Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations

Robert A. Williams
Brigham Young University

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Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations

Robert A. Williams

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Brian Christensen, Chair
Bryon Draper
Fidalis Buehler

Department of Art
Brigham Young University

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ABSTRACT

Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations

Robert A. Williams
Department of Art, BYU
Master of Fine Arts

In my art practice, collecting materials from personally significant locations has become a way to subtly reconnect people with places, nature, natural materials and processes. I produce well-made objects, with the end goal of allowing the viewer to feel and interact with traditional forms of beauty through craft, which is increasingly rare in our mechanized world.

Raw materials are a direct link to nature and earth, a link which people in general can benefit from in essential ways. The processes of collecting and using naturally occurring materials to form links between objects and places resembles human relationships, and the connections between places, things, and people set the stage for the performance of beauty.

Keywords: ceramics, pottery, glaze, beauty, utilitarian, nostalgia, geology, mindfulness, minimalism, Japanese, aesthetics
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my wife, Jen; she deserves this degree as much as I do. I would also like to thank my committee, Brian Christensen, Bryon Draper, and Fidalis Buehler, for supporting my craft background and helping me find a place in the contemporary art world, while embracing what is important to me: pots. I would also like to thank Ben Neff for friendship and teaching me the importance of camping. And my oldest brother for endless adventures, collecting materials for me way out of cell range with only GPS coordinates to work from, and for helping lift more than one ridiculously big rock into the back of my truck.
### Contents

Title Page...........................................................................................................i
Abstract...........................................................................................................ii
Acknowledgements..........................................................................................iii
Contents...........................................................................................................iv
List of Tables...................................................................................................v
List of Figures..................................................................................................vi
Nature of Beauty...............................................................................................1
Bluebird Cabin and the Function of Art.............................................................1
Mojave Desert..................................................................................................3
Childhood Locations and Process.................................................................5
Quiet and Familiar.............................................................................................7
Working with the Materials.............................................................................8
Description and Content of Work.................................................................9
Conclusion.......................................................................................................11
Appendix of Tables..........................................................................................12
Appendix of Figures.........................................................................................13
Bibliography....................................................................................................27
List of Tables

121-point Quadraxial Mixtures - Variation 1 ................................................................. 12
# List of Figures

Richard Serra, Tilted Arc .................................................. 13
Robert Smithson, Spiral Jetty ........................................... 14
Shoji Hamada, Press molded vase ................................. 15
Tomoo Hamada, Chawan ................................................. 16
Robert Williams, Yellow Earthenware ......................... 17
Robert Williams, White Stoneware ............................... 17
Robert Williams, Granite .............................................. 18
Robert Williams, Basalt .............................................. 18
Robert Williams, Quadraxial ......................................... 19
Robert Williams, Nuka Glaze Progression .................. 19
Robert Williams, Celadon Progression ......................... 20
Robert Williams, Celadon Tiles ................................... 20
Robert Williams, Selection of Glazes from Quadraxial .... 21
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 1...... 21
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 2...... 22
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 3...... 22
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 4...... 23
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 5...... 23
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 6...... 24
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 7...... 24
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 8...... 25
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Gallery Map .................. 25
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Gallery Statement .......... 26
Nature of Beauty

Beauty is a loaded topic. For my purposes, I am going to make some assumptions about beauty as defined by philosophers who have spent a great deal of time considering this concept. Soetsu Yanagi, a philosopher who founded the folk craft movement in Japan, wrote extensively about craft and its ties to beauty. I am interested in his philosophy and how producing and living with functional hand crafted objects may bring us closer to beauty and, in so doing, increase quality of life. In *The Unknown Craftsman*, he discusses the idea that beauty is possible only when opposing ideas cease to exist; as long as we are in debate about the technicalities of what is or is not beautiful, we are unable to consciously experience beauty.¹ Beauty is far less about visual aesthetics and far more about experience—not merely the experience of seeing, or even the experience of something beautiful causing a stirring within us—a more active and decidedly not passive experience where we choose to be a participant in a performance of beauty. My work is beautiful to me not because of good craft, or design, but because it is a signifier or reminder of my experience with people, places, and materials.

Bluebird Cabin and the Function of Art

The purpose of my art is to facilitate a more regular connection with people, the earth, wilderness, and natural beauty. The utilitarian nature of my work is critical to its role, for it is while I am interacting with the object that it has the potential to perform its function. While I eat, my mind is provided a short period of time for thought or conversation. If my work is present to perform the function of holding food, then at the same time it can act as a signifier. There is potential during that brief moment of time for conversation or thought to dive into memory and

strengthen ties with places, people, natural materials, and so forth. Ultimately, the purpose of the functional object is no different than Richard Serra’s *Tilted Arc* or Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty*; it is to disrupt mindless routine, and consequently compel individuals to think, form connections with people, places, and materials, and to be aware of our existence, this kind of mindful routine can allow us to experience rather than merely see beauty.

Along the Blackfoot River in Bingham County, Idaho, bouldery basalt cliffs line the river; the black rock stands out against the dry grass and the vivid blue sky. The river navigates the rocks as it meanders along its path, its sound gently breaks the silence of the place. As I gather stones and drop them into the back of my pickup, I breathe the cold morning air and remember the warmth of the radiator in the corner during my last visit to my grandparents’ Bluebird cabin. We drove up with our crying baby to get a last breath of fresh air before winter set in. My grandparents drove out to the cabin from Blackfoot to see our first baby girl; this would be the last time I would see my grandparents together. Their visit was short, but the smiles were big and the hugs meaningful. The rocks I collected on this trip solidified these memories and created a beautiful blue celadon glaze. Recently, my second daughter offered me a blue celadon mug and indicated she would like some milk from the fridge. I put a little milk in the mug and handed it to her; she grabbed the handle and tipped the mug to drink. The mug covered most of her little face and immediately reminded me of the Bluebird cabin—the landscape, the river, and the visit with my grandparents. The blue celadon glaze was made from the basalt collected there.
Mojave Desert

We, as humans, have a biological need to be connected to nature and earth. We live in a time where it is so easy to forget our origins, we can go our whole lives and never experience real quiet, or witness a landscape devoid of man. Edward Abbey, an environmentalist author and former park ranger, said it best:

...the domestic routine, the stupid and useless degrading jobs, the insufferable arrogance of elected officials, the crafty cheating and the slimy advertising of the business men, the tedious wars in which we kill our buddies instead of our real enemies back in the capital, the foul diseased and hideous cities and towns we live in, the constant petty tyranny of automatic washers and automobiles and TV machines and telephone!2

This describes the evidence of our society blindly following that biological need to protect ourselves from nature, to the point where we have made it possible to be so far removed from it that our soul is starved by being severed from its roots. It is disrupting this routine that has proven to be my arts’ great necessity, and I argue that connection, to people, nature, earth, and beauty is the great cure. It is important for our overall health to be connected to nature, but Abbey expands on this by saying:

A man could be a lover and defender of the wilderness without ever in his lifetime leaving the boundaries of asphalt, power lines, and right-angled surfaces. We need wilderness whether or not we ever set foot in it. We need a refuge even though we may never need to go there. I may never in my life go to Alaska, for example, but I am

grateful that it is there. We need the possibility of escape as surely as we need hope; without it the life of the cities would drive all men into crime or drugs or psychoanalysis.3

For many, following travel bloggers on Instagram, occasionally visiting the local park, or watching birds at their feeder provides enough nature for their needs. For me, I need more, which is why after my first year in art I switched into a field biology degree and took a job in a research position. This gave me a good excuse to immerse myself with nature and solitude all summer long, and weekends in the spring and fall. Work took me to the Mojave desert in the southwest corner of Utah where I used radio telemetry to track Gambel's quail, and set up motion sensor cameras with scent stations to monitor canid activity. These jobs enabled me to travel hundreds of miles back and forth across the landscape by vehicle and on foot. As I look back on my time working in that desert, I recognize it as a time when my spirit was strong and energized, and I attribute that to a close connection to the earth. I was anxious for everyone to feel that strength and even convinced my wife to come along one cold winter weekend to camp in the desert and change out memory cards in motion sensor cameras.

In preparation for this show, my daughter and I drove for hours on dirt roads through the Mojave desert looking for potential materials. In a road cut, we found a yellow earthenware clay, and while I filled a bucket to bring home and test, my daughter played in the sand; her feet sinking below the surface caused her to lose a sandal which we never found. This is a memory she has brought up several times. After testing my small sample and realizing I needed more to use in this exhibition, my brother living in, but moving away from, Las Vegas volunteered to

collect the material for me while he wandered around the area for a few days one last time before heading east. My brother and I both have strong ties to this area, but have rarely had the opportunity to experience it together. This work provided that chance even though we were not both there at the same time. He did not find the sandal. Being able to share the experience of this location, has formed links that facilitate the experience or performance of beauty.

Childhood Locations and Process

Two places are burned into even my oldest memories. Both of these locations have remained important to me, and I visit as often as possible to this day. The first is not far from my home; Hobble Creek Canyon has been my family’s canyon for my whole life, and I am sure this is true for many families. It has hosted numberless father and son outings, family picnics, and last minute campouts with my brothers. It was here I learned to fish, start fires, wield a hatchet, and cook a pot in a campfire. These memories are shared with family and close friends, so it was only natural that I would search this canyon for ceramic materials and fortuitous that it had several options, including the white stoneware.

Ruby Valley, Nevada has always been so surreal and dreamlike to me. As a child it was a place of unequivocal freedom, my mind and body free to explore without hindrance. I could wander and find rocks and bugs, streams and ponds, mud holes and waterfalls, and when my energy waned, I could return to home base and my grandma would make the best toast or nachos a boy could have and then send me back out the door. One morning I woke early before the sun; from the sofa where I slept I watched the sun rise over the hay meadows. The light fog and misty sky glowed purple, then red and orange. Even as a child I was overwhelmed with the beauty. I think even then I understood that the beauty of this place was more than the landscape and the
sunrises—it was the family, cousins, and love that were embedded into the place. It was nostalgic memories like these from my youth that lured me back to be a ranch hand as a young adult. My mom and dad taught me how to work hard, but Ruby Valley taught me how to love my work. There was little difference between repairing fence for twelve hours and climbing to the lake above the ranch afterwards, except that I got paid for one. It was my time working in Ruby Valley that I grew to realize that rural and wild places would be critical to my mental and physical health, and ultimately led to my getting a field biology degree and pursuing ceramics.

While living in Nevada, social life was limited to Sunday dinners and limited interaction otherwise, but it was these dinners that provided the opportunity for me to develop a strong friendship with my aunt, uncle, and most of all, my cousin Ben. Because of insufficient oxygen due to difficulties at birth, which resulted in a mental disability, doctors thought that Ben would be a very low functioning individual, but as a result of an amazing family and an opportune environment, Ben exceeded all expectations. He reads, writes, drives, follows sports, gambles, and even puts in some hard work from time to time. Ben Neff has in many ways come to be the face of Ruby Valley—he is a flamboyant extrovert, an instant friend to everyone, and always has open arms, ready to welcome any visitor. He embodies the spirit of the valley. Ben loves, maybe above all else, to go camping. Ben and I have camped up and down the valley, hiked to lakes, and dug out holes in the snow to set up tents in the yard. Camping has become somewhat of an annual tradition for us. I use gathering materials as an excuse to visit the valley as often as I can.

In many ways Ruby Valley has shaped my process as an artist, both conceptually and in practice. It has taught me to understand that relationships, places, and materials drive the work, and that the work is a beautiful process. Driving in my pickup to a remote location, camping with Ben in
Nevada, or my family in Hobble Creek, collecting rock and clay, are all just as much, probably more so, the art, than the object that results at the end.

Quiet and Familiar

I feel it is important to address links in my work to ceramics tradition. While I think Japanese pottery has the strongest influence on me, there is evidence in my work of Japanese, Chinese, and western studio pottery. While I have taken ceramics classes through high school and college, I would say I have not had any formal training, such as an apprenticeship or trade school. The utilitarian aspects of my work have been largely self taught through observation of other potters and images of Japanese and Asian pots. As a result, I have approached ceramics in much the same way I learned to work from my parents or build fences on the ranch. There is a way things are done and have always been done; when I built cattle fences in Nevada, I did so with little variation from how they were built 100 years ago, save for small changes in modern technology that have made the job easier. This idea is evidenced by the Japanese masters in ceramics, their traditions have remained mostly unchanged over the centuries. Shoji Hamada, a studio potter who worked closely with Soetsu Yanagi in establishing the folk craft movement in Japan, established the town of Mashiko as a clay center and was a significant influence on studio pottery and pottery in the American university system. Hamada’s grandson Tomoo Hamada makes work that is clearly distinguishable from his grandfather, yet it is obvious that his works are made with the same construction and glazing techniques. I have tried to pattern my work after this fashion, using traditional methods, of forming and glazing pots, to produce work that is quiet but familiar. I have focused on basic forms, like simple mugs, vases and jars. And my hope is that, while my work does not shout loudly, the subtle and unique variations of my hand and
materials, which have become a major component of the shown pieces, will create work that is my own.

Working with the Materials

A stable glaze generally consist of four parts—feldspar, silica, clay, and flux. I wanted the backbone of this show to be a quadraxial using materials from the four locations that have made profound impacts on my life. A quadraxial is a glaze development tool, used to explore the potential of new materials or discover new glazes from commercially sourced materials. Starting at the corners, materials are blended in increasing/decreasing quantities, usually in grids of 36, 81, or 121, after firing you can see how the glaze transitions based on how quantities of each material interact together. Sometimes this tool will produce usable glazes on the first test, sometimes it only offers new points of exploration. In this case, I used Ruby Valley granite as a source of feldspar, basalt from the bluebird cabin as a source for silica, stoneware clay from Hobble Creek Canyon, and the yellow earthenware clay from the Mojave Desert as the flux. After I gathered these materials, I crushed them with a sledge hammer until they would fit into the studio chainmill, roughly three inches in size. I milled and re-milled each material until it could be sieved to the appropriate mesh, 1/50th to 1/100th of an inch or finer depending on the material. The first step after processing is a melt test for each individual material. This process is represented on the large tiles. The melt test is simply firing the processed material on a tile or in a cup to see what happens at the desired firing temperature, 2350 degrees Fahrenheit in this case. This helps me determine what function it will fill in a glaze or clay recipe, and helps me guess potential colors. I then use those materials to produce several line blends, which is a simpler form of the quadraxial—only two materials are used; often one side is a clear glaze and the other
is a material being tested as a potential colorant. This test is done with the intent of finding how the materials respond to each other and determining optimal combinations to produce functional and aesthetic glazes. In this particular instance, I made a small 36 point quadraxial to assess potential. I then made alterations and repeated this process again. This process produced my final quadraxial and was the method I used to source materials for the line blends in the celadon and nuka.

Description and Content of Work

The first pieces you encounter as you enter my show are four large tiles. These were rolled with a large pipe and three-eighths inch spacers to establish thickness, and then cut into twenty-five inch squares. I then loaded them into the kiln and covered each with one of the four materials— earthenware clay, stoneware clay, granite, and basalt. These were single-fired in a reduction atmosphere to 2350 degrees Fahrenheit; they are essentially a simple melt test on a much larger scale.

On the next wall is the 121 mug quadraxial; each of the four materials is used in a 50-50 mix on the corners and blended throughout the grid. This is the most exhaustive method for testing ceramic materials. Next to the quadraxial is a shelf with ten cylinders glazed with a traditional nuka glaze with basalt as a colorant ranging from one to ten percent. A nuka glaze is made from one part of a local feldspathic stone, one part silica, and one part wood ash; this glaze has been widely used in Korean, Chinese and Japanese pottery, and is growing in popularity in the US. The glaze is unique to each location it was made, by virtue of variations in local materials and sources of ash. This variation is made from commercial feldspar and silica, but I sourced the wood ash locally and the basalt is from the bluebird cabin.
The next wall has a celadon wall piece with wild-sourced colorants all from locations that I have formed personal attachment to in one way or another—Idaho basalt, Rock Canyon quartzite, Hobble Creek bentonite, Hobble Creek stoneware, Slate Canyon slate, Ibex earthenware, St. George earthenware, St. George stoneware, Ruby Valley granite, and Ruby Valley feldspar—and commercial iron oxide as a control. A celadon is a blue or green semi transparent glaze; while the term is European in origin, the glaze was originally produced in China all the way back to the first century, and later spread through Korea, Japan and eventually the western world. I used Shoji Hamada’s recipe for the base glaze, the base glaze being the clear glassy matrix, and the colorants being the locally sourced materials. Each row ranges in percents added, with the iron potency of each material being considered for the interval added. Next to that piece are ten stoneware tiles, painted with porcelain clay, the same used to make the celadon mugs, and then glazed using the same Hamada base glaze, with varying mesh sizes of basalt added, ranging from 20 to 500 mesh. There is an evident grain transition from either end.

On the final wall are ten large pots with the most successful glazes from the quadraxial. They are organized according to their number placement in the quadraxial. These are selected and used to represent the next step in the glaze development process—glazes that show potential are used on a larger surface to provide a better picture of how they respond to the clay surface and firing process. From here, each glaze could be kept as is, or altered in line blends to make subtle changes.

As you walk through the space, you encounter the unprocessed raw materials on the floor in line with the tiles. The raw materials have become just as important as any of the finished pieces—they draw direct links to their source locations, and to the natural world.
Conclusion

I have created visually quiet work that speaks volumes when given context. Understanding the source of our tools and choosing to use items whose source links us with nature and personal memory allows us to experience beauty, and establish mindful routines that can improve quality of life.
### Appendix of Tables

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121-point Quadraxial Mixtures - Variation 1
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Robert Williams, White Stoneware
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Robert Williams, Nuka Glaze Progression
Robert Williams, Celadon Progression

Robert Williams, Celadon Tiles
Robert Williams, Selection of Glazes from Quadraxial

Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 1
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 2

Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 3
Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Show Documentation 8

Robert Williams, Glaze Exploration via Nostalgic Locations Gallery Map
Collecting materials from personally significant locations has become a way to subtly reconnect people with places, nature, natural materials and processes. I produce well-made objects, with the end goal of allowing the viewer to feel and interact with traditional forms of beauty through craft, which is increasingly rare in our mechanized world. Raw materials are a direct link to nature and earth, a link which people in general can benefit from in essential ways. The processes of collecting and using materials to form links between objects and places resembles human relationships, and the connections between places, things, and people set the stage for the performance of beauty.

Presented here are raw and processed materials rooted in locations that have had a significant impact on my life and memories. Traditional glaze techniques—lineblends and quadraxials—are used to explore the material's potential as glaze surfaces. I selected specific materials from these locations to meet the criteria of basic glaze chemistry, both for a glaze base and as colorants for traditional glaze recipes like celadon and yuika.

While this work is very physical, physicality is not the emphasis; it is more about experiencing the materials in order to relive memories of the past. Instead of snapping a selfie or buying a souvenir, I study the geology, collect promising samples, and then crush, sieve, and test them. The end result is an object that, instead of simply being admired, facilitates the ritual of eating or drinking. The vessel contains the ability to transfer physical vitality as well as stimulate fond memories. These daily rituals are the performance of beauty and a source of lasting joy.
Bibliography
