

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Wild/Garden

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## **The Wild**

Dirt records civilization. We build our homes on it, grow our food from it and bury our dead beneath it. It is our domain, our sustainer, our sanctuary. Engaging with this bodily earth reminds us of our presence. To it, we are grounded, connected and mortal.

Wheel-thrown, earthenware pottery is the foundation of my work. Gritty, rich, robust terra cotta impresses raw, primitive, necessity. Coarse grog rips and tears through soft clay, leaving a rough, worn surface, suggesting unrefined wild earth.

My interaction with the material is casual. In the studio, both debris and trimmings are swept into the reclaim bin. I mix my clay very soft and do not pug it. It is not fussy. By throwing a pot, unassuming, malleable earth becomes defined. What was once responsive is now resolute.

## **The Garden**

My work references life's most fundamental yet most imperative material – dirt - a life source that constantly and graciously gives. From its depths rises abundance: trees, flowers, vegetables and fruits. Nature's bounty yields sights, sounds, touch, tastes and smells. It stimulates human experience.

The garden is space of curated bounty. It is a spirited habitat full of overwhelming potential. There is air and rejuvenation. Skin absorbs glorious rays of heat and light. Weather, wind and sun reveal saturated tones and delicate hues. Many of my earliest memories involve encounters with nourishing sensations from the backyard:

*She hands me a papaya. We unearth a pineapple.  
Sweet, yellow, slimy, black, creamy, orange, sharp, green  
Gardenia, soft, sour, white  
Mint, pink, bitter  
Kumquat, electric blue, a red shadow*

I decorate earthenware pots with stylized imagery of flowers, plants, stems and berries. In this work, I investigate dynamic relationships of space, scale and rhythm. The elemental format of rectangles, circles and triangles provides a structure for curves, spikes, waves and curls.

Uninhibited use of expressive color activates the imagination. It establishes a particular mood. In a letter to Emile Bernard, Vincent Van Gogh wrote, “*There is no blue without yellow and without orange*, and if you put in blue, then you must put in yellow and orange too, mustn’t you?”<sup>1</sup>. In my work, generous use color, shape and texture, live as a palette of visual flavor. The interaction of these individual ingredients creates objects that are graceful and light, rich and dense, full of high energy and a breezy sense of play.

## **The Pot**

In life, the garden emerges as a both a physical space and as metaphor through which I view my work. Gardening/potting is a direct link to the source; a presence, connection, awareness to the human mind. Heartfelt labor cultivates both sustenance and objects that contain sustenance. Sweat and diligence prepare the earth and grow the spinach. The same hands dig the clay and create the dish on which the spinach is served.

Utility and accessibility are the driving forces behind all of my decisions. I make plates, bowls, cups and jars that are made to be used daily in the home. Thinly thrown walls and soft edges allow for easy handling. Healthy internal structure affords casual

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<sup>1</sup> Chipp, Herschel, *Theories of Modern Art* (Berkeley: U of California, 1968), 33.

interaction. Open mouths provide efficient stacking and storage. Generous, graceful handles offer a comfortable grasp.

Handmade pots actively engage with a fundamental question about life - How can I strive for more, while being content with less? My work personifies the garden of the mind; that of private wealth, abundance, independence, beauty and reward.

### **Momentum of Surface and Form**

Currently, I am involved in an intense investigation of surface on ceramic. I am on the hunt for beautiful, warm, rich combinations of clay, slip and glaze. The search is emotional and fierce. The momentum in my studio is quick. I make, I evaluate, I respond. The pace at which I work demands particular forms at a particular scale. Handheld tableware, thrown on the wheel, offers an efficient solution for multiple objects with uninterrupted space. The elemental cylinder is the constant within my investigation.

Cups, plates and bowls are the sketchbook of my image-based study. Each of these formats provides a different structure in which to play, offering its own unique proposition. Considerations of gravity, transitions and bodily relationship have the potential to alter perception and experience.

The cup remains a cylinder. Its open mouth and open form allows the user to see all of the liquid. It also makes the pot easy to clean. A flat, wide base meets the countertop. This stability allows for quick and automatic movement of the object. It becomes a casual, not precious experience. The bottom of the cup also becomes a smooth area of tactile rest. Moving from the base upwards, thin walls taper and transition into a smooth, fine lip. An outstretched handle welcomes the human hand. It provides distance between

skin and hot liquid. The cups I make are a spin off of the classic diner mug. They are stable and casual.

The plate begins as low, wide cylinder. An expansive, horizontal plane is a field for decoration. It is also a field for food. The plate's rim is slightly elevated above the table with enough room for a human grasp. At times, the rim is a physical and visual division of space. This rim creates a distinguished frame for decoration or a simple border for food. Plates range in size for different contexts of eating linked to classical cuisine. Their scale recommends a particular meal: breakfast, lunch, dinner, tea or dessert. Their formal qualities are suggestive of different types of consumption: a Sunday night family dinner, a celebratory feast, a ceremonial ritual or a quick snack. Thin, light, robust terracotta plates operate as simple and durable, yet as a delicate and sensitive presentation of food.

The bowl sits somewhere between the plate and cup as its own unique challenge, considering both horizontal and vertical territory. Bowls, more often than not, are used for foods that contain liquid. The bowls I make consider the spoon. They consider the mechanics of use or the contour of the interior. The spoon must be able to scoop freely and move up the sidewalls, so all food can be accessed and no food is trapped. This low, open contour sits a top a narrow, elevated, cut foot. This narrow foot generates energy within the form. It is a spring of volume from a central point. The weight of the form rests in its foot, which creates a physical balance and stability in the hand and on the table. Like the plate, the bowl's scale is associated with specific forms of eating. The handheld bowl can be used for personal portions of ice cream, a side dish of vegetables, or as a preparation space while cooking.

## **Rhythm**

### *The wheel generates form and pattern*

Regular, metrical beats of physical movement provide a steady tempo of ticks, beats and clicks – chopping a carrot, typing on a keyboard, sanding a piece of wood. The act of repetition is a rudimentary to existence. It creates pattern, both seen and unseen. Creating visual repetition is a primitive instinct. It establishes organization and structure. It is a form of record keeping and a way of finding interest within the mundane. Marks are a reminder of our presence in the world. Ultimately, they fulfill human longing to communicate – to make meaning from symbols and patterns.

Throwing pots is repetitive. Throwing, by nature, offers opportunity for visual mark making. Slowly and methodically, the wheel turns, presenting an inherent format to make visual impressions. Using the hand, tool, or brush, I explore a range of expressive marks – a slow, lethargic spiral up, quick streaks, cheerful waves, or fluid, graceful lines. These impressions set the underlying pace for the piece. Whether thrown, carved or painted, lines and dots serve as an abstract language. They ambiguously move somewhere between abstract and representational, things and symbols, control and freedom.

## **The Field**

The pots I make are highly decorated. I approach image making through various points of view: I look to American folk quilts, contemporary studio pottery, Arita porcelain, Japanese textiles, William Morris's wallpaper, Post impressionists' painting

and Matisse's collages. These various entry points radiate a familiar appreciation of color, craft, floral imagery and domestic/personal space.

At times, imagery develops in the moment; it becomes a process of discovery. This search results in lively, balanced interactions – fat with thin, round with square, quick with slow, sharp with soft. At other times, imagery directly references specific patterns, wallpapers and/or historical pots. This approach becomes a study. It is a way of learning about image and developing a vocabulary of pattern outside of my intuition.

Slip is my acrylic paint. I use it for instant color and to create defined, stable layers on a wet pot. It offers an immediate mark – a mark that suggests speed, reveals process and gives visual depth through opacity. At times, thin, watery slip faintly reveals the skin of the clay beneath. Light, airy and diaphanous, translucent layers gracefully drift and hover. Other times, thick, opaque pigment, smeared across a surface, creates raised areas of pasty, dense material.

Paper guides my decision-making, allowing me to freely arrange, find and move. Paper is easy and quick, it is dispensable, it is immediate, it is not precious. The negative shape of a stencil is applied to a wet pot. Slip is brushed and the mask removed, leaving a raised relief. The crisp edge of a cut stencil defines a shapeless material.

Layering surface creates depth within a plane. There is opportunity for moments in the clay, in the slip and in the glaze. Often I think about making a pot, much like building a painting – first comes the under painting, then the distinguishing features and lastly the highlights/details. Clay and form establish the landscape of the slip. Slip is the primary application of color. Glaze acts as a jewel; a lush surface that brings in richness and



points of focus. Shapes range in scale to develop a foreground, mid-ground and background. Desaturated colors fall back in space, while saturated tones pop forward.

## **Image/Object**

*The pot's surface must bring to life the space it occupies.*

A series of large jars investigates a range of imagery. On a piece of paper, I map out floral patterns that reference William Morris's wallpaper, scientific botanical drawings and American folk quilts. When the horizontal plane of the paper pivots vertically and wraps around in space, it forms a cylinder. This spatial presence is made concrete through large clay cylindrical jars.

The cylinder occupies substantial vertical space and minimal horizontal space. It is three times taller than it is wide. Its flat, stable bottom meets the counter directly. Though not excessively heavy, the pots physical weight and proportions make it inconvenient to move regularly.

The cylinder's vertical presence makes the viewer aware of the object's relationship to the horizontal/floor. The scale of the jar begins to suggest architecture. It moves towards a column, structure, or pipe. It has the potential to become the feature of the room, yet it stays in the realm of utility.

A flat, removable disc, the lid, has an interior collar that rests securely against the form's inner lip. It closes off and completes the cylinder's contour. The lid requires two hands to remove. It is not a quick gesture.

Its structure advocates for storage. The opening of the cylinder is wide enough for the action of the human hand and a scoop. Its volume allows for storage of a fifteen-pound bag of dry goods such as rice, pasta or grain. Though the object can hold an abundance of food, the bottom of the jar remains accessible to the human reach.

These image/objects have the opportunity to hold, serve and display. Now, not only can you look, but you can also touch, move, fill and store. Rotating image revives the physical momentum experienced in the pot's wheel-thrown creation. Forms float, dance and fall around the structure they inhabit. These clay jars both symbolize and contain the harvest. They activate domestic space.

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## Technical Statement

### Rich Terra Cotta Δ04 - Δ5

Redart	55
Hawthorn 40 mesh	20
Newman Red	15
OM4 Ball Clay	10
Talc	10
Fine Grog	10
Coarse Grog	15
Barium Carbonate	

#### Notes:

- Rich brown body with red/purple tones at Δ3
- Very durable and nearly vitrified body with a 1% absorption rate at Δ3
- Classic Terra Cotta Color at Δ04
- Does well in salt and soda atmosphere
- Very coarse throwing body - fairly plastic
- To allow sufficient carbon burn out during bisque firing, I hold my kiln at 1500°F for 1 hour. Eliminates or significantly reduces pin holing in glaze firing.
- For black clay add Red Iron Oxide (15) and Manganese Dioxide (5)
- Black Clay must be completely oxidized. Incomplete reduction results in carbon coring. Complete reduction results in weak body.

### Mid Range White Slip

Grolleg	8
EPK	25
OM4 Ball Clay	17
Frit 3124	23
Silica	17
Minspar	10

Notes: This slip responds wonderfully to colorants. I use a range of ceramic stains in increments of 10% - 12% for deep, saturated colors and 1.25% - 3% for soft pastels

### Perfect Δ3 Gloss Base

Nepheline Syenite	18
Ferro Frit 3124	70
EPK	12

### Water Blue

Copper Carbonate	2
Cobalt Oxide	0.125

#### Natural Green

Copper Carbonate	2
Red Iron Oxide	2

#### Opaque Cream

Red Iron Oxide	2
Zircopax	6

#### Honey Yellow

Red Iron Oxide	5
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#### Notes:

- Crystal clear, glossy, durable and stable glaze at  $\Delta 3$
- Works great in salt and soda atmosphere
- To encourage a bit of movement in the colored glaze, I use this firing cycle:

Ramp 1 - 250°F/hr - 2000°F

Ramp 2 - 108°F/hr - 2109°F

Ramp 3 - 100°F/hr - 2009°F - Hold 0.15

#### Surface Process

The majority of my imagery is applied with colored slip in the leather hard stage. Using computer paper, I cut out shapes to create a stencil. I dip the stencil in water, apply to a leather hard pot, and apply slip. When the slip has set up, I carefully peel back the stencil, leaving a crisp shape on the pot.