

POTTERY: ART AS RELATIONSHIP

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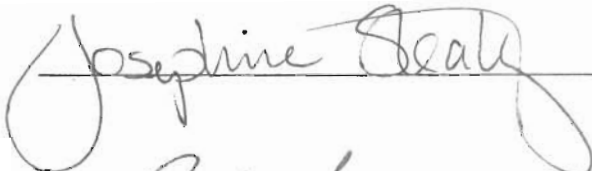

POTTERY: ART AS RELATIONSHIP

Presented by Fergus P. Moore

A candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Art

And hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.





DEDICATION

To Sensei

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge Davie Reneau and Michelle Coakes, my first clay teachers; Mark Shapiro, for the experience of my formal apprenticeship; Robert Anderson for teaching me perseverance; Barn Raisers for an ever deeper understanding of community and friendship; my father, mother, and four brothers for the blessing of a good family; and finally, for Cherith, Sage, and Olivia, for their immeasurable love, support, and life lessons.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis asserts that pottery is art because of the relationships people form with it. These formations occur on three levels. The first is the human response to the form of the pot. In this case a cup and a plate serve different functions and we choose the form that corresponds with our need: a cup for liquid, a plate for food. Secondly, we form relationships with pots through an aesthetic response. Formal elements and principles such as color, size, profile, texture, imagery, etc., lead us to admire a particular pot. And thirdly, we form relationships because of emotional attachment. This can be due, for instance, to knowing the potter or because the pot represents and reminds us of events in our lives. In this case our attachment to a particular pot is not necessarily based upon the pot's quintessential form for the given function; nor is it necessarily reliant upon its aesthetic appeal – though both of these usually figure into one's relationship with any pot.

This thesis also explores the role of Zen thought in both the making and using of pots. In both cases the pot acts as a pathway to the considered moment whereby the ordinary and even the mundane can be seen in a new light and appreciated. A section is dedicated to the process of making and firing salt-glazed stoneware. A final section details the physical and philosophical nature of the thesis exhibit.

Introduction

It was not my intention as a young boy to grow up to be a potter, as some might aspire to be a fireman, or president, or musician, though there were early indications that I found clay more than interesting. I still have a simple, unbisqued stoneware cylinder I took from the slop heap at the university pot shop two blocks from where I grew up. I was, perhaps, eight years old. For years it has held my quarters. And though I never saw the students throw, the object had enough draw for me to keep it safe and to use it.

Also, in our back yard in Kentucky, was a dirt pit where my four brothers, the neighbor kids, and I carved roads and tunnels for Hot Wheels. We also built parallel forts of the dirt and placed plastic army men in them. From behind a line, each of us would have three shots at a time with similar size stones. The fort with the last man standing won. I learned how to dig deep into the pit to get clay, add a little water, and score the dirt blocks to make my forts the strongest. I could also make them tall, the openings intricate, and even cantilever awnings and roofs.

No, I did not want to be a potter. I didn't really know what a potter was until a friend pursued a BFA in college. I "fell into clay" during a semester in graduate school in an attempt at cathartic release from the pain of the deaths of my grandfather and the family priest, and because my brother began a tour of duty in the Army during the first Gulf War. My night classes were in the same building as the clay studio. My friend was always in the studio with the radio on and I knew I could hear the war report in the company of friends. Davie gave me a bucket, sponge, ribs and a needle tool and set me at a wheel with clay. I remember thinking I might hear my brother's name in the nightly

casualty list. While I listened, I made pots. I had read of how art could be expressive and I sought to express the ugliness I felt in my life. The pots, besides poorly thrown, were rough, scratched heavily, dented and torn. None survive.

What I did not foresee was how the pleasure of making pots would raise through these feelings of pain and anger. Making pots began to transform me. I began to understand and express my different feelings. The pain and anger did not leave, but I found comfort in the clay. I continued to make pots, finding studios by re-enrolling in school and apprenticing to a potter for three years. Workshop space was acquired through work/study programs at the craft schools Arrowmont and Haystack. I knew from early in my clay experience that making pots would be a life-long pursuit.

I am a functional potter. I make functional pots. The objects I make are utilitarian. These three statements are obvious in their meaning but the significance is not necessarily so obvious. Function in the colloquial usage is superficial, having only to do with an object's use for a task; a functional object is a tool, and I am a toolmaker. However, I see function from a more anthropological perspective whereby function is extended to the greater meaning found in the relationships between people and objects. Paul Greenhalgh writes, "Works of art are not objects; works of art are relationships between people and objects. If the relationship does not exist, neither does the work of art" (Greenhalgh 13). My pots exist as objects, but they live through relationships with people. The point when a pot is sought out is the beginning of a relationship with that pot.

Function in pots primarily involves "the kind of action or activity proper to any thing or person", according to the Random House Dictionary. In this sense it implies a mug for coffee, a bowl for cereal, and a vase for flowers. Forms can and do vary widely

in their range of ability for accomplishing a given activity. But we know profoundly from our earliest days what can best serve our needs and are able to choose accordingly. We choose because of shape, form, and size; we choose because the pot is lidded or not, because it has a spout or handle, or not. We choose a vessel initially because of the physiological needs at hand. More complex considerations might involve color, texture, pattern, or imagery; our choice is basically a response to our likes and dislikes. This sets us apart a bit from animals that use tools. But deeper still, we choose pots based on the relationship we have with that pot or with its maker. As I see it, the greatest function of pots, and with art in general, is to form relationships.

My pots are not analogies; they are pots. They are not overt in their address of political or social issues but are quiet and serious. They seek the gravity of what it means to be human. That response quietly demands forming relationships. After the conscious (or subconscious) choice has been made for a specific pot for a specific need, a new relationship develops, one that taps emotion and meaning. Henry Glassie writes, “The pot creates relations—relations between nature and culture, between the individual and society, between utility and beauty” (Glassie 17). These “relations” ask questions about materials, process, use, and culture. They encourage us to go beyond a small circle of concerns to include our relationship to the world. They enable a response to our history as humans not just as citizens of our country. Pots form physical relationships that go beyond their mere physicality. Any pot conveys implicitly, if not explicitly, the twelve thousand year history of the clay vessel. This history is rife with ritual, mundane and holy, that is inescapable even in the most spiritually vapid culture. Kenneth Beittel writes, “Pots are containers. They affect their contents just as their contents affect them, and so

they participate in the spiritual and aesthetic dimensions of eating and drinking in such a way that holistic integration of body-mind is encouraged” (Beittel 114).

It is my goal in potting to make pots that serve the daily needs of people. This is not merely a pot to carry coffee or to hold food or flowers, or even a pot to garner a patron’s positive aesthetic reaction, but a pot to take the user into a quiet, comfortable space where the chatter stops. An initial relationship is formed because of a pot’s ability to perform a given function and because of the pot’s aesthetic appeal. The pot as vessel is made art by its use. Formal considerations such as size, shape, scale, and weight, help determine the pots I make. Of course these pots involve an attention to formal elements such as scale, form, shape, and weight, as well as to ergonomic considerations: Does the handle fit the scale of the hand? Is it positioned to balance the weight? Is the clay lip comfortable for the human lip? A well-made pot is the beginning; but I want my pots to go beyond their rudimentary function as tools. The pot’s appeal to the senses, how it operates as an object of beauty is an important bridge from mere tool to spiritual catalyst. But I want my pots to go past the point of objects of aesthetic scrutiny. I want my pots to form relationships with the user so that the ordinary activities of eating and drinking may be elevated to the extraordinary. “A unified pot is always spiritually functional and as such humanizes and extends the presence of space” (Beittel 115).

The nature of hand-scale, utilitarian pots, naturally leads to a personal relationship with the user. The hand-scale encourages touch. That which can be held can be known more fully. Knowing a pot tacitly adds another sense with which we respond. Even in shared meals, more than likely each person will have his or her own plate, bowl, and cup. And the weight, scale, balance, texture, etc. figure into our experiences of the past as well

as furthering our appreciation of the variety to be found in even the most mundane activities. Knowing a pot as an individual increases the opportunity to develop a relationship with it, to see it as special. The object used in mundane activities, if special, holds the promise of elevating the mundane to sacred.

In the Japanese Tea Ceremony the vessels and utensils are deliberately mismatched so as to accentuate the existent variety and individuality in life. This variety is evident in my work where individual cups or bowls of the same series (or “litter”) vary in height, belly, handle, foot, and rim (see image one). The nature of salt glazing, whereby the atmosphere varies in the stack, ensures that no two pots will be the same. They begin as individual lumps of clay on the wheel and continue as individuals through use. This uniqueness encourages a relationship with the user. Individual implies uniqueness that encourages relational bonding between the user and the object. Greenhalgh writes, “...Pottery is best when held. The scale, symbolism, and practical function of these objects [is] often intended for private consumption in informal places” (Greenhalgh 12).

The Influence of Tradition

Fredrick Frank says, "It is as useless to hold forth about Zen as it is to prattle about art: both Zen and art have to be experienced, they have to be practiced" (Frank 23). But prattle we must because, as leaden and inexact as they are, words are the common and most readily accessible mechanism we have for communicating. Zen can be defined loosely as "...contemplation leading to a higher state of consciousness" or "union with Reality" (Ross 139). Zen thought continues to resonate in my life. I begin each session of work with a few minutes of quiet concentration. I willfully push out all thoughts and then admit only those pertaining to the pots at hand. Sometimes it doesn't seem to work at all and there is a flood of other pressing business. But usually I can take myself down, in breathing, in heart rate, in speeding thoughts, to a calmer, quieter state of mind/body. I consciously strive to bring the contemplated moment to life in each pot. Because of this, the routine of making pots is not dull or numbing. Each pot is birthed from the mind state of that moment. D.T. Suzuki writes, "The truth of Zen, just a little bit of it, is what turns one's humdrum life, a life of monotonous, uninspiring commonplaceness into one of art, full of genuine inner creativity" (Suzuki 17). Each pot requires my full attention and I find joy in the inexact results of the union between my hands and the clay. The differences found in the pots of the same form, differences in foot, belly, and lip, help describe the character of the pots (see image two). I form relationships with the pots as I make them.

What I seek in myself I seek in my pots: peace. I wish to make objects that gently rest where they belong, objects that are quiet and strong, interesting but not overpowering, active but not frantic. My nascent understanding of Zen guides me to look for peace in my pots. In his book Zen and the Fine Arts, Shin'ichi Hisamatsu describes the Zen influence this way:

- 1) No Rule (irregular, asymmetrical)
- 2) No Complexity (sparse, simple)
- 3) No Rank (seasoned, mature, austere, sublime)
- 4) No Mind (natural, unstrained)
- 5) No Bottom (subtly profound, implying rather than nakedly expressing)
- 6) No Hindrance (free of attachments to things and of the expectations of others or oneself)
- 7) No Stirring (inwardly oriented, tranquil) (Hisamatsu 7).

These are lofty goals perhaps for my pots and me and I do not expect to get “there”. But each day brings the briefest of moments when time ceases to exist and everything seems to stretch out in front of me as if I might step easily from one world to another. And sometimes I can find this moment in a curve of a pot or a mark from the fire and I feel as if the pot could exist in any time. More and more, I believe, I succeed in approximating these goals. It is a lifelong journey, to be of use, to seek beauty and truth. Wendell Berry writes, “How we take from this world, how we work, what work we do, how well we use the materials we use, and what we do with them after we use them—all these are questions of the highest and grandest religious significance. In answering them, we practice, or do not practice, our religion” (Berry 315). I make serious pots for humble

purposes. In doing so I seek to enliven and make holy (that is, set apart) the potentially mundane activities of eating and drinking. These acts, the points at which we take in necessary sustenance, if brought to even a slightly higher level of consideration, can only reasonably be assumed to feed us beyond calories, minerals and vitamins. Domestic wares address spirituality at the basal level of our involvement with the world.

Eternity is approximated on the human level through tradition. It is through my pottery genealogy that I trace my influence to Zen and the works of Shoji Hamada, Bernard Leach, Soetsu Yanagi, and beyond. More than inclining me to imitate their work, reading their words encourages me to uncover my own way, to make my own pots. I want my pots to reach toward the sublime through simplicity of form, color, and pattern. Hyperbole is the great addiction of my culture and, because of the spread of the “global economy”, increasingly so of the world. My point of view is not blind nostalgia but intent to harness particular qualities that we may have forgotten to bring with us. Tradition is the weight, but not the inertia, of a thousand generations. “...When a piece of ceramic is held it conveys through the inherent symbolism of its materiality 10,000 [sic] years of activity, of things being made, substances stored and consumed. The act of human hands clasping a clay body, of skin and clay lips meeting, is automatically and unavoidably endowed with the archaic depth of an act endlessly repeated back into antiquity” (Greenhalgh 10). I am merely the present participant in the long line of potters, necessarily making my pots in my time and culture, for I do not exist outside the milieu. The materials and techniques have changed, and this fact makes a difference, but it doesn’t matter. This difference is surface. What matters lies in the depth of the human experience: the need to interact with our physical environment, the need to belong to the

entire human race, the need to be of use. This is my view of tradition, of the long history of potting, and of my place in it. My place is to make pots that resonate with the user so that a relationship is formed between them. It is my hope that this relationship elevates the activities of eating and drinking beyond the ordinary to approach the sublime. In this way the simple choice of cup, bowl, or plate creates an encounter with art. I am humble in my acceptance of the challenge to make good pots.

Process

I make pots to form relationships with people. When I sit at the wheel with clay it is often with a general idea of the form I want to make. The family life of my household informs the decisions of size and scale and proportion because the little hands of my children have different needs and abilities from my own; small cups with fat handles get used the most. Larger pots, serving bowls and platters, are often made with our circle of friends in mind. Every week brings an occasion for sharing food. And even the pots I make that go to people I don't know go with the tacit understanding that they will be filled with food and drink, emptied, washed, and used again. My pots are working pots. In form and surface they are meant to deliver food and drink. They are also meant to form relationships with the user through their simple understated beauty. The individuality of each pot enhances this possibility.

I create understated forms with relatively quiet surfaces (see image three). These pots ask to form relationships with the users through their innate utility. This is not unlike a painting or a sculpture whereby the viewer is invited to respond to its formal elements as well as its contextual meaning. A plastic mass of clay shaped into a vessel and fired to a soft sheen with salt acts as an irregular canvas. The marks from my hands, evident in the asymmetry and irregularity of the pots, are visual and tactile texture. This presence of hand and tool form a link, a relationship between the maker and the user. Knuckle and palm, fingertip and thumb, rib and wire: these are the markers of my pots. Nothing is frantic because pottery making dictates its own pace, one that is slower than this modern life. A relationship is formed with the user visually, ergonomically, and because of the evident process. Ribs are employed to smooth throwing rings and I use them to leave

slower, broader, upward-bound wraps of movement. Cuts made with a wire on freshly thrown pots are not so much precise facets but more like that of a fresh-sliced tomato, juicy, spilling, slumping in release.

Many forms are thrown from a single hump: mugs, cups, bowls, and small saucers, birthed as litters onto the ware board. When leather hard, feet are trimmed and handles are attached. The temporal proximity of throwing pots “off the hump” encourages unity in size, scale, and shape. The larger forms are thrown from two lumps, the second added to the first after the first has been centered into a low wide dome. Particular attention is paid to the final marks on the pots, as these are what will be fired into stone. Swirls in the bottom interior and trimmed within the foot ring create a sweeping motion that makes reference to the tools of its making, the wheel and the hand. The spiral is muted by the glaze and left as a quiet detail. The evidence of the process of making is one way pots resonate with the user.

All the faceting is done to freshly thrown clay before the pot comes off the wheel. This is an attempt to condense my activity on the pot temporally. A special tool crafted by a friend involves a wooden handle with two metal pins through which a wire is passed and tightened by means of a piano-tuning key. This wire slices the thick sides of the bowl, slowly moving up as the wheel slowly turns (see image four). The result is eight or nine angular, rough wire facets around the outside of the bowl. The cut, like the inner rib mark, is breath-like, hand and foot in a single stroke, an active exhale.

On most pots, a band formed on the rim is left unglazed so that the raw clay can respond to the fire and salt. During the final firing this effectively creates a frame of subtle activity around the glazed interior (see image five). Lips on cups, mugs, and small

bowls are beveled from the inside out in an ergonomic attempt to stop the pour by cutting the liquid. The insides of all my pots are glazed black or white to interact visually with their contents. The black glaze, St. John's Black, is highly stable during firings, minimally variable (blue only in conjunction with intense salt), and offers a smooth satin finish, ideal for food and washing. A shino glaze is also employed for the interior surfaces. It tends toward white in a salt firing and develops a network of tiny cracks (crazing) in the cooling which adds a subdued visual pattern, especially over time as the tannins from coffee and tea fill them. Slips are applied to the outsides of some pots to activate the surface during the firing. Salt, a reduction atmosphere, and flame, act to impinge the surface of the bare clay and slip. The activity of the outside is juxtaposed to the interior surface and heightens the effects of both by contrast.

My handle is a signature, much like the throwing and trimming and even the repertoire of forms I make. My first teacher, Michelle Coakes told me that it is easier to make a good cylinder than a good handle, and that one could tell a beginner's mug by looking at the handle; even if the pot were good the handle would give it away. From Michelle's tutelage I apprenticed with Mark Shapiro. On my first night I made a litter of cups. The next night I attached handles and left them out for Mark to see when he came in the next morning. I had been careful and was proud. As the morning wore on I began to wonder if he had seen them. Finally, as I was in the middle of reclaiming slop, he passed by on the way to make lunch and tea and paused a moment to say that we needed to have a talk about my handles. We never spoke about handles but the indication was that I should try to make better handles.

A handle is not so much a preconceived response to a particular pot as the result of guided repetition. The variations are the result of years of my hand and clay in a relationship of forming handles. These are my handles, changing over time, even as my written signature has changed with age. I focus on three main considerations when I make a handle: tension in the upper curve, a cross-section shaped like a flattened oval, and attachments left showing (see image six). A relationship is formed with the user visually, ergonomically, and because of the evident process that extends the user's understanding of the pot into the realm of how it was made. My handles are pulled from lugs of clay attached to the pot, rather than pulling several handles at once to attach after they have had time to stiffen. This approach ensures that a specific handle is made for a specific pot. The cup is held slightly inverted and the lug is wetted and pulled until the length is achieved to land the tail end where it needs to land. When the inverted cup is rotated to vertical the resulting curve is tighter at the top and opens up to almost flat at the bottom connection. The handle is shaped with a single edge on either side of the fatter middle; the handle in cross-section is a flattened oval. Visual activity results whereby the eye is drawn along the handle because of the tension of the curve. The tighter and slightly elevated curve at the top affords the finger a resting place. The joints where the handle meets the cup, top and bottom, are left unsmoothed. Leaving the attachments showing forms a visual punctuation, as well as a tactile reference to the process of attaching a handle to a cylinder. My handles are an easy alliance between how I think my handles "ought" to be and my evolving ability to make them so.

The Exhibition

If pots are art because a person forms a relationship with them then it is necessary to challenge the conventional approach to the exhibition of them. In previous exhibitions my pots sat alone on pedestals. At the closing receptions friends, colleagues, and some strangers arrived to sign the guest book, eat and drink and mingle. At some point each person walked through the space, perusing the forms sitting in silence. Few pots were touched or handled and the shows were simply visual. The traditional and formal atmosphere of the gallery effectively neutered my pots.

This exhibition consisted of two “stations”: a central bamboo table for food (see image seven), and a bamboo wall shelf for cups and plates (see image eight). My interest in bamboo developed over the last several years following a tour of the botanical gardens in San Diego. I find its form and natural vigor compelling and it offers unique challenges in construction projects when compared with dimensional lumber. In addition, the use of bamboo for the tabletops in the exhibition offered a natural reference to the Asian influence in my pots.

Also present were platters, teapots, pitchers, garden pots, and vases. Though the pots sat silently until the closing reception, their positioning in relationship to each other indicated their meaning as usable pots rather than simply as objects for visual scrutiny.

It was during the closing reception that the vitality of the pots and the potency of art in our lives were made more evident: food and drink served in pots in the gallery space itself. The line that normally divides art and people in gallery settings was removed

by asking each person to interact with the work, to choose a cup and a plate, fill and empty them, and take them home. This accomplished at least two important things. First, using the hand-made pots elevated the experience of the participants through shared actions. And second, taking the pots home extended the experience into private homes and into time. Even the serving pots seek to elevate the level of this shared meal. They were part of a collaborative effort to pair food with my pots in regards to shape, color, and size.

Much of what was in the show was understated in color, form, size, and texture. The real exhibition, and what was not understated, was the collection of interested people who shared a common experience. I wanted to counter the neutering atmosphere of the traditional gallery space by flooding the gallery with food, pots, and people. At the beginning of the reception, as the platters and bowls of food were being brought out, I made a short announcement. I indicated that the participants were to choose a plate and a cup, fill them, empty them, and take them home. Over the course of two hours people approached me to express thanks for the pots. I watched as people chose, some quickly and some with more consideration. I was surprised to recognize as many pots as I did. Some I had followed through the various processes from wet clay to glazing to finished pot and I was able to relate a small story to each person about his or her pot. Clearly, I had formed a relationship with my pots and I believe the people at the reception did as well.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I make pots that live through their relationships with people. Response is formed initially to formal issues such as form, size, and surface. My pots are pragmatic as they stress practical consequences in determining value or truth. Beyond this initial choosing, deeper than the physiological response to a cup to sate thirst, we can form a relationship with a pot based on mental and emotional connections. These form as we consider and commune with the maker via his or her pot. Through daily use of a particular pot an intimate knowledge of its lines, blemishes, and weight grows. An appreciation of tradition and the recognition of the long history of human potting can be humbling. The individuality found in any hand-made pot echoes our own. This belief in individuality, the fact that each of us “has a shadow” that marks his or her very existence, is fed through my study of Zen. The individual pot is not diminished by its role as a functional vessel; rather, its fulfillment is begun by its use. The point when a particular mug or bowl or plate is desired over the other choices in the cupboard is the point of the formation of a relationship between the pot and the user. This is the point where the pot becomes art.



Image One, Cups to Three Inches



Image Two, Cups to Three Inches



Image Three, Pitcher and Mugs, To Twelve Inches



Image Four, Facetted Bowl, Twelve by Four Inches



Image Five, Platter, Sixteen Inches



Image Six, Handle Detail



Image Seven, Bamboo Table with Cla Legs, 60"x36"x34"



Image Eight, Detail of Clay Legs, Bamboo and Lanyards



Image Nine, Bamboo Shelf, 72"x12"



Image Ten, Detail of Pegged Bamboo Shelf

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VITA

Fergus P. Moore was born March 9, 1963 in Houston Texas. After attending public schools in Murray, Kentucky he studied at the University of Louisville and Western Kentucky University. He earned a B.A. from W.K.U. in 1988. He began making pots in 1990 under Michelle Coakes at W.K.U. From 1995-1998 he apprenticed with Mark Shapiro of Worthington, MA. He is married with two children and a cat.