Where There Is Design

Elizabeth A. Crowe

Brigham Young University - Provo

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Where There Is Design

Elizabeth Crowe

A selected project submitted to the faculty of Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

Von Allen, Chair
Brian Christensen
Bryon Draper

Department of Visual Arts
Brigham Young University
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ABSTRACT

Where There Is Design

Elizabeth Crowe
Department of Visual Arts, BYU
Master of Fine Arts

Giving up a certain amount of control can be healthy, productive, and natural. Nature has an important part to play in our lives, and nature is random even as it obeys natural laws. In the same way, creating ceramic objects requires obedience to the laws of nature even as it benefits from freedom from control. Creation requires a certain amount of letting go of control, allowing nature to take its course, and recognizing when good things happen. I have learned that my most successful pieces emerge when I combine conscious control with serendipity.

The work in this show reflects that symbiotic, natural relationship between control and serendipity, and it grew out of my struggles with unrealized expectations. I tend to be a problem solver, sometimes obsessively, and as I’ve worked through various surprises, challenges, disappointments, and disillusions, I’ve come to realize that I have little control over life’s situations. I have learned to rely on the tender mercy of a greater designer and to value the less-than perfect; those lessons have influenced my ceramic art.

Keywords: ceramics, visual arts, vessels, porcelain, serendipity
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**Introduction**

Coming from a family of artists, I grew up with a passion for the arts, and as I got older, I first studied and practiced two-dimensional art. While my children were young, I studied painting, using books as my teachers. When my youngest child started elementary school, I resumed work on my Bachelors of Fine Arts degree and studied painting, mainly oil painting, at BYU-Hawaii.

In addition to art history and studio courses in painting, my BFA program also required me to take ceramics classes, and I discovered that I loved working with clay and the hands-on process it demanded. After I graduated, we moved to Provo, and I set up a painting studio, but I found that I had lost my desire to paint. Trying to reignite my love of painting, I took painting classes at BYU, but painting felt like a chore. Unfortunately, nothing felt natural, and my paintings looked stiff and forced. Somehow, I had lost my voice as a painter.

I still felt a desire to create, so I took a ceramics class and fell in love with the hands-on process again. It had been ten years since I’d last touched clay, but in that ceramics class, I felt my creative abilities re-emerge. My initial work focused on functional vessels, and those efforts honed my skills and understanding of clay, glazes, and firing. Over time, and with the encouragement of Von Allen, I started to experiment with my vessels, and I moved to nontraditional forms and then on to non-functional forms, and finally to porcelain pieces that had their beginnings as vessels but morphed into more organic, natural shapes.

As I progressed as a ceramic artist, I experimented with different kinds of clay. Rather than using stoneware or earthenware, I began to work in porcelain, a medium that
made its own demands on the clay and the shapes that emerged on the wheel. The loose, pliable nature of porcelain influenced my vessels even further, creating sculptural organic shapes that were quite unlike my functional work. My work in porcelain utilized the fragile appearance of the material with its inherent strength. The translucency of the porcelain encouraged me to incorporate texture and impressions into the clay, emphasizing porcelain as a material of beauty, sensuousness, and strength. In time and with further experimentation, I returned to stoneware and merged my porcelain pieces with stoneware bases.

**Influences**

Before I entered the MFA program, Wouter Dam’s sculptural pieces first drew my attention to the potential of vessels being used as sculpture. After seeing some of Dam’s pieces, the guiding question to my work became, “What can I do with a bowl?” A visiting artist to BYU, Seth Green, impressed me with the process of stacking several parts in order to make a whole. While Green’s work is functional, I was excited by the possibilities of using a similar process to make sculptural pieces. In 2011, my husband and I lived in London for six months, and I spent a lot of time at art museums. A favorite, the Victoria and Albert, contained prime examples of 19th and 20th century pieces that have stacked profiles. Seeing these various pieces opened my mind to endless possibilities of sculptural stacked forms based on vessels.

Using vessels as sculpture also follows the tradition of Ruth Duckworth, Peter Voulkos, and Richard Devore as well as many contemporary artists, including Roseline Delisle, Cheryl Ann Thomas, and Jennifer Lee. Although there is sometimes a divide between functional and sculptural ceramic art, I enjoy participating in the conversation
that employs functional forms as sculpture. I also feel that because of vessels’ nearly
universal presence and historicity, they have an inherent ability to communicate to viewers
whether they are functional or not.

Process

I make two different kinds of work; some are all porcelain and some join grogged
stoneware pieces with porcelain pieces. These different types of work have elements in
common. They both contain porcelain vessel shapes that have been distorted. They also
reference fractals, having lines, texture, and form that are organic, random, varied, and
repeating.

The all-porcelain pieces are thrown on the wheel in several sections. I make the
bottom sections more symmetrical and controlled than the top sections. I try to create
tension and contrast within the piece by using both symmetrical and asymmetrical parts to
make a whole. To distort the perfect symmetry of the wheel-thrown sections, I press
natural objects like stones and shells into the walls of the newly-thrown porcelain vessel.
After the piece is bone dry, I apply a filigree-like pattern using an underglaze and wax resist
substance. I emphasize the shape of the various areas of the piece by putting orderly
designs on parts that are symmetrical and random designs on the organic sections. These
designs articulate the fractal nature of the pieces by using repetition and variety. The
texture also emphasizes the fragility of the translucent porcelain as a material of beauty
and subtlety. When the wax resist is dry, I carefully wipe the piece with a damp sponge,
removing some of the greenware and leaving a raised surface where the wax resist
remains. These pieces are then once-fired to cone 9. The firing vitrifies the porcelain,
accentuating the beauty of the raw clay while at the same time strengthening it. High firing
the porcelain also makes it translucent, which causes a pleasing contrast with the raised texture on the piece’s surface.

The work that is a combination of stoneware and porcelain is also created in sections. I make the porcelain sections the same way I make the all-porcelain vessels, throwing them on the wheel and distorting them. I use the wax resist technique previously described to add texture to each porcelain piece. The stoneware sections are created by randomly throwing slabs of clay together. I try to take advantage of natural forces, letting go of total control, throwing pieces of clay against each other and allowing centrifugal force and gravity to act upon the clay, just as those forces influence clay on the wheel. This loose and random process of making these stoneware forms parallels the loose and random texture I apply to the porcelain pieces. After the stoneware has an interesting shape, I let the stoneware become leatherhard. At that point, I can hollow out the form.

These sections are fired to cone 4 to give them strength. Then I apply various oxides and stains to emphasize the random cracks and natural texture in the stoneware and fire them again to cone 04. Usually multiple firings are required to attain the nuanced surface quality that makes the piece interesting and natural-looking. I am seeking for a surface that looks ageless, containing the essence of history with layers of texture, values, and color. The application of oxides and stains is also loose, rather than controlled, corresponding to the random, loose creation of the piece and the application of the wax resist texture.

All of my work process, creating both the vessel forms and the sculptural pieces, is a combination of using conscious control and working intuitively. This process is reflected in the work, which includes a combination of loose and rhythmic patterns, values, lines, and
forms. I'm attracted to the organic elements inherent in nature: the kind of marks you see a snail leave behind on a stone, the randomness of moss and lichen growing on a rock or tree, cloud patterns, deer trails, the movement of waves. The essence of these organic elements is most apparent in my strongest, most successful work.

I want my pieces to look like they were formed spontaneously rather than consciously, intuitively rather than self-consciously, giving up control with the hope and expectation that something greater will occur than if I tried to maintain strict control. Serendipity has also influenced my process and work. For example, one day I threw some traditional bowls and didn’t like them, so I squished them together, planning to recycle the clay. Before dumping the mass of clay into my used-clay bucket, I noticed its intriguing shape. So I set the stack of pinched-up bowls aside and considered how to explore the possibilities of combining randomly pinched bowl shapes into meaningful objects.

Another example of serendipity occurred when I was carving out the inside of a large stoneware piece, and a fellow student told me he liked my random pile of carvings better than the piece I had made consciously. Taking a closer look at my stacked carvings, I realized that they contained the unselfconscious nature that was essential to the content of my pieces. In future pieces, I endeavored letting go of even more control, trying to make objects that looked like they were created independently of a maker's hand.

### Description and Content of Work

**All Porcelain Vessels**

Even while I experimented with organic, stoneware objects that reference nature, I always included vessels in my work. I prize vessels. Vessels connect me with food, pleasure, giving and sharing. And I love to hold a bowl—to feel its soft curve, to enjoy its
heft, the beauty of its openness, and the roundness of the circle it completes. The fact that
the inside of a bowl is as important as the outside attracts my interest. The volume and
shape of the inside defines the outside, and the outside activates the interior because there
is a vacancy to be filled in a vessel. Vessels are rich in their ability to combine form and
content, and, therefore, make prime sculptural objects.

My porcelain vessels are distorted, never perfectly round, reflecting life’s pushes
and pulls, showing beauty in imperfect, organic forms. Nature is an important element in
these vessels, communicating the basic necessities of life. Organic forms signify nature and
life. I use lines and shapes to denote movement and to make my vessels look alive, like they
are in flux, moving, changing, and anthropomorphic. As beautiful as a perfectly round circle
is, I find irregularities interesting and am intrigued by uniqueness and unpredictability.
Some of the vessels have no bottom; the vessel walls have been liberated from a floor,
allowing light to shine through the vessel to the base upon which it sits. The
unpredictability of an open, bottomless vessel encourages the viewer to question the
function of a bowl, imperfect forms, and the aesthetic of beauty.

In my stacked porcelain vessels, I combine both symmetrical and organic forms. By
joining multiple pieces together, my vessels are made up of elements that provide support
and contrast in a single, unified object. The bottom sections are sturdy, symmetrical, and
traditional while the organic vessel sections are thin, translucent, distorted, and
unconventional. I reiterate the symmetrical and organic forms with the filigree-like texture
I apply to the surface of the vessel, placing orderly texture on the symmetrical forms and
making the texture gradually become random and loose where the form is most organic.
The combination of natural and man-made elements in vessel form questions tradition while at the same time is steeped in tradition. This contradiction opens up a dialogue that contains something of the mystical and ethereal. It includes subjects of the sublime and worldly, heaven and death, and the relationship between nature and society. The contrast of the symmetrical and organic forms and texture emphasizes the contrast between control and abandon, society and nature, and inanimate and animate. Combining these various elements strengthens the binary, symbiotic relationship between opposites and celebrates diversity. One element is not more important than another; they are different while sharing similarities. At the same time, one can’t exist without the other.

**Conjoined Porcelain Vessels with Stoneware Bases**

After having the serendipitous experience of recognizing beauty in porcelain bowls that are pinched together, I created bases that specifically referenced nature and resembled wood or stone using heavily grogged red stoneware. When the base was completed, I joined one or more porcelain bowl sculpture to it. In combining porcelain sections with stoneware, my challenge was to create forms that were very different in material and essence but would unite in a single strong piece. The porcelain parts spoke of movement, softness, growth, and fragility, while the stoneware parts gave a rough, raw, and strong presence.

One way I endeavor to create unity in these combined pieces is through surface treatment. Because clay itself is a natural element, I leave the surface unglazed in both the porcelain and the stoneware sections. The raw, translucent porcelain emphasizes the fragility and luminosity of thin, fine porcelain while the unglazed stoneware emphasizes the natural texture of the heavily grogged clay. I accentuate the naturally rough texture of
the stoneware with oxides and stains, which brings out the coarse and irregular surface of the clay. The unglazed surface treatment unifies the two differing clay bodies and exposes the clay for what it inherently is—earth.

Using the concept of fractals also helps to unify the disparate parts. As previously mentioned, the concept of fractals—repetitious, random, and varied natural shapes—dictates the formal element of the work. Both the stoneware and the porcelain sections are comprised of repeating and varied shapes and lines which not only give unity to the piece, but also provide interesting contrast. The porcelain's delicate appearance is provocative, especially when contrasted with the more solid-looking base. Both are equally durable, although their appearance is quite different. The combined forms are unexpected and unconventional, taking the viewer by surprise, while at the same time containing aspects that are tied to both traditional and natural forms.

Because my pieces are made up of separate parts, contrasts are apparent: rough and smooth, light and dark, fragile and robust, random and ordered, organic and geometric. My sculptures contain components of both unity and variety in their lines and shapes, imperfections and irregularities. I hope viewers will be intrigued by the contrasting clays, textures, colors, and shapes—that with all of these contrasts, the pieces communicate value in imperfection and diversity. Contrasting qualities in the objects communicate contradictory ideas: logic and emotion, randomness and predictability, symmetry and asymmetry, control and serendipity. These disparate ideas convey the concept that beauty grows out of the raw elements of reality. The variety of these ideas contributes depth and interest in the work.
Conclusion

Living in a variety of places has contributed to my choice of formal and aesthetic elements. When I lived in Japan for four years, I learned to appreciate the natural beauty of the irregular and simple, the *wabi-sabi*, which traditional Japanese art emphasizes. After living in Japan, I moved to Hawaii where I first began working in clay. I started each day walking on the beach and felt nourished by the natural beauty of the ocean and the mountains. Hearing the constant pounding of the surf and recognizing that this same pounding had been going on for millions of years taught me the insignificance of our short lives while at the same time made me feel more alive and strong. Being in nature, I felt part of something that was relentless and powerful. Working with the clay and water was a meditative practice for me, and I felt deeply the expressive quality and potential inherent in clay. It is responsive to each nuance of touch, and my touch reflects my mental, spiritual, and emotional state. I want that honesty and openness to be reflected in my ceramic work. I prize diversity and accept that we have little control over many aspects of our lives. As I create vessels that twist, turn, and refuse to be traditionally functional, I am speaking of the surprise of beauty in a difficult world. Objects that are unique, asymmetrical, and reflective of nature speak to me personally as communicating qualities I have learned to depend on for happiness and peace of mind.
Blythe, 13” H x 7” W x 7” D
Deborah, 12” H x 7.5” W x 7.5” D
Markito, 15” H x 9.5” W x 7” D
Gloria, 8” H x 10.5” W x 10.5” D
Katie, 17.5” H x 10” W x 10” D
Standing on a Stand, 18” H x 10.5” W x 8.5” D
Mochi, 14” H x 8.75” W x 8.75” D
Napoleon, 20" H x 12" W x 8" D
Rock Canyon Route, 9” H x 16” W x 12” D

Brent's Insight, 10” H x 11” W x 8.5” D
Once Broken, 18.5” H x 10.5” W x 9” D
Red Hat, 9” H x 11” W x 10” D

Rock-a-Bye Log, 10” H x 18” W x 8” D
Von's Gravity, 10.5” H x 13” W x 8.5 D

Von’s Gravity, Detail
Orange Curl, 10” H x 12” W x 9.5” D
Volcanic Gulch (both images), 9” H x 14 W x 11 D
Blue Nest, 6" H x 7" W x 8" D

Intertwined, 8" H x 16" W x 6" D