

contemporary functional pottery



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handmade pottery by
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There are a lot of people who use pottery, but only a relatively small group of them use handmade pottery. These are the folks who really understand the value of the handmade object in their everyday lives. As it happens, the most dedicated of those people are often potters themselves.

In Contemporary Functional Pottery: A Discussion of Handmade Pottery by 11 Working Potters, we present the observations and perspectives of those who know handmade pottery the best—not only the pots they produce, but what it means to make functional, utilitarian pottery in the contemporary world.

Potters included:

Julie Crosby, Trumansburg, New York

Drew Nicklas, Seattle, Washington

Shadow May, Chattanooga, Tennessee

Nicholas Bivins, Red Lodge, Montana

Birdie Boone, Helena, Montana

Jessica Caccamo, Ballston Lake, New York

Maureen Mills, Portsmouth, New Hampshire

Matthew McGovern, Glen Arbor, Michigan

Lisa Buck, Afton, Minnesota

Susan Kennedy, Waco, Texas

Tina Gebhart, Berea, Kentucky



Julie Crosby

Trumansburg, New York

This bowl is part of a series inspired by the carved wooden bowls of the Northeast Woodland Indians. The forms were carved from a single piece of wood and include square or rectangular handles. When I saw them at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, I was struck by their simple beauty. I wanted to make them out of clay and try to mimic the elegance of the bowl leading to the handles without any attachments. This led to a change in the way I work. While I use the wheel to make the initial forms, most of the work is done off the wheel in the leather hard stage. In order to get the form to look right with the handles, they are thrown larger and cut down.

The strength and beauty of the pot should carry over from the visual form to the pot in action. The handles should enhance the function of the pot while leaving enough space inside for the right amount of food. These qualities are vital to the integrity of the pot, and they do provide the starting point. All of the formal considerations for making a good pot must also be addressed, from the weight and balance of the piece to the treatment of the surface. The success of the firing has the final say in the success of the piece. The biggest challenge in making

this form is getting the wall thickness right. Since the pieces are cut down quite a bit, the inside wall must be thick enough to act as the both rim and handles. I sometimes have to add a bit of clay to beef up the edges.

I can see this piece being used for both preparing and serving a side dish. The size also lends itself to eating a meal right out of it. I think it is important for the pot to clearly speak of function, but I am not concerned with what the user ultimately puts in it. I did have in mind the ceremony of preparing, serving, and eating food while making this piece. For me, the daily ritual of eating and the aspects involved in getting ready to eat, such as grocery shopping or gardening, are tied together with making pots.

It does not bother me if someone buys a pot from me and does not use it at all. I have no control over what someone might do with a piece. It is totally up to them.

At sales, I like to put fruit such as clementines, lemons, or limes in a bowl or basket to give some contrast to the color of the clay. Often, the pots with the fruit in them will sell first.

www.juliecrosbypottery.com



Serving bowl, 8 in. (20 cm) in diameter, wood-fired stoneware.

Drew Nicklas

Seattle, Washington

I was really excited this particular piece was accepted, because not only does it have a clear functional purpose, but it also suggests how cups can be displayed and leans toward an idea of community. The piling or stacking of work, to me, has a great fit. It is able to juxtapose the idea of precious art object with everyday drinking vessel. A bowl full of cups is inviting, disarming, it's simple—it's a big stack of pottery! I think that is pretty cool. Sometimes we don't need to cover it up with too much meaning.

The formal aspects relevant to the work are seen in a move toward honesty and simplicity. Honesty is an acceptance of what it means to make pottery—understanding that it is a practice. The form and surface of a piece of pottery simply need to point to the fact that it is pottery. A simple approach can be particularly successful in a culture oversaturated with complex imagery. My approach to form leans toward stark and stoic, highlighting the process of throwing and firing.

I value the time it takes to throw each cup and the variation found in each cup. The work hints more at a practice than a final object. Beyond that, the cups need to hold liquid of some sort—preferably whiskey.

Function is obviously the key component here. However, it is dizzying to see all the new forms and surfaces people are coming up with today. I think this has a lot to do with the quality of ceramic education in art departments and continued in residency programs. This makes for good functional work and increases formal vocabulary. Personally, I return to simple forms, but I have been working with wood-fired reduction cooled surfaces to dress them up a bit.

I want to keep things simple. While perhaps counter intuitive, simple is the most difficult to pull off. I have a tendency to want to over think, over throw, over decorate a piece of pottery. Sometimes the most successful pieces are those brought back to the basics.

The owner of a piece can do whatever they feel is suitable. As a potter, you can help them get to where you think they should be by the design and execution of the work. In my eyes, this is a set of whiskey cups. Sure, it's decorative. But I am not the one to say whether it should be used for whiskey, wine, or to present at a lemonade stand.

Now, in my house, this piece is for the express purpose of having a Montana flavored whiskey jam (even though I am



Whiskey Jam (A Pile of Tumblers), 17 in. (43 cm) in diameter, wood-fired stoneware.

currently a long term resident at Pottery Northwest in Seattle, Washington). The ceremony is very important—but ceremony is a big word. I would prefer to use “Whiskey Jam.” The principle is simple: the more, the merrier! (True for both people and whiskey.)

I am pretty sure my pottery has not reached the value where people are afraid to use it. I have pots in my house that are deemed “top shelf,” and I try not to use them, but tableware is supposed to be used as such, and I try to push this idea with my own work.

I think people will always value hand-thrown pottery. It is a mark of craft and stability. A hand-thrown pot can contain nourishment as well as provide it. It sells itself. Utilitarian pottery reconciles the precious nature of art objects with the necessity to inject artful practice into all the things we make and consume. It establishes a balance between a unique and valuable item and an acceptance of a functional end. This specific piece came out of a pile of cups I saw at my friend Dean Adam's house. I think this is how a potter would display cups. And during a whiskey jam its good to have an extra couple cups on hand.

www.potterynorthwest.org

Shadow May

Chattanooga, Tennessee



Square stacked jar, 15 in. (38 cm) in height, porcelain, fired to cone 6 in an electric kiln.

I chose to make this form because of its uniqueness first and, in a utilitarian sense, it gives the appearance of one piece while utilizing two containers. I really just love making containers that consolidate or stack in any form or medium. Making this piece let me contribute to the idea of consolidated containers. I want it to fit together, be useful for food or just appreciating. I want people to want to pick my pots up and use them.

If I make a piece for function, then it needs to work. Although, I think that if your main focus is function then a lot of times you leave little to no room for creativity, which is my first priority in making a piece.

Patience is my main challenge. These pieces are not your straight forward piece of pottery you can finish in half an hour or so. You really have to picture the finished piece and then work your way through it until it's finished. Also, since I fire each section of each piece separately, the fitting back together is always a concern; otherwise the piece doesn't work and I won't like it enough for the public to see.

It is not really important to me that the user be aware of an intended function for this piece. I make the piece out of a sense of fun and creativity. Function falls about third down on my list, even though my pots are completely functional. I'm more interested in the artistic expression of a particular piece and the idea behind it. I imagine that, if this piece is used, whether putting your car keys in it after a long day or your coffee and sugar for the morning, it would be considered a piece that plays a small but very important role or ritual in your life.

Looking and appreciating are as important as function. Sometimes people need to just stop and look at something to make them feel better, take them back to a particular time in their lives—or just smile.

I do about 20–25 juried fine art shows a year and that has gotten my pots out there extremely fast. I do have a website, a Facebook fan page under Shadow Pottery, a Twitter account, and a Myspace page. I also have an Etsy and blog account, but rarely have a chance to get to them.

My pots are always changing. Doing a lot of shows lets my pots evolve quickly. From the beginning, I've tried to sell the idea that if you like my pots then you'll trust that whatever I make you'll like. I really don't want to be making the same stuff day in and day out. My body of work will always look like I made it, but it will change in a matter of moments because I work so much in the clay and love stepping out and playing that risk. That's how good pots are made!

www.shadowpottery.com
[www.twitter.com/shadow_may](https://twitter.com/shadow_may)
www.myspace.com/shadowpottery

Nicholas Bivins

Red Lodge, Montana

I make *Toasting Cups* as a way to fit functional pots into peoples' collective celebration of their lives. This piece gains significance the more times it is used. A toast cannot occur with only one, and many times, the more the merrier. My goal for *Toasting Cups* is the act of toasting, so by experiencing the piece with friends through celebration, it is fulfilling its purpose. Using formal language to describe necessary qualities of a functional pot is a beginning, but for a piece to become truly successful it requires a much more dynamic investment and agreement between maker and user.

A challenge I repeatedly face when making these types of sets is finding the right balance between sameness and difference when working with multiples.

Toasting Cups was made with the understanding that when people gather, they like to celebrate the occasion with a toast.

The type of beverage consumed can be quite arbitrary, but it's the tradition of toasting each other that I am keyed in on. This situation is a wonderful arena to play in, because of the importance of the role of the objects. It bothers me somewhat if a buyer does not use my work, because there is a huge amount of information contained in the use experience. I put a lot of time, effort, and research into making my pots feel good, not only to eyes, but also to hands and lips.

I have not yet tried to independently market my work. All of my sales have come directly from three sources: I know the buyer personally; I applied and exhibited work at a show/gallery; or they approached me because they saw my work in one (or both) of these places.

www.nicholasbivins.com



***Toasting Cups*, 10 in. (25 cm) in length, porcelain with glaze, fired to cone 10 in oxidation.**

Birdie Boone

Helena, Montana



Flower vase with bowl, 9 in. (23 cm) in height, mid-range redware, fired in oxidation.

My functional pots are forms that convey the significance of what I call “domestic intimacy,” a recognition of the impact that domestic actions have on our identities and the quality of our lives. This flower vase with bowl is a piece that celebrates the power of beauty in the domestic environment.

In terms of my aesthetic goals, the work must have a strong presence as an object, yet have the ability to offer its contents (in this case, flowers) as a symbol of attentiveness and care for one’s domestic environment. The specific qualities of this piece that make it successful are softness of form and a quiet, soft surface. I have been told that the qualities that give my pots their sweetness are successful, but my work is also personal: As I change, so do my thoughts on domestic intimacy, which leads to shifts in the way I consider form, touch, surface, and color.

The challenge in making this type of form is to be innovative with the structural elements in a way that creates a gestural means for an “offering,” as if it actually wants to give something to its environment.

It is only important that the user be aware of my intended function if that user takes an interest in the ideas behind what I make. Beyond that, I think that when I put a piece out into the world, I cannot expect to retain control of whatever thoughts or emotions were at play when I made it. In fact, I hope that it will adapt to its new environment and gain some special meaning for its owner.

Daily, habitual acts of domestic activity are things I define as ritualistic in terms of observing the body-mind connection. To that extent, I always consider ritual. But once a pot is no longer mine, I may be curious as to why it isn’t used, but would not be bothered were it not used. Function is a multifaceted term and so a pot’s function may even be to be appreciated only visually. That is absolutely the owner’s choice.

If anything, I think that making a personal connection with a prospective buyer can make a big difference. When I buy a pot, it is usually because I like the person who made it.

www.birdieboone.com

www.archiebray.org

www.northernclaycenter.org

Jessica Caccamo

Ballston Lake, New York

I have always loved making bowls; there is something so satisfying about working on the curve, especially when you get it right. I also find there to be a great variety within the form itself. One of the only parameters is that it must be able to hold volume, and that leaves a lot of choice up to the artist. It also must have an opening that is both large enough to make food-use a possibility, and larger than the foot.

These qualities certainly dictate what your form will be named, but as to whether or not it is successful, there is a lot more involved. There are many unsuccessful bowls out there in the world, and what I believe sets successful bowls apart from the others are proportions, curves, weight, and surface treatment.

I think that the challenge of making a bowl lies in achieving the curve of the bowl and overall balance. I can spend what feels like forever smoothing that curve at the bottom so it really has no beginning or end and is just seamless.

I have made a conscious decision in my mind as to what the function of each piece I'm making should be. However, within that form, I am open to the possibilities of several different uses.

I know what I would use it for, but I have chosen to let the users ultimately choose for themselves how they want to integrate it into their lives.

I think that often when I sit down at the wheel to throw, I start with a notion of what I need in my daily life and go from there. The type of ceremony and/or ritual that I consider in my work is much more informal than the word's connotation; perhaps the ritual of breakfast, a favorite snack, or a decoration for one's favorite end table.

Of course I would like my work to be used, but I have made a decision to let the ultimate choice of function be the users. My works can oscillate between the realms of tool and function and can do both well; it remains up to the user to decide if they will use it for food or as a decoration.

I'm very new to marketing my work and trying to sell it, but I think that ultimately people need to use the work to fall in love with it. Let others experience your work as often as possible.

www.jcaccamopottery.etsy.com



White Glacier Bowl, 7 in. (18 cm) in diameter, porcelain, fired to cone 10 in oxidation.

Maureen Mills

Portsmouth, New Hampshire



The addition of a lid or cover on a form adds additional complexity to the making and the composition of both form and surface that I find challenging. The covered form allows for play in scale of form and surface treatments as well. A covered form should have a well-fitting lid with strong form and confident surface treatments, whether it is decorated or not. But good design is just that. Without the spirit of the maker showing passion for the work, it will be just a good pot. That's not particularly tangible, but I feel like we all know what that is when we see it.

There really are unlimited opportunities for exploring scale and proportion in a covered form. Then, modifying the details of the lid or knob, foot or bottom, and the surface treatments so that they are appropriate for the form are good challenges to focus on. Jars are always intriguing to potters, and I am no exception. While they insinuate function, because they hold something and have a cover, the actual use of my jar forms becomes much more personal to the buyer without any imposed function.

It does not always bother me if someone buys a piece and does not use it. There are some pieces that beg to be used more than others. In my experience, jars are an appealing form for both the maker and the user, and they have the option of being functional, but they are often objects that find a way to usefulness once they are in the home.

**Jar, 12 in. (30 cm) in height,
wood-fired porcelain.**

Matthew McGovern

Glen Arbor, Michigan

The main motivation behind any of my work is simply making and creating with my hands. I believe that, in a world full of anxiety and fear, immersed in an age that moves at a supercharged technological pace, beautiful handmade objects that promote spending time with ourselves, our friends, or our family are not only important, but are crucial to our spiritual well being. My highest aspiration as an artist is for my work to inspire these moments of personal and shared reflection for the owners/users.

When I started developing this form, I was in graduate school, and finding the time to sit down to a cup of coffee, tea, whiskey, or wine was becoming so infrequent that I thought of making an object to inspire me to do so. I was looking at wine

little thicker, maybe the kiln could have been fired a little hotter with a bit less soda and a bit more carbon trapping. Success is always within a quarter inch. Secondly, when finished, the work has to be utilitarian. It must function with ease and with grace. It should not leak, drip, or want to fall over, and it should feel good, both in the hand and to the lips.

Making, beauty, and utilitarianism are all circled around each other. They are all starting points and places to end. If the piece meets these initial criteria, it still has not achieved true success. For me, true success is when someone purchases a piece and brings it home because they had to have it in their lives. When they come back and tell me that the piece has become an integral part of their daily lives or a part of a new tradition or that it's the serving dish



Three cups, 7 in. (18 cm) in height, porcelain, soda fired to cone 10.

cups and stands from the Korean Koryo dynasty and was struck by the way the stand gave the cup a place to reside that wasn't the cabinet or the shelf. It occurred to me that, by giving utilitarian objects a home, I could give them a setting or context that would allow me to further explore both their formal and metaphorical aspects. Three Cups with Stands was developed from the memory of getting together with three very good friends of mine from college whom I now rarely see. When on display, the piece reminds me of those days, and the conversations we used to have over a bottle of wine.

For me, any object that I make has to be as beautiful as I can possibly make it. First and foremost, it must be impeccably made and the craft must never be rushed. Most of my work never completely lives up to my vision for it, and it always has room for improvement. Maybe the foot could have been a little taller or narrower, maybe the glaze could have been applied a

that they bring to every pot luck they go to, I know that the piece has fully succeeded. In some ways, the qualities that I imbue my work with are just a starting point; success comes when a piece makes someone's life a little more beautiful or extraordinary.

I believe that ceramic artists need to be very careful when they start associating and defining their work with the terms ritual and ceremony. These two words have been in use by artists (myself included) for a long time in the wrong context. When I started graduate school and began making this work, I was completely engrossed with the idea that I was creating objects for daily rituals and social ceremonies. But ritual and ceremony are based around religion, spirit, language, form, time, place, participants, movements, and processions. As I delved deeper into my research on rituals and ritual objects, it became very apparent that what I deemed a daily ritual was actually a daily habit or a necessary action for survival. I am not saying that daily rituals and ceremonies

McGovern cont.

don't exist anymore, or that people don't perform them, but when a person gets up in the morning and has a cup of coffee, even if it is out their favorite mug, they are not performing a daily ritual. Drinking coffee is a habit that is controlled by a need or desire for caffeine. As creators of functional utilitarian objects, we supplement these needs and actions with objects of beauty and utility. We have to stop using the terms ritual and ceremony when describing our work. I consider myself a maker of functional utilitarian objects, not a maker of objects for daily ritual or ceremony. My pots may someday be incorporated into a ritual or ceremony, and I take this into account when making my work, but until then my work remains an object of visual beauty and utility.

I am fascinated by the ideas of intended use and actual use. My intention is to celebrate handmade utilitarian work on two different levels, both as symbolic objects that affect our lives on a purely visual level and as objects intended for use. I believe that it is very important for the customer to hear the creation story of a piece and understand what the intended visual and utilitarian functions are. It helps them conceptualize the work and understand its presence. But this is not to say that they can only use it for that intended purpose. Say someone buys one of my pieces (the piece shown here, for example) and purchases it because they have three daughters and they want to give one to each of them so that they all may know that each of them possesses a part of a whole. They separate the piece and completely change its format, individualizing each cup and possibly breaking up the piece forever. For me, this would be okay: if a customer appropriates my intended utility and visual function and uses the piece for their own symbolic purposes, so be it. On the other hand, I have a friend who purchased two of my coffee mugs to have coffee with a lady friend who was coming to visit him. She stayed with him for a week and every day they drank coffee out of those two mugs, talking and sharing thoughts. After she left, he washed the mugs and put them on his dresser, never to be used again, but they now function up there on his dresser as a visual symbol of two friends getting together and spending time with one another. By doing this, he took two separate pieces that were not intended purely for display or as a set, and made them into a set and removed the utilitarian function from their life. This is also fine with me, and is in fact very exciting, because part of my work's intended function is to bring beauty into the owner's life purely on a visual level. My work is made with the idea that it may only function on this level.

I always encourage a customer to pick up the work and let them know that it is okay to handle it, informing them that I do not have a "break it, buy it" policy. Getting the customer to comfortably interact with the work is very important. Talking about the work in a way that lets the customer know why you make pots, what you think handmade utilitarian ceramics are all about, your process, and how it affects and transforms the work, helps too. If a customer wants to know the intended use for a piece, I will describe my own inspirations and intentions in making it, and usually after I do so I will turn the question back to them, asking, "But what would you use it for?" The replies vary from, "Oh, I would never use that because I would break it," to,

"Oh, I thought it would make a great bowl for oatmeal," to a little boy saying about my large oval serving dishes, "Look at the pretty bird baths, daddy." This dialog varies, but it is always a learning experience for both of us.

I feel that in modern day ceramics, we need to redefine the language we use to describe and critique our work. There are many words out there that get tossed around and have created a cloud of misunderstanding around art and utility. These words are functional, non-functional, utilitarian, and use. Webster's dictionary defines these terms as follows:

Function: The work a thing is designed to do, its official duty.

Utilitarian: Holder of utilitarianism, doctrine that the morality of actions be tested by their utility.

Utility: Usefulness, profitability

Use/Useful: To employ with a purpose, consume as material, serviceable, and efficient.

A maker can get lost in the land of superiority when making functional or non-functional work. I feel that this is in part because art critics of the past have stated that function is not content or a concept. Sculptors and painters have all but removed the terms from their aesthetic vocabulary, because anything slightly associated with function will smack of craft and will be deemed not high art. But what the critics of the past have failed to realize is that the term non-functional should not be used in any art lexicon. There is nothing under the sun that does not have some sort of function, even purely visual objects function on some sort of level. But everything under the sun does not have utility. It is important that we stop using the words functional and non-functional and start using the words utilitarian, use, and function. Let's replace the term non-functional with non-utilitarian when describing purely visual and tactile qualities. Then artists can begin the creation process by asking themselves what sort of utility they want their work to have and how well do they want this function carried out, or how useful they want this particular object to be and in what context.

Once a maker knows how they want their work to function, it becomes a lot easier to justify and define the work. As a maker of utilitarian objects, I believe it also makes a great deal more sense to think about the particular food or event that the work will be used for before creating the work. For example, I wanted to make dinner plates this winter, but was confused about what shape and size I wanted. I started by asking myself what kind of food would be consumed on these plates. I decided that the plates would be designed around the type of food my wife and I eat and our cabinet sizes. I designed a shape that could be used for both creating a larger shallower bowl, good for both pasta and for soup. In the end, it was very easy to talk about and critique the work, because my intentions were known right from the get-go. It was also easy to understand the changes I was making during the process, because I could always ask myself if I had shifted from my initial intents. Once we begin to use the proper language when creating and defining our work, we are able to fully immerse ourselves in, and relish the task of, creation.

www.mcgovernpottery.com

www.lakestreetstudiosglenarbor.com

Lisa Buck

Afton, Minnesota

This is a bit of funny form in that it came out of a series of work I was making as I was getting ready for my annual holiday sale. I was thinking about the lovely handmade chocolate truffles a friend of mine makes each Christmas and then delivers in a box to our door. I wondered what kind of pottery form would do them justice in presenting them on a table. This is what came out of those thoughts; a basket form that was very open, but still allows one to take care when dipping your hand in to select that tiny, tasty morsel of chocolate. It's significance is really about honoring a tradition.

As with all pots, I think the form needs to have a strong visual balance, where all of the parts come together to create a pleasing whole, feel good in your hands and function well for the intended purpose. The components that make up a strong form can be obvious parts, such as handle, foot, and body, but they are also the more nuanced "parts" such as line, volume, gesture, movement, etc., that really create the feeling or personality of the pot. So, those minimum qualities would be just that, minimum starting points.

Because this form came out of a specific idea, it feels like less of a "type" of form, although I guess it might fit under the umbrella of a basket form. That said, I think the challenge is in creating an interesting tension and relationship between the handle and the body of the form, as the line of the handle really completes the idea/form.

I think a user's awareness of the intended function adds to the piece and further communicates with the user what I was thinking, but it doesn't have to be important for the pot to be enjoyed. There are some pots I make, particularly the baking dishes, that are intended to move from oven to table—utility to presentation—in a way that I think truly enhances them and adds another level of information/communication with the user. But, it doesn't bother me if someone prefers to enjoy a piece for simply its visual aspects; that's a lovely compliment all on its own.

Marketing is something I feel I could do a much better job at, but here are a few things I do: I make sure the images of the

work present the pieces as well as possible, but I think that's important no matter if a piece is functional or sculptural. At my own sales, I try to present the work in relationship to food and have some pieces in service, and then talk about how they can be used. Some particular pieces may come with contents, such as the little salt pots I make; I will fill them with sea salt. I like my work best in the kitchen, on the table or resting in the cupboard and being viewed in that context, so I have done some sales in our kitchen and living room to add to that connection and really appreciate the shows I have been in that used domestic furniture to display the work. I have also started to have some of the owners of my work send me pictures of the pots filled with food or just taken out of the oven, but I have yet to decide what to do with those. I have had brief discussions with a local cooking store regarding having some of my work there as well, and I would like to pursue that further as it seems like a natural fit.

www.mnartists.org/Lisa_Buck2

www.thegrandhand.com

www.minnesotapotters.com



Truffle basket, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, earthenware, fired to cone 04 in an electric kiln.

Susan Kennedy

Waco, Texas

The egg tray idea actually began as a mancala board. Mancala is a game using seeds or stones, dropped into round divots, five or six on each player's side, with a larger, collection divot on each end. I had some finished boards around the studio at pot luck time, and immediately recognized how well deviled eggs would nestle into the depressions. I enjoy specificity of function, and the celebratory feel of an elaborate serving piece. And I enjoy eggs.

Since eggs can be quite slippery, and prone to rolling, an egg tray needs depressions, somewhere for the eggs to sink in just a bit. Without this, the function of the egg tray becomes entertainment rather than food containment as the decked-out eggs slide into someone's dressed up lap.

make the pot animated often counteract the actual stability, and can interfere with the piece sitting on a flat surface without a (dreaded!) wobble.

I see the pieces I make as characters in an epic narrative, existing on many levels. I want to give the user a vivid backstory, to bring the user up to date with the life of a piece thus far. After the piece leaves my world, it has a life of its own, continuing forward in the narrative, perhaps even finding a new career later in life.

As a child, I loved decorating the Christmas tree with my mom. As she unwrapped various globes of glass and silver, and aged yellow lace, she told me stories about my great grandfathers who worked in glass factories, or the student whose mother knitted the snowflake as a gift for my mom in her first year teaching. I am drawn to the power of the object, humble or valuable alike, to hold strong memory and deep feeling. Objects have a tactile way of connecting us through time. I believe our ceremonious interactions with nostalgic objects perform the function of ritual in a contemporary life.

I do feel sad if I catch my pots in the back of cabinets, but I accept the fact that once a pot is sold, it is beyond my control. Sometimes I have seen a pot put to better use than was intended, and welcome seeing a piece through someone else's eyes.

Not being much of a salesperson, sometimes I shy-out on marketing strategy. Feeling bold, I would paint a picture of possibilities, illustrating a future that is richer, more mindful, filled with daily interactions with a well

loved piece of handmade pottery.

I have more questions to ask than to answer, particularly about the various meanings of function. Is there a distinction between function and utility? Do we use the word functional when we mean to say tableware? Is function inextricably linked to food? Is containment an essential parameter for function? There aren't necessarily answers; I am more interested in the conversation.

www.skennedyart.com



Egg tray, 10 in. (25 cm) in length, stoneware with glaze, soda fired.

Of course the possibilities for an egg tray are endless, especially considering the broad range of ways we eat eggs. From the elegant single serve soft-boiled egg cups, to chicken shaped casserole dishes for quiches, and even scrambled egg steamers for the microwave found at festivals, there are always chefs cooking up new, tasty egg treats, and for each, a potter designing a new form to contain and showcase it all.

My main challenge is finding balance, both visual and literal. I want the form to have an animated feel, as though it is strolling the room, handing out hors d'oeuvres. The visual elements that

Tina Gebhart

Berea, Kentucky

Professionally, I make teapots because they embrace the complexity of parts coming together as a whole. This form comes with more design parameters than most traditional forms, and each decision in the process shapes the way the following decisions will be made. In some ways, they are like choose-your-own-adventure books—simply (or complicatedly) life.

Personally, I am interested in the teapot form because it exemplifies taking time. Each morning, I drink a full pot of tea, and do so in slow time. This may be the only slow time of that day, and I take it first, not last, in preparation for the business that will almost inevitably occur. I like a brisk pace overall (my students comment that I even walk fast), but it cannot be relished without the contrast of slow. This is my special time with myself and my husband, talking and drinking tea.

The minimum qualities for the teapot format are: appropriate containment, hand-handle position, spout pourability, lid sit,

knob grip (the pure utility issues); integration of the parts into a cohesive visual whole (the visual issues); excellent assembly (construction issues). There are just too many attachments and form joins that can become a distraction if construction is not sound. As are most parameters, these are simply a starting point, the fundamentals without which one cannot effectively approach this next arena of “making special.”

I can imagine a teapot that was utility-effective and visually cohesive, yet bored me to tears and I would never ever want to use. The pot must be compelling on some level, either by visual content (in a Modernist sense), emotional-material content (in an Expressionist sense), narrative content (in, well, a narrative sense), and cognitive content (in a Postmodern sense). Work that focuses on one of these categories still benefits greatly from the presence of at least some amount of the others. The visual may be the initial powerhouse, otherwise the viewer may never



Lobed teapot, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, porcelain, salt fired to cone 10.

Gebhart cont.

access the other intended content layers; yet it also requires some amount of the others or the viewer may never linger. If the layers are never uncovered, do they actually exist? Entice. Deliver. Allow space for rumination.

There is not a perfect handle, or spout, or any part. All things depend on each other for their success. The spout has to be right for that body. The knob for all things that have come before it. The great handle from one form can fail miserably if placed on another pot. The decisions have to be made in some kind of sequence, and that sequence can exaggerate or obliterate pre-existing strengths. The handle may adjust a slight mismatch of body to spout, or exaggerate it into serious visual problems.

The pot isn't fully alive when at rest, yet it must also be enjoyed when it is still. It's like sleep, which is good, but in doses between other activities. It does disappoint me when my pots are not used for their generally intended function, but if a user prefers something other than tea from the teapot, I would not complain. At least they are pouring something from it. Just please don't put flowers in it—my skin may crawl off.

I consider the ceremony and ritual of others before and after making or designing (drawing), never during. That would actually interfere with my own ritual in making.

When I make, I am fully with that pot, that group of pots. Nothing else exists. I am connected in a quiet intensity to my hands, and my hands to those forms. Part of my mind is not allowed to wake until I step back. Then I am in a different gear, one of brisk analysis of the parts, the balance, tension of a line, flow of a curve. There I decide a conscious, basic course of action, of reframing or redirecting, and then I jump back in and make simultaneous, half-conscious, micro-decisions to make it do what it needs to do.

I think of marketing strategies as design strategies. In this case, it may not be simply "Build it and they will come" but "Build it and then go find them." If the work is good, get it where it needs to be to be seen by the people who will buy it.

I believe that good sales mechanics can probably sell just about anything, even if it is low quality. In my heart of hearts, I cannot imagine getting up in the morning with the intent to make some-

thing half well. Make it well, or consider not bothering with it at all. A quality product is worth the extra effort in making and in buying, and it can sell itself to a degree.

I have a Prada backpack that is a hand-me-down. I would have never bought one of these, but now I know why people do. It isn't just the name. This thing has been through the wringer; I lug thirty pounds around in it, flinging it over my shoulder by one strap, and not a single seam is starting to come apart even after years of abuse. It will last longer than ten cheap backpacks and be less expensive in the end. It does its job and does it well.

For professional studio making; if it's not good, don't keep making it. Change something, anything that might improve things. The world does not need another poorly-made, low-quality, throw-it-away thing. Investing in quality is cheaper in the long run, and investing in our personal existence (or that of our customers and collectors) is worth every penny and every hour. And figure out how to make it well while making it briskly, or you may break the bank.

For learning-focused making, we have to go through a few tons of pots (a likely equivalent to the 10,000 practice hours of a skilled activity which are necessary to be a virtuoso) to get to the good ones, so accept making lots of bad pots. Every tenth one may be somewhat good, or even every fifth one. Eventually, nearly every pot coming out of our hands may be at least good, even great, or maybe even quite excellent. Don't lose sight of this, ever, or you may never get there.

I propose that function isn't; function does. It is defined by its action, instead of its being. The functional pot invokes action on our parts, both as makers and users, and acts in its own right. By being engaged, we and it continue to more fully exist. We do, therefore we are. It does, therefore it is. It earns its existence by serving us, giving us time, showing us time, and making that time more noticed, more special, more true.

In a world of fast, instantaneous change of state and engagement—in cell phone/Facebook/Google/microwave land—time is existence, and celebrating time reminds us that we are.

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