Thoughts on Pottery

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I come from a large family that as far back as I can remember has spent most of our time together gathered around a large amount of food. With work in tropical epidemiology, my father traveled and lived around the world, picking up recipes and tastes for new foods along the way. When I was 11, he spent a month in the Hunan province of China, and came back anxious to try the very typical Hunan Mushroom dish that he had eaten so much. I wasn't much interested in the flavor, but did enjoy his teaching us the traditional eating practices from this rural Chinese town - always slurp while eating the soup and spilling and burping were necessary signs of appreciation of a good meal. My mother was not so fond of my father bringing these particular customs to our table.

The food was always presented thoughtfully if not beautifully. Along with the recipes, my parents picked up traditional ceramics from all over, and though these pots were displayed for their own beauty, many were also taken down and served with food. Why not incorporate beautiful objects into our everyday existence, why not slow down and appreciate a flavor and a handmade object holding it?

Beautiful presentation of food is something that is taken very seriously in Asia. Having a mother who considers herself Thai, a father whose cooking and presentation was heavily influenced by living in South East Asia for many years, I think this is where my interest in thoughtful presentation comes from. At restaurants in Japan, every dish will generally be served in a unique bowl or serving plate, one that is specifically the right dimension, color, and background for the food which it immaculately presents. Appreciation of the presentation becomes a part of the experience of eating. In Thailand, the attention to detail in all aspects is incredible. Rather than cutting a pineapple in normal rounds, the Thai spend a little more time to cut the spines out individually, forming a spiral pattern which shows itself when the pineapple is sliced. There is a whole department of the Thai Royal Kitchen for decorating the food presented: small chili lilies, radish flowers, and incredible feats with carrots are produced, just for the purpose of visually
presenting the curry or rice in a beautiful fashion. I believe this attention to food presentation actually makes the food taste better, and it definitely makes the eating experience more enjoyable.

So from this lengthy explanation of my appreciation of food and presentation, comes my love of pottery. Pottery can be found in every part of the world, and I like being a part of something that is so universal. During my travels, encouraged by parents and sisters that valued the education in immersing oneself in a different culture, I first studied pottery in Guanajuato, Mexico. I learned from an old master potter who would come around occasionally and center my wobbly ball of clay so that I could produce something I was proud of. Since I did not know anyone in the town, I spent most of my time at the studio and came back from that trip wanting to make more. Luckily, a friendly professor let me slip into a ceramics class at the University of Georgia, and I have been throwing ever since.

The reason I have continued making pots since that first class, besides the finished product, is a love of the process. From the very beginning, with mixing the clay, the process is very physical and intuitive. I have never really been one to follow recipes exactly and this holds true with the mixing of the clay. Mostly I am going for a deep brown color, one that is beautiful while still wet, and turns into a nice range of orange to brown depending on firing temperatures and reduction. After mixing the clay, the physically repetitive motion of wedging lulls my mind to a place of stillness that allows for the spontaneous following of intuition. Next comes the centering of the ball of clay on the wheel. I brace my elbows against my body, and the clay mimics the shape of my cupped hands around it. Once the clay is somewhat centered (being a little bit of off-centered seems to give the pot more life, a dip in the round lip or an off balance tilt that is more interesting than a perfectly centered shape), I push my fingers down to the bottom and pull out across the wheel to form the inside base, attempting to leave a spiral pattern while pulling out the bottom. Now it is time to pull up the sides, first wetting both sides of the clay with a sponge. Here the choices start to emerge: whether to belly out the shape by pushing from the inside, or to narrow the form at the top, whether to
leave the top thicker to make a shelf for a lid, or to thin it out so that it can be pulled in to form a bottle neck. Many of these decisions are not so much made consciously as instinctively. Once I finish a pot on the wheel, I slice it at the base and pick it up, feeling for the first time the weight in my hand, a quick preview of how successful the pot will be. When the pot is leather hard, I have more decisions to make such as showing the attachments of handles and spouts, or smoothing them over. In tradition with some fine Athenian potters, I like the looser approach - leaving my fingerprints and attachments visible to provide information about how the finished product was made and a connection to the process.

When the pot is leather hard, I either dip it or brush on Tile 6 slip, this is seductively smooth and it coats the dark clay body in a very satisfying way. For pots that are going to be fired in the salt kiln, I dip the pots to get a thick coating that will hopefully crackle in the kiln. For the pots fired in an electric kiln, I brush on the slip, hoping to add another texture from the bristles of the brush. After the slip dries, I start the drawing process, or sometimes leave the pots without pictures, to let the more subtle crackle and glaze patterns speak for themselves - these I fire in the salt kiln. I enjoy both end results - more intentional surface design fired in the electric kiln, or more organic atmospheric finishing that comes from heavy reduction, flashing and a salt glaze. If I decide the pot does need some drawing, then the first marks I make in the slip are while it is still wet. I drag my fingers through the slip quickly, making marks somewhat instinctively to use as the start of my composition. This is a technique traditionally used in Korea, and suggested by my professor Sunkoo Yuh. I like the physicality of using my fingers to make these movements, and I like the spontaneous marks that inform where and what I later draw.

I started drawing on slipware in one of my earlier classes in undergraduate school as a way to make a particular pot more unique. I would sketch the people around me working in the room and fire them in the salt kiln. I liked the end results- there was something nice about a silly, quick sketch that became so
permanent when drawn into clay. There is no erasing, some drawings simply come out better than others, and accepting this is part of the enjoyment. From the faces that I started drawing, I picked up more of a repertoire of animals and plants and words, particularly while studying in Cortona for the second time in the fall of 2006. There I really appreciated the unusual paintings that could be found on a pharmacy pitcher or wine jug: a quickly painted house and tree, a very large woman riding a small horse. There were plates that had busts of women’s faces on them, made by men for the lady they were courting. These plates often said the woman’s name and “Bella.” Inspired by these I started making mugs for people with their names on them, and including animals that I imagined their personalities to align with. I started drawing the archetypal cypress tree on covered jars, images that connected the pot to the time and place I was making it. When I returned to Athens, I started a project where I illustrated one cup a day for a month at a time, recording happenings and images that occurred to me at the time. I enjoyed all of these new ways of decorating pots and started incorporating drawing into most of the pots I was making as a way to spend a little more time and thought with each piece. That is, after all, what I want from someone using it later.

For the place settings that I made in the MFA show, I decided on a cast of characters - people, plants and animals that I would like to appear in various connections on all of the pieces. I drew all of these things on a piece of paper and hung it across from my wheel. I made about 20 place settings to choose my 6 from, and on all but 4 salt fired ones, I would draw some of the characters interacting with various plants in different stories. I tried to use similar finger motions while starting the compositions and draw in a way that would tie all the pieces together while still having a unique story all to themselves. After the pieces were bisqued, I first stained the lines with black, hoping to highlight some of the slip crackles as well. I glazed these pieces using variants on the cone 04 Water glaze: vibrant blue, green, yellow, and white that, in combination with the dark clay and white slip, are reminiscent of the bold glazing techniques in Mexico where I first learned to throw. I brush on the water glazes to highlight the images
and make finger dots of color in other areas. I also mixed up a batch of light water yellow to spray on top of the outside of the pots with an atomizer. This hand blown technique adds a light sheen in a more organic manner than brushing or dipping. The pots fired in the electric kiln were taken to cone 1.

For the less belabored pots, I left more of the surface design up to chance, and fired them in old broken salt kilns. I find that some of the results produced in the salt kiln have a grace that I could never intentionally place on an electric fired vessel. However, the low percentage of success and the almost constant troubles starting burners and finding functional kiln shelves are what pushed me to find a technique other than salt-firing that I was satisfied with. This being said, I love the unusual and dramatic effects of the flame and heavy, uncontrollable (at times) reduction that occurs in the old salt kiln, and was happy to find some good results in a few firings to put in the show. I tried to intersperse salt-fired pots amongst the electric fired pots, and keep a consistency in glaze technique and imagery.

For the presentation of this particular show, I decided to show my pots in two ways: holding food and flowers in the reception area downstairs, and representing a home scene upstairs. It was important to me to have the pottery used, as this is the main reason I make it. However, it was nice to also present the pottery in the museum upstairs: claiming a spot for functional work in a museum yet proposing by the installation that our everyday existence can be art. For the food downstairs, I collaborated with my father, choosing particular shapes, colors and sizes that would present the food we had chosen for the catering. I made taller, large bowls with drawings on the outside for the spinach dip, with a blue inside to add color to the light green and white food. My father carved a number of the food garnishes that I spoke of earlier, and red and orange chili lilies graced the lips of the bowls. I made vases for the food table, as I believe that flowers and food go beautifully together. By placing the same flowers on the reception food table and on the table of the museum installation, I brought continuity to the two parts of the show.
I deliberated about the furniture on which I would show my work in the installation. Did I want to use an old family china cabinet and my parents’ table that I ate on throughout my childhood? Did I want to incorporate someone else’s craft into my show? I compromised by making both table and shelf with my uncle, Bruce McCumber, who is a cabinet maker working in Vermont. I acquired some hundred-year-old heart pine wood from a carpenter friend, old posts and beams taken out of a pencil factory in Atlanta. I drove this up to Vermont on my spring break to make it into the furniture. The entire table top came from a carrying beam that was 11” by 14,” and after slicing through the wood lengthwise, the stunning grain was revealed: only slow-growing trees in an old growth forest produce grain this tight. The simple style of table with its golden orange and yellow color and many cracks and gouges complimented the pots well and I enjoyed collaborating with another craftsman who makes a living through his work. The shelf and table top were hand beaded and planed, incorporating a similar slow-handed technique with wood that I employ with clay. I placed favorite pieces on the shelf - bigger plates, a set of teapot and cups, covered jars – things that might be hanging in a home, hopefully ready to be taken off the shelf and used. Conceptually, I was pleased with the comfort of coming to my corner of the museum while simultaneously elevating the home scene to art. As individual pieces, I enjoyed the process of making a story with characters continuing from one plate to another, from a bottle down to a soup bowl. As particulars go, there are many small changes I would make on the pots: add an altered lip to the soup bowls, continue the drawings on the bottom of the plates inside the foot… It is these details that keep me interested and excited to continue making pots. I want to continue using pots, sharing and selling them, and incorporating them into other’s lives to get feedback. I am excited to keep working, slowly gaining skills and adding layers to the pots.

I maybe have a more subtle influence from my travels than my father. He came home with exact recipes to reproduce at home. I came home with images and impressions to work into my vocabulary of making. But I hope that the
peculiarities, the techniques that I have seen and picked up from my travels add another dimension to the visual information, to the story that is told in a pot. I want there to be new things to discover: a finger print, a connection from one animal to another, things to stay interested in while cradling a cup in hands, or while disappearing food reveals more of the image.
Heart Pine Table with Dinnerware for Six

Detail: Donkey Plate
Heart Pine Hanging Shelf with Selected Pottery

Installation: Table, Shelf and Pottery
Detail: Cup & Saucer and Tumbler