Pattern, Ritual and Thresholds

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ABSTRACT

Pattern, Ritual and Thresholds

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The work in this show reflects my interest in the role of the ceramic vessel historically as well as its place in the dialogue of contemporary art. Traditionally thought of as an object of craft and function, the vessel has found footing also as a conceptual container of ideas and artistic expression. It teeters on the threshold between craft and art, between art and life. Because of its strong association with the domestic, I find the vessel to be a fitting form on which to paint ornamental patterns and imagery associated with my own home life and to put into question its role as a strictly functional object.

Key Words: art, craft, function, vessel, pattern, ornament, ritual, thresholds, domestic
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Introduction

Of all the materials used in the art making process, clay may be the most humble. Dug from the earth, with little refinement, clay can be formed and fired to create functional and non-functional objects alike. Since the advent of the clay object millennia ago, ceramics has a history rooted mainly in function and ritual. For thousands of years pottery has been used to store, to transport and to serve foodstuff. It has also been used to create objects used in the performance of certain rituals such as burials, religious ceremonies, etc. More recently, in the early 20th century following the dawn of the industrial revolution, there was resurgence in craft and the handmade object. This resurgence began in Brittain with Bernard Leach and trickled over to the United States as potters traveled to study and practice his methods. The Leachian philosophy (which espouses many Asian beliefs toward function and art) has had a stronghold in the area of ceramic pottery and continues to exert its influence as ceramic artists create what many consider to be expressive, functional forms

Figure 1). In the book *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty*, (in which Leach is a contributor), the Japanese philosopher Soetsu Yanagi states, “To the extent to which they [fine crafts] become separate from use, they are stripped of craftmanlike content. The nearer to uselessness, the nearer to sickness. They seldom escape from the affliction of self-consciousness. They fall so easily in to the pitfall of themselves.”¹

It has not been until the mid 20th Century that ceramics has been able to subvert long-standing roles of strict function and utility and to take on new roles that have allowed it to exist within what would be considered to be the arena of fine art. Much of the revolution in ceramics is due to the experimentation and teaching of Peter Voulkos during the modernist period of the

mid-20th century. Voulkos was a central figure at the Otis Art Institute in California where invention and individual expression were highly promoted. Although influenced by Eastern spontaneity and aesthetics, Voulkos created forms that transcended traditional craft practices and that had strong footing in the modern art scene. At the Otis Art Institute, no two artists’ work looked the same. Ceramic artists such as Kenneth Price, Paul Soldner, Ron Nagel, Billy Al Bengston, Henry Takemoto, John Mason and Malcom McClain, and more developed individual styles and art practices. This was in direct contrast to long held ceramic philosophies of precise forms and superior craftsmanship. As Clark and Hughto explain,

There was no common style or ideology—other than the tacit agreement not to have any common style or ideology. The group was freely, almost purposefully, eclectic. They drew from myriad sources: Haniwa terra-cottas, Wotruba’s sculpture, Jackson Pollock’s paintings, music, poetry, and the brash, inelegant Los Angeles environment…The manner in which they handled clay was looser and more informal than ever before and generally there was a unifying sense of incompleteness in the seemingly cursory finish of the works. What was taking place was a broad-ranging experiment taking craft to the point that the critic Harold Rosenberg proposed as the ideal in contemporary art, an unfocused play with materials.’’

Although clay has gained some footing in the present-day fine art world, there are still issues to be hashed out and questions to be answered. Does one have to engage in ‘sculptural ceramics’ in order for their work to be validated? Is clay just another tool to be used in the sculptural process? Does the tradition and craft process associated with clay preclude it from being considered fine art? Can the clay vessel be subjective enough for a contemporary art dialogue to exist? Can we get past the vessel’s functional references long enough to engage in some conceptual conversations surrounding this type of object?

For me, the ceramic vessel seems to bridge the gap, or at least clouds the line between contemporary craft and fine art. I often find myself pulled in both directions, loving the process

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of creating a precise form while also wanting my pieces to be conceptually expressive. This process of being pulled in two directions, of being right in the middle of the art/craft discourse, is both frustrating and exciting at the same time. While I am not literally deconstructing the ceramic vessel itself, I hope to deconstruct a little more the notion of the ceramic vessel as a purely functional object. I have chosen the platter form, combined with surface imagery and ornamentation referencing domesticity, as a vehicle for this conversation. I hope to span the threshold between craft and fine art, between two-dimensional art on the wall and functional vessels, between art and life. And finally, I hope this show becomes a celebration of the mundane—an elevation of commonplace objects, circumstances and practices of home life.

The Vessel

As mentioned earlier, Peter Voulkos has pioneered efforts and challenged notions about clay and the vessel. This is amply illustrated in his *Stacks* series of the 1970’s (Figure 2). In these pieces, Voulkos roughly threw ceramic vessels, deconstructed them and reassembled them into forms that referenced the vessel, but were no longer functional. These forms, stripped of the function became objects for significant conceptual dialogue. Jo Lauria describes Voulkos’s process as a “dynamic assault on the form and surface.” She goes on to say, “…the stacks show the scars of the valiant battle waged and won: the four distinct volumes of the assembled stacks swell and contract as they rise to form the profile and their surfaces are scored and incised with fluid line, are gouged and slashed, are cut away and re-attached…”

Not only did Voulkos’s pieces reflect the process they went through to be formed, they also came to represent much of the human condition past and present. It may be argued that

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these pieces, through their rough lines and haphazard assembly may symbolize humankind’s struggle for existence, order and balance—it’s struggle for stability and refuge. Collette Chattopadhyay speaks of Voulkos’s stacks:

Their external, circular forms, which certainly allude from afar to vessels, reveal deeper complexities as one steps near…Vast in their conceptual sweep, these pieces allude not only to the ancient amphorae of the Minoans and to the fire pits that transform stoneware, but also to the primal human need for shelter. Generously exploring the relationship and tensions between internal and external space, these works both define and contain a deserted and empty space, while articulating a sense of rugged mass and presence. Metaphorically, the dichotomy between interior and exterior alludes to distinctions between art world outsiders and insiders, between craft and fine art, or between alleged artistic peripheries and centers.4

Other “vessels” by Peter Voulkos that exude considerable conceptual expression are his series of Plates (Figure 3). Like his stacks, his plates reflect the coarseness of the earth and humankind’s toil for sustenance and meaning. Referencing his plates, Chattopadhyay explains, “Alluding to the inseparability of basic human physical and metaphysical longings and needs, the plates successfully shift the craft dialogues of clay into very different plateaus. While these works trek back in time to the ancient age of the earth, they simultaneously astound with their perspicacious connection to the present.”5

Like Voulkos’s work, I would hope, through the imagery presented on the surface of my platters and through their varied placement on the wall and on tables, that my ceramic vessels are referencing more than a functional object. While I do want each viewer to form their own observations and thoughts about the work, I also want them to question the works’ placement in the galley as well as what the surface imagery is saying contextually about it.

5 Ibid., 42.
Another artist that has been an innovator with the ceramic vessel is Elizabeth (Betty) Woodman. Although committed to creating functional ceramic objects early on, Woodman has excelled in pushing the boundaries of the ceramic vessel. In her most recent exhibition, *Illusions of Domesticity*, Woodman created a series of works in which the traditional vessels were thrown, assembled into an unexpected and abstract forms, and placed in conceptualized domestic installations. In some of her pieces she took several cylinders, joined them together and then added slabs coming out from different angles (Figure 4). This causes the viewer to have to walk around the piece, to see it from different angles, in order to understand it as a whole. In another piece, it appears that she has thrown plates on the wheel, stretched them, altered and cut them, and then hung them on the wall, thus transforming a three dimensional object into two dimensions (Figure 5). According to Christopher Johnson, Woodman’s current “…ceramic works…defy categorization as painting, sculpture or pottery,” while also giving “a renewed picture of the pleasures of home life.”

Speaking of Woodman and her contemporaries Clark and Hughto explain,

These traditionalists have achieved a quiet revolution in the 1970’s, which has proceeded apace without being acknowledged. Yet at no other point in modern American ceramic history has the vessel been employed more expressively, more coherently, and with such credence to its claim as a legitimate medium for creative expression…The pot, far from being a redundant relic of the past, is reestablishing itself in ceramics as the format of the future.

Like Woodman’s vessels that seem to question and push the art/craft hierarchies as well as the art/life boundaries, I would wish one to pause and consider how my installations of platters and plates blur similar lines.

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7 Clark & Hughto, 204.
One of the most prominent and eccentric contemporary ceramic artists known for his vessel forms is Grayson Perry, winner of the 2003 Turner Prize. Perry uses the traditional ceramic vase form but creates surface decoration imbued with contemporary societal concerns and personal references (Figure 6). Cigalle Hanaor describes Perry’s vessels:

Using photographic transfer, painting, collage and stenciling, Perry’s vessels address themes of art and history, consumer culture, violence and sexual abuse, amongst others…He is drawn to the ‘second class status’ of ceramics—the default perception of it as a decorative art—for the same reasons that he is drawn to cross-dressing and the perception of women as second class citizens. His subversion of gender and art go hand in hand…”

Unlike Voulkos and Woodman, Perry does not deconstruct the vessel itself, but deconstructs the idea of the surface of a pot being something purely decorative and lovely to look at. He goes deeper to engage the viewer in imagery that creates thought and dialogue about difficult social issues. Similar to Perry, I wish the imagery on my pieces to create thought and contemplation within the viewer through making references to home life and what could be at times considered mundane.

The Vessel and the Domestic

Ceramic vessel production has a rich and varied tradition throughout the world’s history. The vessel is not only a symbol of function but also has strong references to the domestic. In describing the vessel Cooper explains,

Within studio ceramic convention, objects defined as vessels are usually seen to have a distant, if sometimes faint, relationship to use. Yet, however loose this connection, it is a vital link to the broadly perceived but significant association of clay with its humanist history. Contemporary vessel makers who have appropriated territory for their own purposes, while retaining references to the container, may make a work that takes on

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more metaphorical or symbolic qualities—the vessel as signifier, container of meaning and of ideas.\(^9\)

The ‘humanist history’ and ‘signifier of meaning’ that a vessel can portray is something that I hope to capture within the form and imagery of my pieces. The platter/plate form itself conjures up ideas of food rituals and domestic gatherings. It serves to emphasize the deep connection between clay and everyday living. By placing some of my platters on a table, the ideas of domestic function and ritual are encouraged. By hanging some of my platters on the wall, one may view them as almost two-dimensional paintings. Their functionality is put into question.

Several contemporary ceramic artists with strong references to the domestic vessel are Francesca Dimattio, Nicole Cherubini, and again, Betty Woodman. Dimattio uses the traditional vessel form in non-traditional ways while also referencing the domestic. Her vessels are cut and spliced together as haphazardly as Voulkos’s works. In her recent exhibition entitled Domestic Sculpture, Dimattio combines disparate sources to create stacked vessel sculptures that go back and forth between the craft and fine art realm, between function and non-function, between beautiful and grotesque (Figure 7). Bill Rogers explains, “In her…sculpture, she discovers ways to weave together the history and artistry of craft, transposing it from a practice of quiet control into one that seems unpredictable, explosive and shifting. Similarly, she mixes high and low, East and West, the historical and the contemporary.”\(^10\)

While Dimattio’s sculptural compilations reference the history of the domestic vessel, they also turn it on its head further blurring the art/craft hierarchy. Similarly, Nicole Cherubini is

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\(^9\) Ibid., 59.
an artist interested in the ceramic vessel as an object that documents social history. Cherubini herself states, “I started researching the history of the decorative within a feminist context and was spending much time at the Met. I kept coming back to all these pots there and actually realized that they were this incredible signifier of historical precedence. They held the presence and concerns of their time period—through both surface and form.”

Cherubini has taken this insight to heart in her art. Much of her work is about political and social ideology and its effect on society as a whole. Cherubini also questions the art/craft hierarchy in her work. Additionally, she strives to reconcile her love of minimalist sculpture with her affinity for ornamentation. She paradoxically refers to her work as ‘baroque minimalism.’ Combining clay vessels with other materials such as wood, paint, metal, etc., she feels that there is no hierarchy of materials—that each material is a contributor to the whole of the piece. This artistic practice is evident in her piece, *Astralogy* (2013) (Figure 8). Faye Hirsch’s description of Cherubini’s work shown at Tracy Williams in 2013 states,

> Like many a potter, the New York-based artist inflects her vessels and reliefs with an adventurous, painterly use of glazes, an aggressive manipulation of surfaces and a varied approach to building forms. Her distinction, however, lies in her manipulation of the way we view her work, as she fashions a meta-commentary on display and context in the form of platforms, frames and armatures made of wood, fiberboard, acrylic paint, found objects and other non-ceramic materials.

Like Cherubini’s work, I would wish that by presenting my platters/plates as both functional vessels and two-dimensional paintings—that the art/craft distinction is done away with, or at least minimized. I would desire that they also reflect a bit of the social construct within the home. While the platter/plate forms particularly reference the rituals involved with preparing

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and serving foods, the particular ornamentation painted on each surface also reflects the patterns and textiles that may surround humans in their domestic dwellings. I have chosen to present fabric patterns from personal sources in my home as well as the homes of my ancestors (i.e., quilts) as a representation of social and ritualistic atmosphere of the home (Figure 9-Figure 14). Particularly, in *Sunday Afternoon* (2015-16), I have created a grid of 12 plates that represent some of the patterns and practices that my family engages in on a weekly basis (Figure 15).

Pattern and Ornamentation within the Domestic

Again, Betty Woodman is an artist that has embraced the domestic as well as pattern and ornament within her work. As a participant in the New York-based Pattern and Decoration movement of the late 1970’s, she went against the grain of minimalism and high art pomposity and employed witty and unique ornamentation to the outside of her ceramic vessels. Michael Duncan states,

> As is true of the P&D [Pattern and Decoration] artists, a kind of ipso facto feminism permeates Woodman’s art. But her muscular fragmentation of the vase makes her enterprise a very rigorous, contemporary representation of traditional “women’s work.” With Woodman’s multiple households [in New York as well as Italy] celebrating decoration, food, flowers, children and guests, domestic life has nourished and enlivened her esthetic.13

Woodman also found herself influenced by disparate sources such as the modernist paintings of Matisse and Picasso as well as “…Early American spongeware, Tang Dynasty glazes, Okinawan folk pottery, Indian textiles, Baroque architecture, [and] the splashy patterns of 16th century Japanese Oribe tea-ceremony sets.”14

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14 Duncan, 195.
Woodman’s postmodern mixing of styles gave her pieces an interesting conceptual grounding. Similarly, if find myself drawn to various periods and styles of art making as well as craft and ornament. Growing up, I had an artistic mother who painted in an early modern, Cezanne, cubist sort of fashion. I have a sincere appreciation for modern formalist art. Line, shape, form, balance, reference to materials, etc. are very important elements to me as I make and view artwork. There is something that I find very satisfying in the modern painting and sculpture of the mid 20th Century. Many of these works create a pleasing arrangement of abstract shapes that draw the eye around and through the piece. On the other hand, I have a furtive love of decoration and ornament. This may come from being surrounded not only by my mother’s paintings, but by quilts pieced together from patterned fabric, knick-knacks and other ornamental objects that I developed an affinity for as well. I find myself drawn to the natural decorative elements of Art Nouveau, the Chinese vase painting of the Ming and Song Dynasties, and even mass-produced figurines that may have found their origins in the late Baroque or Rococo period to name a few. As I have formed and painted my platters/plates I have worked to create a visual surface that is formally balanced while also implementing abstracted ornamental patterns and elements found in the textiles of my home (i.e. quilts, clothing items, etc.) (Figure 16-Figure 17).

Materials and Process

For me, art always begins within the process of creating. It usually develops out of intuition, not always knowing where the ideas and influences for a piece have originated. As I begin to develop my work, then the influences begin to manifest themselves. Because I have spent many years in my home raising children, it is natural for me to feel this as perhaps the most
significant influence in my work. The patterns and rituals and objects used displayed in my home and in the home of my ancestors have filtered through me and into my work.

Because the process is such an important element to my art practice, I have found myself testing many clay and glaze materials before finding the ones best suited for the work. In order to throw the platters as large as I wanted to, I made wooden bats out of high quality plywood that were 24 inches in diameter. These bats were sanded and finished with a waterproof lacquer. With my large platters, I found that high-fire clay with a lot of grog was the only clay that could withstand being fired as high as I needed it to without warping and cracking. After the platter was thrown and trimmed, a foot was added. I also applied a white slip to the surface before bisque firing. This slip provided a nice background on which to paint patterns and imagery with the underglazes. The platters then went through a second firing to cone 04 to secure the underglazes. Following this firing, I sandblasted the surface to add some visual interest as well as to reference the wear and tear that some of the textiles I used for imagery had gone through with daily household use. After sandblasting, red and black slips were brushed on and wiped off enough to reveal the patterns below. This process is done somewhat blindly because it is difficult to tell with the naked eye exactly how much slip is left on the piece. Next, the piece is sprayed with a clear cone 6 glaze and fired to cone 6. By firing the platter to this temperature, it becomes much stronger and more vitrified.

The process and materials for creating grid of plates for Sunday Afternoon (2015-16) was completely different than that of the platters. In September/October of 2015 I was able to travel to Italy to study the traditional Renaissance majolica process. I learned from a master teacher how to correctly apply majolica glazes and stains. I was able to purchase specific brushes and stains to bring home with me for use in this process. There was, however, some significant
testing that I had to go through to find the right clay and white majolica glaze recipe for this project. After a few failed attempts, I found and tested a recipe for red earthenware clay (cone 04-cone 5) that worked nicely with the studio majolica glaze. I mixed the clay myself and threw and trimmed the plates on the wheel. The plates were then dried and bisque fired. Following the bisque, the plates were dipped in a low-fire (cone 04) white majolica glaze and allowed to dry. I then painted on the imagery and designs with the brushes and commercial stains brought back from Italy. The plates were then fired a second time to cone 04.

Conclusion

The act of throwing clay vessels, especially the large platters, is an extremely physical process. For me, it symbolizes the physicality of traditional ‘women’s’ work. This process reminds me of the hard working, strong women that have come before me that have honored their roles as wives, mothers, homemakers, teachers, homesteaders, etc. Often, these women have created households with little to nothing. They have been resourceful in not only creating functional homes but also lovely and comfortable homes.

In contrast to the physicality involved in making my ceramic vessels, I also enjoy engaging in the more ‘refined’ process of painting the surface of the vessel. To me, this relates to the process of making a house a home. Often women make use of patterned textiles in the decoration of a home. For example, my great grandmother, Anne Margaret, brought with her knowledge of textiles and how to manipulate them into functional and beautiful objects when she immigrated to Utah from Denmark. She used her resourcefulness to create beautiful quilts out of old clothing combining patterns in an interesting and unique way. Many of my platters are based on the unexpected fabric combinations in her quilts. I hope these objects honor both the
physicality as well the refined aspects of women’s work within the domestic that often goes unrecognized.

Over the past 60 plus years, ceramics has begun to bridge the gap between craft and fine art. As many ceramic artists find grounding in traditions of the past, new innovations are being made which allow clay to inch forward in the art world of today. I find myself continually drawn to the ceramic vessel. For me, the vessel is to the ceramicist as the canvas is to the painter. Although some may view it as traditional and restrictive, I find the clay vessel to be a challenging and unhindered form to work with. It vexes and excites me that it seems to sit at the threshold between craft and art. I love that it references the domestic and that it teeters on the art/life border.

As renowned ceramic artist Peter Pinnell puts it, “…Art thinks about life, but it does so from the role of the critic, from the observer, from the outsider. I like to joke that art will peek in our windows and rummage through our closets, but it won’t sit down at the dinner table with us. And that’s where we come in. What’s unique about pottery and a few other arts is that they are active participants in life.”

15 Peter Pinnell, YouTube website, “Pete Pinnell: Thoughts on Cups,” last modified July 23, 2011. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WChFMMzLHVs
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