

Bountiful

By

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**Photo by Charlie Cummings*

Summary of Project in Lieu of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
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Functional pottery historically plays a celebrated role in the idea of abundance and benevolence. When the user engages with the work in *Bountiful*, the voluptuous forms and humorous, exaggerated proportions speak to certainty and comfort, while also good-naturedly poking fun at traditional pottery forms.

The work in *Bountiful* uses bold and uncomplicated rounded forms that are made to evoke the sensations of comfort through sensuality and certainty through mass, while also referencing the vastness of an open western landscape. While in use, the curvaceous masses of the vessels fill the hand, and evoke buried subconscious memories of plenty. The un-obstructed western landscape of Wyoming commonly reminds those who witness it of abundance and possibility, much like the sense of hope that comes from the anticipation of eating a delicious meal. These sensations in the work are supported by the luscious matte glaze surfaces that are on the vessels, specifically chosen for their smooth, tactile, cool surfaces. Various hues of greens, tans, and reds make up the color palette of the exterior glazes used in *Bountiful*. They are derived directly from geologic formations, and also various species of shrubbery that grow on low rainfall grasslands. Intentionally bright and visually contrasting glazes line

the interiors of the pots. These glazes are meant to surprise and delight the user as they interact with the vessel.

While the forms are made to capture the awe of a sweeping landscape, and generate security through mass, there is subtle humor at play in the proportional relationships within individual vessels. As an element of design, proportion plays a key role in the overall impact the vessel has on an audience. When the proportion is dramatically altered by either over or under-exaggeration, the end product creates an intentional imbalance. This imbalance can be read as fun, and it teases the expectations of what forms functional pots traditionally take. A large bulbous handle on a mug is one example of the imbalance. Another example is a handle on a pouring vessel that is nearly as large as the containment space of the vessel, where the handle looks to be nearly consuming the pot. These specific exaggerations subvert the commonly held “rules” of function that are constantly at play in the user’s experience. When the user picks up the piece, and is delighted by the scale and silly proportions, I am one step closer to accomplishing the serious work of engaging the audience.

PROJECT REPORT

Introduction

Functional pots have been used as objects for the delivery of nourishment since the first mud-filled basket was set aflame by our cave dwelling ancestors. The relationship of pottery and sustenance allows for a wide-open arena in which artists can make meaningful objects for a broad audience. The basic biological needs that are met through the use of pottery make functional vessels both mundane and profound. Centuries of vessels testify to the human need to create beautiful objects with which we engage with on a daily basis.

My own relationship with making pots began when I realized the dignity and generosity that lay within carefully considered craftsmanship. My peers and I were inspired by the Japanese Mingei movement which elevated the beautiful and subtle objects made by the “unknown maker”. The Mingei philosophy focused on the humble anonymity of the maker, and the availability of well-considered objects for the masses. British potter Bernard Leach, the Japanese philosopher Soetsu Yanagi, and the Japanese Living National Treasure Shoji Hamada popularized the movement through writing, tours and most specifically apprentices at the Leach Pottery. Many makers based their studio practices on contributing to a community through the act of making unique wares and selling them at an affordable price. The former Leach apprentices had a lasting impact on contemporary American ceramics for many reasons. Their tenacious work ethic became the standard expectation for the development of a sound haptic sensibility. Another impact was the sheer volume of works they produced and the

dissemination of their images on the field. This work planted the seeds of forms in the imaginations of other makers. Many former Leach apprentices were writers and teachers as well, and these contributions have had lasting effects on my studio practice and the field as a whole. The height of this trend of Mingei pottery was well over thirty years ago. These philosophies are dignified and have built a foundation for the current state of ceramics today. It is important to note that there are many differing factors today that make a simple, humble potter's lifestyle inaccessible to a younger generation of potters. One is the cost of education as compared to forty years ago, and the increased pressure to attend graduate school. Another is the cost of land and housing. Thirty years ago a potter was able to buy a building for a few thousand dollars and set up shop, today potters must rent while paying student loans. Economically, the contemporary makers with a Masters of Fine Art have to be very clever about marketing so that they can make a living without teaching. "Slick" marketing skills are necessary, and do not fit the traditional mold of the "humble" unknown maker. Just as pottery forms can be expanded on in unique and fun ways, so can marketing. Current technologies give makers today tremendous opportunities to market themselves in smart and successful ways.

As my work has continued to develop, I have become more interested in questioning the decisions I make during production, and exploring the material in ways that will provide new elements to the vocabulary of vessel making. Having grown bored with my interpretation of traditional Leach forms, I began to feel that in order to continue the generosity that the Mingei philosophy engendered in me, I had to excite the intellect of the user by expanding the form options in my work. Forms that meet the table on a

curve, lid galleries that sink far into the body of the pot, and small pouring vessels that have handles as big as the containment space all build on traditional form in a unique way. My work remains dedicated to the spirit of community, and *Bountiful* is a culmination of many years of making pottery, but more specifically, it is the beginning of a body of work made with a focus on alluring curvature and swelling invitation that will engage the user both intellectually and physically.

A sense of community that is present in the clay culture was, and still is, a powerful allure for me. I grew up in Lander, Wyoming, which has the population of 7000 people. Lander is surrounded by a gorgeous and treacherous landscape. The towns of this region are separated by many miles, so community members have an unspoken sense of responsibility to one another. Generosity and sincerity are common attributes of the community members, attributes that reflect the inexhaustible splendor and expanse of the landscape. Generosity and sincerity can also describe a vessel that is bold and full of “breath”. A vessel whose wall is stretched from the inside, and whose exterior curve continues without an inconsistency or “dead spot”. The “breath” was described by my first teacher, Lynn Munns, to seem as though the vessel had taken in a large breath and held it. Since first hearing of the “breath” that fills a finely thrown vessel, I have pursued the desire to make the elusive “beautiful vessel”. It quickly became clear to me that this art could only be mastered through dedication, and I



Fig 1

believed there were unspoken “rules” about how to make beautiful work, and who could make it. I found both dread and hope in the forceful writings of people like Bauhaus-trained Margarine Wildenhain who said :

“The pot is absolutely the image of the man who makes it, and if that man is nothing, to put it bluntly, that pot thrown with all the skill and all the technique in the world will also be nothing. For the secret of making a good pot lies, to a certain degree, in an honest and decent and ethically convinced man—a man convinced of the validity of that he is working for, the values he is trying for. Little by little, without consciously trying to be original, his pot will be original. It will also be his and it will be a good pot.”¹

Wildenhain’s assertion makes broad moral assumptions that are daunting, but as I have continued with the art-form, I have come to understand what “values” I am trying to attain. Rather than conforming to a set of standards I imagined were “right”, I have begun exploring what is “right for me”. The recognition of my desire to emulate the stark and dramatic landscape of my youth, and to infuse the work with playful absurdity is right for me. I am still dedicated to the “well thrown vessel”, but am not limited to believe that is the purest mode of expression.

¹ Halper, Vicki, and Diane Douglas. Choosing Craft: The Artist's Viewpoint. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009) 11

Tactile Symbolism

Large jars with continuously curved, full bodies may remind the viewer of several things at once: a gourd, a piece of fruit, pregnancy. In his book, *Ceramics*, Philip Rawson describes in great detail the phenomenon of “memory-traces”. He states:

“As we live our lives we accumulate a fund of memory-traces based on our sensory experience. These remain in our minds charged, it seems, with vestiges of the emotions which accompanied the original experiences.”²

He goes on to say that memory-traces provide the “*continuum from which evolves everyone’s sense of the world*”, and that the artist is responsible for recalling the experiences and bringing them to physical form and the viewer is responsible for their interpretation.

Memory-traces are intentionally evoked in two ways in *Bountiful*; through the physical engagement a user has with the work, and by the way the work sits atop a table. The physical act of holding the vessels will recall smooth, weighty stones, or ripe voluptuous fruit. When forming the vessels, I push out

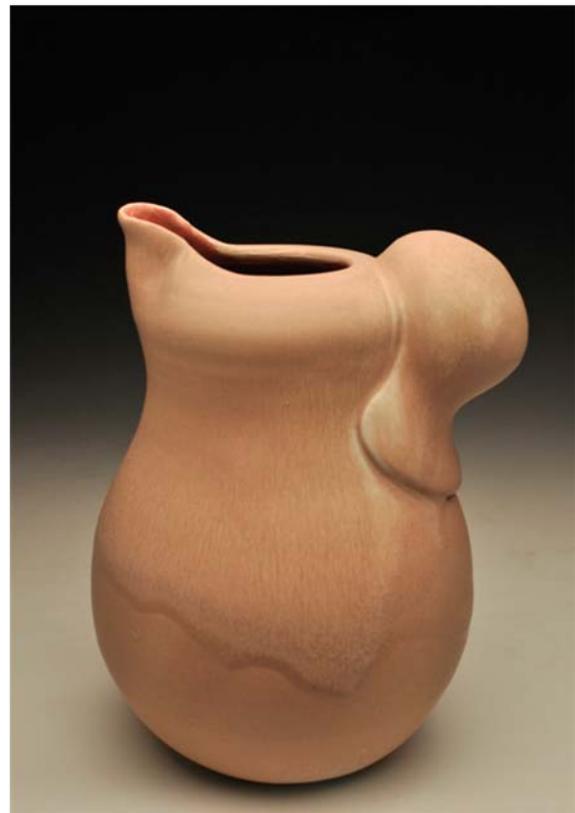


Fig 2

² Rawson, Philip S. *Ceramics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984) 16

full forms whose curves will fill the hands. I also “rib out” any throw lines or rough spots to further accentuate softness. I sand bare spots of porcelain to a smooth texture. When the hands are overflowing with an object, the sensation simultaneously recalls abundance and consumption. When engaged with the pieces, many people will continuously turn them around in their hands in order to enjoy the relationship of the exaggerated parts to the whole piece, and the fullness of the objects themselves. When turned in the hand, the cool, soft surfaces invite intimacy, while also evoking a sense of calm. This experience is unique to each person, but as the maker, I am imbuing the work with my own memory-traces of abundance, and the swelling sense of joy and potential found in the experience of an un-touched wide-open landscape.

My choice to rest the pots upon a curve and to omit the traditional “foot” is made to both evoke memory-traces of fullness, and also to explore the edges of traditional formal decisions. When the work sits on the table top, the curves of the vessel “complete” above the table, rather than “completing” below the surface with the help of the viewer’s imagination. The curve meets the table at a nonspecific point, much like a large ripe watermelon, or squash. The nonspecific point creates a unique balance point for each piece. It also provides another arena for humor by adding “nubs” on the bottom as a solution for stabilizing vertical wares. On a formal level, a sensation of nesting or self-containment is achieved by having the sides of the vessels curve completely around and finish inside the forms. On lidded forms, I throw a swelling continuous curve as the base, and carefully pull the rim down inside the base. I then create a generous seat for the lid to rest upon. The lids are made in exaggerated proportion to the base to again reference abundance. When making tea pots, I consider and analyze all

attachments, and study the relationships the parts will have with the whole. I explore the shape and type of spouts I make to further explore form language. I work within a series so that I can alter and tweak small relationships within the work. The function of the work is sometimes limited by the shape of a particular form, as is the case in the large serving dish, "Basin". In this form, the lip curves back in to the main containment area of the dish, thereby limiting the volume. This lip also makes spooning out food slightly difficult, and washing the dish

inconvenient. My position on this is that the object itself is magnificent, and physical use of the object does not negate the impact of the vessel. The majority of the forms I make are deeply seated in function, and if the form overrides function, it is only to break away from the mundane. It is healthy for the audience to experience the elevation of a common piece of pottery.

There are several contemporary potters whose work influences my thinking. These makers are pushing form language in ways that engages the user in ways that are surprising



Fig. 3



Fig 4

and pleasing. Chris Pickett has several clever designs that allow the user a unique experience, as does Birdie Boone. Pickett's work is made from an inventive method of molds that transforms the common pot to a useful sculptural object. Boone's work is interactive in subtle and playful ways. She rounds the bottoms of cups on a broad plane so that the piece rocks gently, but with stability when in use. She also incorporates spouts that are simultaneously placed in the lid space and the attached to the side of the pot. These tea pots also incorporate bud vases in the lid. Each of these artists is making work with a unique voice and adds interest to the world of functional pots.

Bountiful uses swelling, expansive forms and exaggerated attachments in conjunction with soft alluring glazes to create a feeling of abundance for the user. The forms in this body of work are subtle and simply stated. It is work that is designed to exist within the intimate space of the user, while humorously challenging traditional form making.

The work in *Bountiful* is conceptually bound to the user/vessel interaction; the viewer must submit to the desire to physically engage with the work. Physical contact is the only way to completely understand it. Philip Rawson writes:

If we are to understand the true significance of the formal units making up a pot, we must try to discover in ourselves appropriate memory-traces of our own, chains of vivid concrete experiences, to which, as we have seen, feelings may be the only key. And since it is primarily the counter of the vertical section, in essence a kinetic trace, which gives a form its specific character, we must taste

*its possible suggestions as fully as we can. We may have to follow it with mind and hand, up, down, over and under...*³

The viewer may come to functional pots with material biases firmly in place. When confronted with the work in *Bountiful*, inner reflection is required to understand the decisions made to create the specific form and feel of the work, and the intention of symbolism of those decisions.

Display

The display supports for *Bountiful* were designed to evoke a sense of expansive space in which to view the work.

With simplicity and elegance in mind, the gallery furniture was built to accentuate the undulating line created by the height variation of the work. The works were placed on the wall shelves according to form. The works are arranged so that the pieces would be seen as a whole and also appreciated individually. The heights of the various works were considered so



Fig 5



Fig 6

that when placed side-by-side, they would take on a linear quality much like mountains

³ Rawson 110

on the distant horizon. The color choices refer to undertones of browns and plums found in the glazes, and ultimately reference landscape. The “constellation” wall provides a contrast to the linear quality of the rest of the space. The “constellation” pattern was designed to emulate the diverse holes in the tea strainers and berry bowls whose unpredictable patterning speak of motion and change found in nature.

In order for the concept of the works to be complete, the user must engage with the pieces. Only in a gallery where the viewer is welcome to touch, will the work be fully successful.

In Conclusion

Bountiful is a collection of work that continues the line of functional pots made to accommodate celebration and generosity in everyday life. Because of the inherent necessity to use vessels for nourishment, functional pottery is an obvious conduit between an artist and their audience. When the user engages with the work in *Bountiful*, the forms and exaggerated proportions serve to remind the user of abundance and generosity.



Fig 7

LIST OF REFERENCES

- Halper, Vicki, and Diane Douglas. *Choosing Craft: The Artist's Viewpoint*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009. Print.
- Rawson, Philip S. *Ceramics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984. Print.

Biographical Sketch

Dandee Pattee grew up in the foothills of the Wind River Mountains in Lander, Wyoming. She received her Associates of Fine Art Degree from Casper College in Casper, Wyoming in 2003, and her Bachelors of Science degree from Southern Utah University in 2005. In the years between undergraduate and graduate school she was a post- baccalaureate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, a resident artist at the Lux Center for the Arts in Lincoln, Nebraska, a summer assistant to studio potter Clary Illian, in Ely, Iowa and a two year apprentice with studio potter, Silvie Granatelli in Floyd, Virginia. Dandee received her MFA from the University of Florida in 2012.



Fig 8