

Finding the Authentic Self



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I come from a family of makers, people who found importance and pleasure in designing and making objects for others to use. They were manufacturers, but they also surrounded themselves with objects of beauty that added meaning to their lives. Many early memories are of my parents 'arranging' objects in our house, moving things from one place to another, organizing their possessions to highlight whatever aesthetic impulse of the moment required. I remember my mother, when asking me to set the dinner table, always adding 'do it artistically!' at the end of her request, a subversive moment within the banal activities of daily life to challenge a twelve year old to question what that might personally mean. In effect, she was asking me to find an aesthetic experience within the ritual of everyday life.

These experiences of family life, so taken for granted and yet incorporated into the fabric of my being, have been the foundation of my work. I'm an object maker, and like my parents, I've found incredible value and meaning in looking at and living with tangible things that tell a story of our common human experience. I've chosen a path that places my work into the larger world of objects, with their history, function and meaning a source for dialogue, and by doing so, I'm willingly risking the voice of comparison.

My educational background was rooted in functionalism, most notably a response to the Bauhaus and Mingei movements of the mid-twentieth century. Yet my work speaks to a Postmodernist interpretation of form. When did that fracture happen, that point when function and utility fell away to explore the dialogue of ideas? We are all a product of our times, but in moments of change, do you risk the unknown or stay with the familiar? The jump from one series to another seems so linear when looking back, yet in the moment everything ahead is unclear.

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Yet within all of my work, the underlying search for meaning lies with an innate need to seek a sense of beauty, however that might be defined. As a stance in contemporary art, beauty in and of itself is often pushed against, a trait or position that is at best suspect and at worst dismissed. Yet within the history of ceramic art, beauty has always held reverence and respect, for it allowed a door into the abstraction and metaphor that is inherent in the ceramic vessel. As exemplified by the Japanese tea ceremony, the clay object became a catalyst for an experience that was rich with both cultural and social ritual. Beauty, as personified through an object, became a door for the participant to enter, to touch what might be called 'contemplative' or metaphorical space. The history of ceramics is full of objects that acted in this manner for the cultures that produced them. These are the objects I respond to, the ones that offer the opportunity to learn from.

In contemporary life, the question becomes how do we touch this? In a world that is so fast paced, as digital experience begins to move us away from the tactile and toward the virtual, how does the vessel, or pot form, still have relevance to our lives? I have taken a very strong stance on this in my work, as I believe that the potency of the vessel form and the handmade object has never been more relevant to our needs as human beings.

I am making work that tries to connect to things that are inherently human, to make objects that have the potential to touch an emotional cord within each of us. I use a synthesis of formal elements to work from, but they are simply a means of organizing ideas into a visual and physical world. How does the understanding of formal design elements help support an idea? And when do they overwhelm or kill the thing you are trying to give meaning to? Does knowing too much get in the way, or does it allow for expression that would be impossible without the skill? These are the questions I've been struggling with my entire career, and I have pushed against all sides of these viewpoints to ask new questions and search for answers.

But what shape does form take to become the platform for one's ideas? As a potter who was trained in the 70's, I've always been drawn to the vessel, a container that holds space that usually has a defined function or purpose. In the early 1980's, this definition began to fall apart, and I moved toward another way of thinking: that the pot form could speak of the figure, not in a literal way, but as metaphor. The potter's wheel became a tool, which then opened the door to hand building, and I began to push scale. These were small moves, but ones that allowed my vessel forms to begin to reflect experiences that were happening in my personal life: an early divorce, the death of my parents and brother, the marriage to my wife Nancy and the birth of my daughter Leila. Common life experiences somehow found their way into how I thought about my work and began to influence ceramic forms that reflected the inner turmoil and exuberance of moments in my life.

The human figure became a source to explore, a way to speak of emotional connection and experience. In the years since, my work has moved in numerous directions, but has always come back to the figure as an elemental source of reference. Forms became more complex, scale grew, and then moved in the most recent years toward a more quiet distillation of form, shape and surface. This was a conscious effort to minimize information, to seek a more elemental dialogue within the work. How much can I say with as

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little as possible? What can be pared away to get at what is essential? My work now is seeking to speak in a very quiet voice, one that asks more from the viewer to be heard. I'm not interested in the loud statement, the exclamation point to a thought. With so much of our lives spent interpreting information at breakneck speed, I'm after something that is more slowly discovered, a cognitive revelation of meaning that's not given up quickly to the impatience of the moment.

Looking back, the work I've made over the course of my career are all windows to specific times in my life. Each piece is part of a larger series of work that at the time felt somewhat raw, new, energetic and risky. There are stories behind them all, memories of people and conversations, events and experiences that feed each series of work with new ideas and questions. Eventually, as clarity of intention comes into focus, the work finds confidence and a series is refined. But at some point, understanding leads to boredom, and I hit a wall. This boredom is essential in moving past understanding to a place of curiosity, when another question is formed. This cycle is what changes the work over time, and I trust it implicitly.

Mentors, friends, family and acquaintances have all fed the fire, so to speak, and have helped me question my perspective and have enriched my work. It's all part of the mix, a synthesis of experience, process, and understanding. I'm nourished by participating in what has been the essence of ceramic art throughout history. It is what feeds me and gets me into the studio every day.