. In the case of the volumes pushed

into the walls of the pots I have tried to give them a gesture of movement and to position them as if springing from the points where the feet contact the ground. The forms also must have a sense of energy as if forces inside are trying to burst out of the pot and yet are constrained by outside pressures pushing in trying to hold the form together.

I have wanted the various pieces of each set to have their own character and still be part of the larger group. It is the manipulated, gestural volumes together with the expression of the form that has given the pots their individual characters. In the Coffee Service (Ill. #2), although the patterns on the pieces are quite similar, they each have their own eccentricities. The coffeepot, with its extra height and the long curve of the handle, is rather elegant. The cream and sugar are somewhat impudent, particularly the sugar bowl with its squat proportions and fat, leaned forward, yellow patterns. In the mugs the yellow motifs are more carefree, leaning this way and that, making these pieces seem to dance attendance to the larger pots.

In the case of the Tea Service (Ill. #2) the teapot is the most dominant and elegant part of the grouping. However, in contrast to the stately bearing of the coffeepot, the teapot has a more energetic character. The long sweep of the yellow pattern from the front feet of the pot up and around to lead into the curve of



the handle creates a more dynamic gesture. The cream and sugar of this set are the liveliest characters acting much as the mugs do in the Coffee Service. The cups and saucers bring in an additional element not present in the Coffee Service. The rippling edges of the saucers and the organic patterns and contours of the cups are reminiscent of waterlillies floating in the water or, when the fluttering of the saucers becomes more active, of a flower dancing in the wind.

The Dessert Set (Ill. #3 and 4) is an idea that developed from making the saucers for the Tea Service. It is the result of an exploration to discover what would happen if the same methods and thought processes were applied to a more two dimensional form. The intent was to try to keep the form and decoration energetic and retain a sense of motion but without the reference to human or animal stance and posture. The movement has been maintained in the up and down flutter of the edges of the tray and plates. The relief patterns of these edges still hint at life but the more peaceful existence of plants and flowers. The flat surfaces have become a resting point for the form and the eye, containing only the gentle flow of some undefined liquid.



## Tactile Quality

A second and equally important aesthetic issue in my work has been the tactile nature of both the form and its surface treatment. I want the form to display the dialogue between my hands and the plastic maleable clay. I believe this dialogue is a vital part of the "life" of a pot that can be passed on to initiate another, hopefully similar, response and dialogue between the pot and the viewer/user.

The forms, created when the clay is plastic and responsive, have volumes and depressions flowing into one another around the pot. These soft, handled variations within the form invite the hands to pick up the pieces and explore the shapes and movement. The essence of the forms is only truly understood using both the sense of sight and of touch.

The surface treatment of the work intensifies the tactile quality of the pieces. White slip is brushed over the red clay body emphasizing the contours and the movement in the forms. This creates a painterly texture that varies in thickness and colour often allowing the red clay to show through. The glossy, coloured glazes applied over this slip are transparent with an almost water colour feeling to them. This use of slip and glazes has a sense of layering, creating an inviting surface that has depth and richness.

The choice of colour applied to the pots is used to emphasize the form and increase the tactile nature of the pieces. Contrasts of light and dark glazes heighten the relief of the pushed out volumes and overlapping of glazes provides a soft transition from one colour area to another. In some cases black is used to strengthen the definition of the volume drawings or to create a negative background allowing more brightly coloured areas to jump forward and claim attention.

#### Context

One final issue that is vital to this body of work is the context in which I would ideally wish the pieces to be placed. The gallery set up of a Thesis Show does not display the work in the situation it was designed for and, to a degree, distances the viewer from the pots. I believe the work would be most successful in a home being used as a part of the ceremony of serving and enjoying tea, coffee or dessert. I envision the pieces set up on a dining room table or a coffee table, creating a pleasureable environment for the shared ritual of after dinner beverages or tea and coffee with friends. In this setting the totality of the intent could be appreciated. The functional aspect would be fully understood, the tactile qualities explored and the visual statement strengthened by the direct interaction with the work.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis work has been, as proposed, an exploration in form which has led to the creation of a body of work that I believe does meet the challenge of uniting my functional and aesthetic concerns. But, more importantly, I have started to search out what I personally wish to express and to find out how to communicate these thoughts through the work. I feel this is just the beginning with great potential for further exploration and discovery as I, and my work, continue to grow and develop.



Ill. 1. Coffee Service





III. 2. Tea Service



III. 3. Dessert Tray and Plates



Ill. 4. Dessert Plates

## APPENDIX A

### TECHNICAL INFORMATION

#### CLAY BODY

##### Red Earthenware

Cone 05-03

Red Art Clay	50
Ochmulge Clay	10
APG Fireclay	10
Talc	15
O.M. #4 Ball Clay	15
	<u>100</u>

Plus

1 - 2% Barium Carbonate to prevent scumming

1 scant handful of nylon fibres per 100 lbs. added to dry mix to increase wet and dry strength

#### SLIP

##### White Slip

Cone 05-03

Grollege	15
EPK	20
XX Sagger Ball Clay	30
Nepheline Syenite	5
Frit 3124	20
Flint	6
Bentonite	4
	<u>100</u>



## GLAZES

### Tim's Clear

Cone 04

Gerstley Borate	55
EPK	30
Flint	15
	<u>100</u>

#### Colourants:

Medium Blue	-	4% Copper Carbonate
		1% Cobalt Carbonate
Green	-	6% Copper Carbonate
Orange	-	10% Golden Ambrosia Mason Stain
Yellow	-	4% Vanadium Yellow Mason Stain

### Deb's Clear

Cone 05

Frit 3134	35
Frit 3195	40
EPK	25
	<u>100</u>

Apply thin or runs and crawls

#### Colourants:

Turquoise	-	3% Copper carbonate
Green	-	6% Copper carbonate

Gives soda colours with oxides and works with some stains including pink and purple.

### Forbes Matt

Cone 04+

G200	32
Whiting	11
Zinc Oxide	5
Gerstley Borate	12
Frit 3124	26
Barium Carbonate	10
EPK	20
	<u>116</u>

#### Colourants:

5% Mason Stains (works well with pinks and purples)

# TERRA SIGILATTA

Red Art Clay	1500 gr.
Water	14 cups
Calgonite	2 gr.

Dissolve calgonite in the water before adding the clay. Ball mill at least 12 hours and allow to settle 24 to 48 hours. Draw the water off the top and approximately the top 20% of the remaining liquid will be terra sigilatta.

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