

Gather Round

By

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Sunday brunch is a time for extended families to come together to share both the mundane and transcendent aspects of family history. As the table cloth is laid on the table, the outside world pauses for the duration of the meal. Pottery is woven into the fabric of the family meal, acting as a silent heirloom that holds the collective memory of the group. *Gather Round* is both the catalyst for and remnant of these interactions.

Gather Round uses color, pattern, and form to create nostalgia. An early 20th century color palette of denim, cream, and terra cotta links the viewer to memories of past family gatherings. Floral patterns establish a regional aesthetic that relates to the casual nature of folk art. Southern hospitality is upheld within forms that are generous in proportion and gracious in design.

Family dining evokes traditions of community and comfort. *Gather Round* embodies personal times that provide a counterpoint to the work-centered individual-first society that we live in.

Introduction

Sunday brunch is a time for extended families to come together to share both the mundane and transcendent aspects of family history. As the table cloth is laid on the table, the outside world pauses for the duration of the meal. Pottery melds into the fabric of the family meals as a silent heirloom that holds the collective memory of the group. *Gather Round* is both the catalyst for and artifact of these interactions.

Dining and Dinner Ware as a Reflection of our Changing World

In *For the Table Top* Merle Evans and Lorna Sass state, “Our styles reflect our culture, as others reflected theirs. And yet some things remain unchanged: The act of eating is still vitally important, and the tabletop, today as before, is at the center of our lives.” (Evans, Sass 9) Food cultures arise out of shared preferences that are spread across geographical areas and cultural heritages. Foods can be categorized by nationality, country, region, and city. This specialization of food identity provides a vehicle for people to connect. Growing up in the south, I was exposed to food culture that was simultaneously traditional and modern in its creative expression. Staples such as biscuits and gravy, grits, and barbeque have been appropriated into an infinite number of local specialties. In her book *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle*, Barbara Kingsolver states, “A food culture is not something that gets sold to people. It arises out of a place, a soil, a climate, a history, a temperament, a collective sense of belonging.” (Kingsolver, 47.45) As culinary practices migrate from location to location, food presentation has coevolved to meet the demand.

Throughout history cultures have fed themselves through hunting, gathering and crop cultivation. Current food cultivation techniques produce sufficient food for consumers who have the money to pay for it. For most middle-class Americans the concern for having enough food

has morphed into a concern for variety in the foods we have available. Food is now a luxury that supports subcultures based on culinary preferences. As these subcultures have solidified, dinnerware has become a way for people to express their culinary preferences and status within their culture. As Ines Heugal states in *Laying the Elegant Table*, “Dinnerware as we know them today first appeared in the nineteenth century, with the rise of an upper middle class from the new industrial milieu and the emergence of a bourgeoisie anxious to emulate the powerful.” (Heugal 23)

The choice between the use of permanent tableware or mass-produced disposable dinnerware reflects the value placed on food presentation. Disposable service ware can fulfill the physical role of delivering food to the body, but does so with its own destruction in mind. Permanence is not a concern for designers of plastic ware. The primary focus on utility is reflected by the absence of pattern and the limited variety of designs. Permanent tableware fulfills the function of food delivery, while conveying cultural content. The prospect of long-term use encourages designers to increase variety through pattern, scale, color, and form. Buyers choose within this variety to express their own personal identity and social status. Handmade ceramic tableware gives the buyer the ultimate personal choice because all pieces are unique and made to order.

With the majority of American households dependent on the income from two people working sixty-hour weeks, time for cooking and communal eating has waned. Fast food, TV dinners, and takeout have replaced home-cooked meals. The emphasis on saving time has seen disposable dinnerware replacing ceramics. This marginalization reduces the time families spend together during the day. Traditionally, the hours reserved for cooking and eating were a time for family members to share their daily experiences. Gracious dinnerware focuses attention on the

process of gathering and suggests the coming together of people for dining. *Gather Round* calls the viewer back to the table where the individual and the group can be nourished.

The pieces in *Gather Round* have been crafted to serve Sunday brunch. This weekend meal is often the only regular time families schedule to eat together. This meal often happens after the family has attended church. The connection between spiritual and physical nourishment is an integral part of the southern cultural landscape. The decoration, color, and display of *Gather Round* convey the hospitality, graciousness, and generosity that communal dining represented in my family.

The Aesthetic of Material Transformation

James Chappell states “Earthenware has been the type of pottery most commonly made down through history” (Chappell 20). Earthenware can be dug straight from the ground and be ready for use with minimal processing. As a secondary clay body it has migrated from its parent rock and collected in river beds, lakes, and low-lying areas. During this migration earthenware picks up residual iron, carbonaceous matter, and other impurities. These physical qualities link earthenware to the mundane aspects of life. This “dirty” clay was used to make roof tiles, pipes and everyday pottery which lend the medium utilitarian associations. These undecorated products were not valuable. When broken they were replaced with a minimum of expense and concern.

As a material, porcelain is the antithesis of earthenware. Earthenware’s dark coarse texture is in stark contrast to porcelain’s white smooth quality. Porcelain represents purity and refinement, qualities that the aristocracy of Europe coveted. The association of porcelain, and its white color, as being valuable is linked to its rarity in the natural world, the skills needed to

master the difficult working properties of the material, and its value as a trade commodity. Developed in China from primary kaolin, silica and feldspar, the formula for porcelain was unknown in the western world until the early 1700s. As trade increased along the Silk Road, the western elite developed a craving for porcelain and the status it represented. The perceived value of earthenware shifted as various cultures used earthenware to mimic Chinese porcelains. By making the clay white they benefited from associations porcelain had in the culture. This is very similar to the practice of gold plating less-precious metals to increase their value. Many techniques involved covering earthenware, or other low-fire clays, with white slips and glazes. The creation of slips, colorants, and decorating techniques took hundreds of years to develop. Transforming earthenware into a porcelain-like commodity took copious amounts of time and labor. The search for the right technique involved many countries along a varied cultural spectrum. As various techniques were tried, the level of decoration and experimentation increased. Major aesthetic breakthroughs happened in the wake of the attempt to make porcelain.

In the 17th century, English earthenware potters used white slip as a base for ornate painting. Platters attributed to Thomas Toft are indicative of a Staffordshire tradition that valued labor-intensive highly decorated slip painting. His drawings were direct, unrefined, and highly stylized. When compared to representational oil painting of the time, they look naïve. He would be the equivalent of the modern folk artist. His intent was to translate the world around him into easily accessible images for public consumption. For Toft this act of stylized embellishment turned mundane earthenware into a valuable cultural object.

The work in *Gather Round* follows the tradition of material transformation by decorating earthenware with floral patterns that reflect the cultural landscape of my home state of Virginia. My approach to mark-making and pattern displays a folk stylization similar to Toft's work. Each

pattern is composed of simple layered brush marks. Individually, the motifs are rudimentary, but when combined they are sophisticated in their complexity. By covering earthenware with patterns, I elevate the material by changing its association from the mundane to the ornate. The patterns commemorate values of graciousness and hospitality that are the cornerstones of Southern cultural tradition. While using tableware in *Gather Round*, the participant is immersed in nostalgia for Southern culture.

The Commemorative Action of Decoration

In *Textile Designs* Susan Meller and Joost Elffers state, “The point at which it became possible to mass-produce floral printed fabric was also the point at which the farm and the garden began to disappear from the main stream of people’s lives.” (Meller, Elffers 27) Floral prints arose out of need to remember a physical landscape the individual no longer saw on a daily basis. By wearing floral-printed clothing, the individual translates the landscape from physical to psychological. The desire to decorate with floral patterns may be commemorative, reflecting the importance of the landscape as a signifier of personal identity. Within this identity, floral patterns may also signify the ephemeral beauty in life.

Dogwood, honeysuckle, and campanula carry associations with moderate climates in the South. These flowers are immortalized through pattern making. The abundant growth of honeysuckle and dogwood blooming in spring is captured in decorative form for the user to experience all year round. This brings nature into the home for people who have become disconnected from the beauty of its subtle changes. Reconnecting people to their landscape reminds them of the changing cycles of life, while providing them with a sense of place.

Psychologically, this provides a sense of belonging that comes from participation in a cultural heritage.

Form, Surface, and Color Language

Pottery form can express physical and emotional fullness. Each piece is manipulated into shapes with convex bulges that reference pillows and tufted furniture. This overfilled aesthetic is a visual metaphor for comfort, joy, and abundance. This fullness is the foundation of my form language.

The surface of the forms is divided into two categories of decoration; symmetrical and asymmetrical. The symmetrical decoration responds to structural alterations of the pot. Rims and feet are manipulated into quadrants that are pushed out from the inside. Slip-trailed lines define the structural decoration with patterns reminiscent of lattice work, masonry, and picket fences. The symmetrical protrusions establish the overall contour of the pots while defining vignettes that hold floral patterns. These asymmetrical floral patterns are used to create decorative tension with the symmetrical alterations. The verdant floral patterns pass freely through the slip-trailed boundaries. This contrast between the restraint of symmetry and the excess of asymmetrical patterns creates movement that is visually interesting.

Color is the key signifier for a sense of time in my work. Modulated blues and shades of cream reflect early 20th-century color sensibilities. The colors are rich but not intense in value or hue. Color triads are established with two cool colors (sky blue, mazerine blue) and a split complementary warm (yellow). Variations of white are also used to establish monochromatic color schemes. These colors are not meant to reference a specific time but rather a generic past. These nostalgic color choices create a sense of familiarity and tradition within the pieces.

Installation/ Display

The primary focus for *Gather Round* is an oval table with dinnerware and service pieces. The table is approximately six feet long and four feet wide. It is six inches higher than a normal dinner table and without chairs to encourage the gallery viewer to handle the work. The ability to touch the work humanizes the viewing experience. The pottery is presented on top of place mats and table cloths. These fabric elements personalize the place setting on the table, establishing a domestic context that is approachable and familiar to the viewer. This familiarity breaks down the emotional distance often present in a gallery setting. The nostalgia for tradition present in my work is enhanced when gallery viewers make connections to their own past.

The table is complemented by a wall shelf that is six feet long and two feet wide. This handmade wooden shelf displays service ware used to present food for the table. Its oval form references traditional buffet sideboards that hold the service pieces ready without crowding the table. Two ovoid wall shelves display dessert and coffee services. These provide individual displays that segregate the work into meal course service pieces, while still connecting to the greater installation.

The walls are painted to delineate the boundaries of my exhibition space. Curtains are hung over the windows to mediate light and signify domestic space. The colors of the walls, table, shelves, and curtains are a neutral tan that complements the pottery without distracting from it. These display elements hint toward the domestic while upholding traditions of gallery presentation. The display increases approachability, encouraging the viewer to interact with *Gather Round* on a personal level.

Conclusion

Gather Round is a collection of functional pottery that reflects the hospitality and generosity of my cultural heritage. The pots serve to share the nostalgia of traditional family meals with the viewer. *Gather Round* uses color, pattern, and form to create nostalgia. The dogwood, campanula, and honeysuckle patterns establish a regional aesthetic that relates to the casual nature of folk art. The color palette links the viewer to the early 20th century when communal meals were the core of familial relationships. *Gather Round* evokes traditions of community, while embodying personal times that are a counterpoint to our work-centered individual-first society.



Figure 1. Full gallery view



Figure 2.

Dinnerware - Four dinner plates, four juice glasses with pitcher, four iced tea glasses with pitcher, butter dish, salt and pepper shakers, condiment tray, flower brick, colander with plate



Figure 3

Service ware - Two oval platters, square platter, five pointed platter, two vases



Figure 4.

After Dinnerware - Cake plate with glass dome, coffee pot, four mugs with saucers

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Appendix A: Technical

Gather Round is a collection of functional pottery made using wheel-thrown and hand-built techniques. Foam and cloth molds are used to create the heavily geometric forms. The softly rounded forms are thrown on the wheel and altered. The pots are surfaced with layers of trailed and brushed slips. Various objects are drawn across the slips to create Sgraffito lines that expose the bare earthenware clay. The pots are then dunked in transparent or semi-opaque glazes to create services for functional use. The pots are fired to 03 in a computer controlled oxidation atmosphere.

Linda Arbuckle Earthenware Clay

| | |
|-------------------------|-----|
| Red Art | 45 |
| Gold Art | 10 |
| Foundry Hill Crème | 14 |
| XX Saggar | 16 |
| Cedar Heights Fire Clay | 8 |
| 325 Mesh Silica | 6 |
| Talc | 6 |
| Spodumene | 3 |
| Bentonite | 3 |
| Barium Carbonate | 0.5 |

Zaeder Matt Revised

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Frit 3134 | 40 |
| Wollastonite | 25 |
| OM4 Ball Clay | 22 |
| Flint | 12 |
| Lithium Carbonate | 5 |

Pete's White Low fire Slip Revised

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| OM4 Ball Clay | 35 |
| Calcined Kaolin | 5 |
| Talc | 40 |
| Flint | 10 |
| Nepheline Syenite | 10 |

Color Additions: add equal parts Frit 3124 to Colorant

Green: Sage Grey 6 Dark Teal 0.75

Brown: Deep Brown 8

Light Blue: Sky Blue 10

Deep Blue: Mazerine 3 Wedgewood 5

White: Zircopax 6.5

Tan: Zircopax 6.5 Red Iron Oxide 0.75

Alfred Clear Gloss

| | |
|-------------------|----|
| Nepheline Syenite | 25 |
| Gerstley Borate | 25 |
| Frit 3195 | 30 |
| EPK | 10 |
| Flint | 10 |

Appendix B: Visual



Figure B-1

A. Dogwood (*Cornus foemina*) B. Bell Flower (*Campanula*) C. Honeysuckle (*Lonicera periclymenum*)

Figure B-2

Iznik Ceramic Tile- Rustem Pasha Mosque,
Istanbul Turkey 1561



Figure B-4

Roller Print- French Unnamed pattern 1914



Figure B-3

Slipware Charger- Thomas Toft
Staffordshire England 1670



Biographical Sketch

Benjamin Gerald Carter received his Bachelor of Fine Arts from Appalachian State University in ceramics and painting. Upon graduating in 2003, Benjamin was an artist in residence at the Canton Clay Works, Canton, CT, Odyssey Center for Ceramic Art, Asheville, NC, and Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass, CO. Benjamin received his Master of Fine Arts from the College of Fine Arts of the University of Florida in the spring of 2010.