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M.F.A Thesis

Alice R. Barry

SMALL INTIMATE AFFAIRS

Submitted to the Committee of Advisors

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School for American Crafts Ceramic Department

Rochester Institute of Technology

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Master of Fine Arts Degree

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INTRODUCTION

My first exposure to clay was at a young age. My father, a high school art teacher, would frequently bring home different art materials for my sister and I to play with. I remember sitting at the kitchen table making bowls by pressing clay into our old cereal bowls. I believe they broke or cracked, because I have no recollection of glazing them or seeing them to completion.

My second ceramic experience was in my junior year of college. Originally I was a graphic design major, but after completing my first ceramics class I knew that my life had changed. The series of work that I had made consisted mostly of highly embellished teapots that were completely encrusted with three-dimensional trompe l'oeil roses, leaves, and vines. I loved the tactile qualities of clay, the different techniques involved in completing one object, but primarily I enjoyed building useful things with my hands.

Since the beginning of my graduate school career my goal has been to successfully combine utility with my obsession for a highly colorful, and embellished surface. In addition I want my work to also resemble soft voluminous forms such as, couches, pillows and fabrics from the regal Elizabethan era to the whimsical contemporary. These objects from the home influence me, because they represent different forms of comfort, luxury, and status. Just as a home should be inviting, useful, and comfortable, so should pottery be.

The marriage of utility and decorative surface is now at the forefront of my creative process. Though my work is almost always completely covered with pattern, a strong sense of utility is essential in determining the success of each piece.

UTILITY

The usefulness of pottery is very important to me. Pottery that is intended to be used on a specialty-use or daily basis should not have any functionality flaws in the design. Such flaws suggest laziness on the part of the maker and insincerity for the integrity of the work. For me pottery is more beautiful when it functions properly.

The idea of utility embodies two things: the object and the user. The intimate relationship that develops between the user and the object is just another element in the ceramic process that furthers my desire to create. Pots are very personal objects and occupy a space close to us. It is a portable art form that we develop attachments to through daily use. These relationships are enhanced throughout the life of the maker, object, and the user. The object stirs and charges emotion and contains numerous memories. Pottery also establishes a relationship between the maker and the user. An artist's work is a culmination of their deepest desires, passions, beliefs and emotions. All of these attributes exist within the work, and so the user in essence through the object, owns an inner part of the artist herself. Pottery also fulfills a necessary role in our lives as a vehicle for nourishment. In turn as food nourishes our bodies, pottery should nourish the soul.

During my first year in graduate school I began making specialty-use pottery, i.e., ice cream bowls that sat on clay pillows, soup and sandwich plates, large deviled egg platters, but those objects were not practicable because I was not considering the user and the object's relationship. Most of my energy was being poured into the presentation of these objects not their functionality. I have made a conscious effort with each new series of work to focus on utility and the structural integrity of each piece.

As began using my own work, and giving it to others to use I was able to recognize the certain aspects of my work that needed improvement. When creating any object I always have to consider the person who might use it. There are many factors that I must keep in mind. For example, when making a pitcher the size, height and weight are equally important. When the pitcher is full of liquid it should not be difficult to pick up with one hand. The spout should pour liquid out in an even flow without causing drips or mess. The handle must fit one's hand comfortably, so only to use one motion, to pick up and pour. The base or foot must be stable and wide enough to support the body of the pot and the contents without fear of toppling over. I take all of these into consideration when designing and creating each piece, because the easier it is to use, and clearer the object's purpose is to the user, the more people will understand, and desire to use them.

PHILOSOPHY

The theme of this particular body of work is centered on breakfast, and ritual in the domestic environment. Breakfast was an interest to me, because I wanted to discuss the

most important meal of the day, and my favorite. I wanted to change people's thoughts about breakfast while renewing and creating memories through small intimate affairs.

In today's society people are working more than ever in history. They are moving through their day at a rapid pace without the thought of slowing down to enjoy life, or even a moment.¹

My desire through this work is to encourage people to appreciate the morning, while mediating and preparing for the beginning of a new day. And it is my hope that the work will instill a peaceful relaxing atmosphere that will stimulate the senses and entice people to reevaluate the amount of time they take for themselves.

Rituals are common to all people, particularly within the home. The home is our sanctuary, the place where we terminate each day, and begin the next. It is where we connect with loved ones and friends. We decorate our homes and surround ourselves with objects according to our own sense of beauty and taste. It is a place where we have liberty to express ourselves without criticism. Everything about the home represents ritual, a ritual that is a part of everyday life.

¹ In fact there seems to be some pretty clear evidence that Americans are actually working now more than they did a generation ago. Using Labor Department Statistics Harvard economist Juliet Schor argues that full time American workers are now tolling 160 hours, one full month more on average than they did in 1969. "It is not only people in the higher income groups-who by the way have been working much longer hours." Indeed, according to the International Labor Organization, in October of 1999 the U.S. passed Japan as the modern industrial country with the longest working hours. 42% of American workers say they feel "used up" by the end of the workday. 69% say they would like to slow down and live a more relaxed life.

Rituals can exist on many different levels from daily rituals to annual, and so pottery is made for daily use and for the special occasions. My work is specialty-use because it is designed to hold specific foods, and condiments, such as butter and maple syrup that are not typically consumed on a daily basis. Although these types of foods are sometimes considered indulgences, in our 'diet focused society', I enjoy making pottery that is designed to hold and celebrate these foods, and bring them to a place of extravagance.

The final body of work consisted of three complete sets of table ware which included: a coffee service, pitcher, tumblers, and coffee cups, a butter dish, maple syrup boat, plates, and silverware. Two of the three sets were stored in shelves on opposite walls and the third was set on a table in the middle of the room. The purpose of this display was to allow the audience to view the work stored, and displayed in a domestic atmosphere. Because I consider each individual piece in this body of work a small indulgence, a large number of pieces were exhibited in the room to convey a sense of abundance and extravagance.

HISTORICAL INFLUENCES OF THE SURFACE AND FORM

The surface decoration on my work has always been very loose, colorful and playful. The historical work that inspires the subject matter on my work are the popular plants and flowers found on Iznik pottery from Turkey during the 16th century, such as tulips, carnations, roses hyacinths, and heavy hydrangea type flowers with bold saw edged leaves. My painterly application of the slips and vivid color palette comes from Italian

majolica wares that were popular during the 15th century, and the Fauvist painters of the early 20th century.

The forms resemble traditional English pottery, but the most influential potter form was the graceful outlines of Wedgwood's Queensware pottery. I was attracted to the softness of Queensware, and the simplicity of form. My minor in Wood Working, Furniture Design and interest in upholstery fabrics have also influenced my work. The bases of the butter dishes resemble pillowy couches, and beds, while the juxtaposition of stripes and brocade patterns references contemporary interior design.

TECHNICAL PROCESS

During the last few months of graduate school I developed a vocabulary of forms and techniques of handbuilding that best fit my aesthetic sensibilities and working style. My work is handbuilt using slab construction techniques with a cone 6 white porcelainous-like clay body. The forms are constructed when the clay is very plastic. It allows me to stretch, push, and mold the clay according to the design of the sketch. I am best able to envision the final product by bringing 2 dimensional patterns together to create a 3 dimensional form. There is a strong connection in my assembling technique to that of sewing. These patterns enable me to reproduce the same form almost exactly. The patterns are a guide for functional and economical purposes, while different designs and surface textures bring uniqueness and personality to each piece.

Once the piece is completed and in a leather-hard state, the surface decoration is applied through many different layers. Colored slips are brushed on in large areas and painted on with detail brushes in others. The slips create a sense of depth, enhancing the surface and adding dimension after it is glazed. The mood I wished to create dictated the color palette.

I wanted a calm, tranquil feeling so varying subdued hues of pink; blue, green, purple, and orange were used in glaze bases from stone mat to high gloss. It also reinforced the delightfully embellished surface.

A variation in surface texture was imperative in the application of the glaze and the glazing techniques themselves. The glazes provided not only a utilitarian surface, but also possessed tactile qualities that engaged the viewer, and enhanced their senses. The initial experience the user had with the object will determine the favorability of the object and the frequency of its use.

My forms and surface decoration have a very sophisticated and whimsical feel. The forms are classic in style with swelling waists, and elegantly tapered feel and share a close resemblance to 18th century Wedgwood and Victorian forms. Every piece is covered with a variety of energetic designs, from the Baroque scrolling floral forms to simple contemporary patterns of stripes and polka-dots. This creates an interesting dichotomy-juxtaposition of the form and surface decoration.

This whimsical feel is also executed by the loose handling of the clay, and the slip and glaze application. The forms and appendages are handled in the same manner to give the surface fresh clay-like qualities. The elegance and sophistication resonates in the forms, due to their regal-like qualities. The butter dishes, for example, resemble crowns while the knobs have likeness to the top of a scepter.

Rather than keep strict continuity with the form and surface decoration I pushed the latter in a different direction. The liveliness of the exterior lends an element of approachability to the work, which is necessary so not to make them appear too precious. Common characteristics that occur throughout my work lie in the varying surface textures. Tightly carved floral lines filled in with a darker slip reveal sharp scrolling lines. These controlled areas of design rest underneath a quiet watery layer of glaze. The crisp under-carving remains stationary and creates a unique dialogue between the controlled and fluid areas.

CONTEMPORARY INFLUENCES

Two women that have influenced my work in one way or another are Andrea Gill and Shannon Nelson. Andrea Gill is a true pioneer in the world of the late twentieth century ceramic arts. Her reformation of the vessel form in the late 1970s opened a world of possibilities to the generations of that followed. Under her influence artists who began to consider the vessel in terms of the possibilities it presented for surface decoration.

Otherwise importance of the tactile quality of the material the artist uses is lost. Gill's interest in painting and fifteenth-century decorated pottery, such as Spanish and Italian tin-glazed majolica, has inspired the surface treatment of her vases. It is the way she brilliantly marries different patterns and winding abstracted pottery forms that attracts me to her work.

Shannon Nelson is another artist whose work I have admired. Nelson's works revolve around the idea of specialty use and are designed as playful objects of indulgence. Her background in botany, and biology influence her choices of forms. Symbols of plant life are repeated throughout most of her pottery. Small green petal-like leaves curl on the ends of a butter dish to reference handles, and on lids their knobs. Her extensive work in vegetation sampling, and studying natural resources has given her the ability to accurately capture the many colors found in nature and apply them to her pieces. Subtle floral references are seen in the scalloped rims of cups and incised carvings on the decorated surface. Nelson's interest in indulgences and specialty objects stem from her fascination and attraction to 18th century Elizabethan furniture and brocade upholstery fabrics. The alluring tactile qualities in such upholstery fabrics inspire the variation of surface texture in her work.² The lifestyle that defined this culture was about basking in the excess and the unnecessary. Specialty use pottery reflects that ideology, but not always in such an extravagant sense. Pottery should create charged and inviting environments that stimulate our senses and invigorate our soul.

As I continue along this journey as a potter I am excited to see how my many experiences and decisions will shape my future work, philosophies, and techniques. The discoveries that are revealed in my work are found within myself. The more I understand my work, the better I am able to understand myself. I am devoted to creating beautiful utilitarian objects of clay with my hands, and seeing my ideas and passions to fruition. The challenge of making useful engaging pottery by successfully marrying utility and the decorative surface is a continuous challenge but it is what attracts me to this bewitching medium. The emotion and love that I pour into my work is genuine, and I am always amazed to see how people connect to my work.

“By staying with your own vision, by digging deeper into your own intuition, you are more likely to tap into a spirit that is not only your own individual voice but one that speaks to others as well.”

-Barbara Barry

Val Cushing's White Porcelain-Like Clay Body: cone 6 Oxidation

Tile Clay #6.....	20
E.P.K.....	10
XX Sagger.....	20
KY. Ball Clay.....	10
Kona F-4 Spar.....	20
Flint Silica.....	20
+ Bentonite 2%	
(Macaloid 1%)	

Rebecca's Clear: cone 6 Oxidation

Nepheline Syenite.....	30
Gerstley Borate.....	21
E.P.K.....	10
Wollastonite.....	8
Flint Silica.....	31

Kathy King's Satin: cone 6 Oxidation

Gerstley Borate.....	3
Magnesium Carbonate...	3
Whiting.....	22
Nepheline Syenite.....	23
E.P.K.....	20
Flint Silica.....	20
Frtitt 3124.....	9

Alice's Raspberry Red: cone 6 Oxidation

Whiting.....	20
Gerstley Borate.....	21
E.P.K.....	11
Flint Silica.....	32
Nepheline Syenite.....	16
Chrome.....	.025%
Tin.....	5%

Stokes: cone 6 Oxidation (not food safe)

Nepheline Syenite.....	59
Barium.....	21
Lithium Carbonate.....	4
OM4 Ball Clay.....	7
Flint Silica.....	6
Bentonite.....	2

Glaze Color Key

Glossy Base

Light Brown: Rebecca's Clear - 3% Tangerine 6027+ .25% Black 6600

Light Blue: Rebecca's Clear - .5% Blue-Grey 6540

Chartreuse: Rebecca's Clear - 1% Turquoise Blue 6393 + 2% Naples 6405

Light Blue Grey: Rebecca's Clear – 1% Peacock 6396

Light Green: Rebecca's Clear - 1% Turquoise Blue 6393 + 2% Praseodymium 6450

Orange: Rebecca's Clear – 3% Tangerine 6027

Light Orange: Rebecca's Clear – 1% Tangerine 6027

Pewter- Grey: Rebecca's Clear – 1% Turquoise Blue 6393 + 2% Naples 6405 + .5% Black 6600

Red-Orange: Rebecca's Clear – 3% Lobster 6027

Red: Rebecca's Clear – 4% Cerdic Red 6021

Deep-Deep Blue: Rebecca's Clear – 8% Cobalt Carbonate

Satin Base

Lime Green: Kathy King's Satin – 2% Turquoise Blue 6393 + 4% Praseodymium 6450

Light Green: Kathy King's Satin – 3% Avocado 6280

Turquoise: Kathy King's Satin – 4% Turquoise Blue 6393

Dirty Green: Kathy King's Satin – 3% Naples Yellow 6405 + .25% Black 6600

Orange: Kathy King's Satin - .5% Tangerine 6027

Dry Base

Stony Light Blue: Stokes – 1% Blue Grey 6540

Notes

¹De Graaf, John, David Wann, Thomas H. Naylor. Affluenza The All Consuming Epidemic. San Fransisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002. 42.

² Nelson, Shannon. Personal Interview. 3 Nov. 2003



Alice R. Barry
Coffee Pot and Creamer Set
11"ht x 9"w and 4.5"ht x 4.5"w and 4.5"ht x 3.5"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Creamer and Sugar
5"ht x 4.5"w and 5"ht x 3.5"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Pitcher
9"ht x 7"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Cup and Tumbler
4.5"ht x 4.5"w and 5"ht x 4"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Plates
8" x 10.5"
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



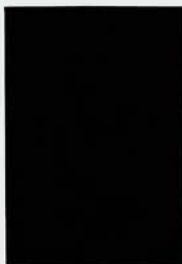
Alice R. Barry
Coffee Pot
11"ht x 9"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Creamer and Sugar
4.5"ht x 4.5"w and 4.5"ht x 3.5"w
Cone 6 Stoneware



Alice R. Barry
Creamer and Sugar Detail
5"ht x 4.5"w and 5"ht x 3.5"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Pitcher
9"ht x 7"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Cups
4"ht x 4.5"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
2004



Alice R. Barry
Butter dish
8.5"l x 6"ht x 5"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Plates
8" x 10.5"
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



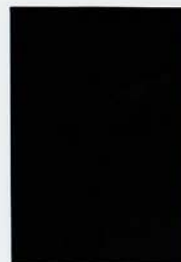
Alice R. Barry
Butter dish
8.5"l x 6"ht x 5"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Creamer and Sugar
5"ht x 4.5"w and 5"ht x 3.5"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Pitcher and Coffee Pot
9"ht x 7"w and 11"ht x 9"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003



Alice R. Barry
Coffee Pot Detail
11"ht x 9"w
Cone 6 Stoneware
Spring 2003

