Stamp of Nature

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

By Sara Mourton
Artist’s Statement

I make ceramic works that reference functionality, written language, systems, and natural forms. My process is responsive and intimately connected with specific material attributes of clay. Using the movement suggested by the plasticity of clay, I build complex yet whimsical forms from thrown and altered pieces. Using layers of glaze, I emphasize the nature of the clay material underneath and interact with the molten, flowing nature of the glaze itself. The forms themselves often hint at a mysterious hidden volume or reveal layers at their edges. My aesthetic draws from 18th and 19th century European porcelain and silver, as well as from nature, organic or geologic, merging lavish ornamentation with biomorphic entropy. I employ a number of visual symbols and motifs that gain personal power through repetition. These symbols include layers, folds, seams, words, script, vegetation, and nests; images that I connect with concepts of intimacy, mystery, growth, entropy, and interconnectedness.
The title, *Stamp of Nature*, is taken from Act 3, Scene 4, of *Hamlet*, by William Shakespeare, in which Hamlet lectures his mother, Queen Gertrude, on her sexual nature. In this scene, he demands that Gertrude reverse her nature and adopt new, ostensibly more virtuous, habits. The significance of this passage is the Prince's complex relationship to his mother. The high-handed advice that he gives her is couched in mild-to-urgent entreaties to augment her habits or “nature.” The full line quote reads, “For use almost can change the stamp of nature.” By “use,” Shakespeare meant repetition or habitual performance. As the title of this body of work, *Stamp of Nature* refers to the literal stamps used in the process of creating the work, the concept of *nature or a nature*, as well as to change. As a synecdoche of the original quote, the title implies the absent mention of changing natures.

Ceramics as a discipline retains ideological subdivisions between different modes of making and makers who adhere to such modes. These traditions of division are fostered between closely related craftspeople within the medium, separated only by modes of working and technology that are considered distinct and unrelated in nature to some extent. For portions of the ceramics field, apostles of the handmade, plaster molds have unsavory connections to mass production and hobby crafts. Johanna Drucker's description of “the implications of mechanical and distancing production” as producing work that displayed a “conspicuous sense of affectivity, a deliberate absence of feeling, emotion, even individual subjectivity” perfectly demonstrates the ways in which a studio practitioner perceives the dangers of work that aspires to the perfections of mass-production (595). For other factions of the field, those who idolize technology, handmade pottery can be
hopelessly rustic, unsophisticated, and nostalgic. Adam Welch uses the term “fetishisation of technology” in his article, *Under the Big Top* (106). Technology is a slippery term because there is not much in the way of tooling that cannot count as technology. Any incarnation of a wheel, from the simple machine component to the potter’s instrument, qualify as technology, lynchpin technology in the case of the former. Because technology is omnipresent and relative, the operative words in Welch’s phrase and my own are “fetishisation” and “idolize,” both of which imply an improperly balanced fanaticism towards an object, force, concept, or person. It is the unbalance in this attitude that creates prejudiced division, not reference towards anything so pervasive as technology. Garth Clark referred to these divisions when, in his legendary essay *How Envy Killed the Crafts*, he suggested that future leaders of craft needed to “create a place” for traditional or classical craft (by which he meant rustic wares) as they are deserving of both respect and a home (acknowledging that they currently do not possess such a position) (452).

My entry point into this discussion is from a specific point of view, that of a hand-builder and potter who learned in a studio where plaster, and thus mold-making, was deliberately not available, the prevailing opinion on this subject being that the handmade possesses more integrity or authenticity than the mold-made. Furthermore, we often discussed objects from formal standpoints of history, symbolism, and imagery but did not often focus on their identities as they related to material, process, or commodity. Though the intention was not to perpetuate a hierarchy in regards to material process, such a hierarchy was reinforced all the same through the community’s reverence for the handmade.
The intent of this body of work began as a way to explore processes of making and to incorporate them with equal reverence and sensitivity to material into the making of functionally situated ceramic objects that play on tensions between consumption, individuality, leisure, and luxury on the one hand and community, production, and labor on the other. This work is intended to celebrate and explore these oft-contrasted methods of production in conjunction with each other and to synthesize them under a highlighted sense of intimacy and responsiveness in the treatment of material. Appropriated forms that reference the institutional and the organic blend.

**The Tableaux**

One of the central motifs of the pottery profession is a romantic view of the communal table, which functions as a fantasy of accessible humanistic use as the ultimate motivation behind art pottery. Pottery is, when defined by many contemporary potters’ statements, about sharing, joyful gatherings, connections between user and maker, and the beauty of humble rituals. The following excerpts from various potters’ artists’ statements illustrate this notion.

Jennifer Allen:

"Handcrafted pottery has the capacity to nourish the home, the hand and the mind. It is important that my work fulfills these tendencies by being attractive, useful, comfortable and memorable. Whether it is a vase that demands flowers or pots that enrich mealtime, my work is ultimately made to honor the rhythms of home."
Julia Galloway:

*I am interested in pottery that is joyous; objects that weave into our daily lives through use. Pottery decorates our living spaces with character and elegance. Teapots celebrate our drinking tea; a pitcher decorates a mantel when not in use; a mug with slight texture inside the handle allows our fingers to discover uniqueness. Pottery is a reflection of us. In making cream and sugar sets I am curious about their own inherent dialogue; the set itself is reminiscent of close conversations and their ritual celebratory use.*

Josh Deweese:

*I am interested in how pots can be used every day to bring art into our lives, enhancing our experience with food, adorning our homes, and providing a necessary ritual to nourish our soul and mind as well as our bodies. In many ways, these notions are romantic fallacies in modern life. In fact, only a relatively small part of the population can afford art pottery. For the most part, preciousness and expense prevents art pottery from participating in the joyous everyday. But, fantasy or not, these statements speak to the intentions and romantic ideals of the pottery discipline. Although the work does not actively participate in the joyous everyday envisioned in the fantasies of the artists, it participates in and collectively depicts/creates a romantic myth, the communal table. This romantic myth of the*
communal table is a cultural touchstone that the pottery community shares with larger cultures. Western culture—indeed many cultures—holds a romantic ideal of the family or communal table. This ideal is pervasive in literature, art, and all forms of commerciality: entertainment, advertising, etc. Norman Rockwell's *Freedom from Want* presents an iconic vision of the family at the table.

My work references the romantic notion of the communal table. For example, what are we playing at when, as children, we play at tea parties? We are rehearsing adult social interactions and roles: the nurturer, lovingly attending to all the comforts of the “guests,” the enforcer, testing imaginary creatures on their table manners, promising nonexistent rewards for obedience and withholding nourishment and comfort when these standards are not met. Food continues to play a primary role in our social gatherings and how that food is framed can tell us much about what is expected of us in any social situation.

As adults, we continue to model our lives and homes around styles and fashions as well as utilitarian concerns. In this way, we fantasize about our ideal world, our ideal self, constructing our environment in the image we would like to show the world. We buy dishes that fit our fantasies of communal dinners, which, in turn, fit our fantasies of social interaction and connections. Through these fantasies of interaction, we continue to play out our desires, pitting personality against tradition, pleasure against utility. In a sense, we have never stopped throwing imaginary tea parties.

Even if/when art pottery does not actively participate in every day life, it has the power to call on all of these associations with function, style, and fashion. As
museum-displayed works that reference but do not adhere to functionality, this body of work references both functional objects and art objects at once. The art object is comprehended in relation to the viewer—the viewer feels a desire to possess the object but does not get to engage in any material intimacy with the object. They do not get to touch it or spend any time alone with it nor do they necessarily comprehend the object as something that they could conceivably own. Alfred Gell identifies this as an impulse to posses *intellectually* the process and consciousness behind an object’s coming-into-being. The level to which these things remain a mystery reinforces the object’s identity as a “magical” artistic object (471).

Functional forms represent a duality in that they are typically situated differently in our lives than an art object in a museum. Nonetheless, despite the familiarity of such objects, functional objects can claim a magic of their own. Through use and play, the simple act of tactile exploration, users know a functional object over time, comprehending, imagining, uncovering. All art can be known and discovered over time, but functional objects, however fantastically decorative, are mundane; they are insidious in that they are both highly charged and commonplace. In a curatorial comment, ceramist Alison Britton describes this, “To me the most moving things are the ones where I experience in looking at them a frisson from both aspects at once, from both prose and poetry, purpose and commentary. These have what I call a ‘double presence’. (442)” In this way, art pottery can represent communal, empathic, relational objects. It can also represent coldly utilitarian function or ostentatious social posturing. But even in that utilitarian function, empathy for human embodied-ness exists. And even in that pretentiousness, human
desire is present. Dishes are irrevocably related to human needs and desires. They can present these relations in a number of ways from earthy utility to carnal indulgence. The pervasive, pedestrian nature of function allows them to be as accessible as the written word in our modern world.

“One could say that the cultural position of craft binds visual art and design together, since craft represents the ultimate response to the art/life, and therefore art/design dichotomy. (Mazanti 65)” When experiencing ornamental/functional objects by display alone, with no tactile or practical relationship, the phantom of use surrounds the object. Memories, assumptions, and expectations of use color the response to the object. The secondary experience of these motions towards use causes us to mentally situate the object sensually or practically, as it relates to our body as a prosthetic tool. In terms of this body of work, we can orient ourselves in relation to the number of settings and to the indication of ceremony because we are familiar with the associations.

**Process and Imagery**

Formally, this work plays on the idea of systems of integration by applying methods, materials, and processes from a diversity of forming backgrounds, incorporating what is often considered an industrial forming technique into a more traditionally handmade mode of working, and vice versa. Molds, however much they have come to represent an industrial mode of working that alienates the maker from the material, are an ancient form of working with plastic or molten materials and display a range of handedness specific to that process. Ezra Shales, when
writing about the levels of alienation in a modern “manufactory,” warned that, “alienation was easier projected than self-identified.” In the same article, he notes the athletic and skilled nature of casting from molds and the pride in their skill exhibited by the workers. Refuting the myth of “de-skilled” factory workers, these men and women share a practical relationship with their tools and materials. They are as intimately connected to them as any studio craftsman. That they use this relationship to produce objects of regularity, not of their own design, in the interests of industrial commerce, may horrify studio artists. But it is not the tool that is inherently at fault.

Marcel Duchamp, in his Notes, explains a word of his own invention, “infrathin,” a word he made up to describe visual tactility, the commingling of sensory perception, the embodiment of the intelligible in the sensible, or, possibly, an indefinable difference between two objects. As the term describes the indescribable, he points out that its meaning is best understood in the form of examples. One of the examples that he gives is the difference between two objects cast from the same mold are different to an infrathin degree. The more identical, in fact, the more it fits the idea of infrathin. Another example given is the warmth left behind a just-vacated seat. These examples illustrate the elusive and perhaps broad meaning of the word but the idea of a quantifiable difference between identicals is intriguing. In my mold-making process, I endeavored to find the small variations in each pressing, tears or seams or undulations, and to preserve, highlight, and respond to the singularity. This technically negates the identical nature of the
pressings and thus the infrathin level of difference is increased to actual individuality.

My process attempts to emphasize the capacity for warmth, intimacy, and connection in mold making. I used two objects/types of objects for the molds—an institutional, injection molded, plastic lunch tray, and various organic specimens from wasp’s nests from nature, collected from the Hudson and Cuyahoga Valleys, in New York and Ohio respectively. One-part plaster molds were taken from both sides of the lunch tray. For the wasps’ nests, I pushed soft clay into the negative space of the cells, then fired this to remove the nests’ paper, leaving an impression in bisque-fired clay that I used as press molds and stamps.

These objects, in particular, exhibited an odd, intriguing connection between material and the human labor of the process, a peculiar combination of the mysterious organization behind nature and the devices of humanity. The stamp’s identity is complex, a tool combining human invention and the collected evidence of the labor of nature. As in any mold or stamp used in the impression of clay, it is the negative or the absence of the prototype that is used to reproduce the object or image ad infinitum. The prototype, in this case, happens to be the actual organic evidence of an insect community that is destroyed through the act of capturing the form. In The Invention of Craft, Glenn Adamson considers casts “double indexes: of the things they represent and the technique used to create them. (150)” In that light the object is an index of a communal effort and the destruction of such in the effort to capture the ability to reproduce it.
Though sourced from two opposite-minded settings, both objects are connected to the idea of community. The nests are the result of communal labor and are the physical housing, nourishment, and structure of that community. The trays, as forms, are used only for communal dining, almost always in an institutional setting. Visually, both objects display a compartmental or cellular structure, with the cell structure of the nest being far more complex than that of the tray.

The lunch trays represent structure and communality—but in an institutional, human setting. The wasps’ nests represent structure and community in organic, natural form. The two objects, through visual and symbolic similarities, connect industry and nature together, so that industry is no longer located outside the realm of nature nor nature located outside the realm of industry.

**Materiality: Clay and Glaze**

The treatment of materials in this body of work is meant to honor production from multiple points in the process by emphasizing the participation of the maker, the tendencies of the material, and the restrictions of the processes. This means utilizing traditionally individual values of handmade objects while still respecting the unique opportunities afforded by reproductive techniques such as molds and stamps. Though no real effort is made to hide the press-molded regularity of the tray forms, some of the irregular incidentals of their forming process are exploited and made more so by human intervention. By incorporating the evidence of these forces into the ornamentation of the objects, the viewer is enfranchised into a state
of awareness wherein the hierarchical categories of high and low are confused within sensual beauty.

Clay is a material that can be frozen in a state of flux, able to capture plasticity, fluidity. The nature of the material is so immediate, so expressive and responsive, almost casually responsive; the slightest force can leave its mark. An object formed from clay is an archive of both its maker’s care and its own physical vulnerability to the environment. The constant pliability of the material leaves nearly unlimited possibilities for the record of marks while the process eventually turns those marks into permanent documentation. The mark of the hand in clay, the tangible evidence of the presence of a maker, as a primary characteristic of its materiality, is similar to the mark of the hand as a primary characteristic of handwriting. It can be erased or eclipsed by craftsmanship and skill or emphasized by either skill or naivete.

There remains a mark of the hand in any mold-made object. The mark of the hand is not always from a literal hand—it is the traces of the maker’s relationship to the made. It is the mastery, struggle, or refusal to struggle with the material. It’s somewhat like a post-mortem of the moment, the moment of making preserved in the object.

With each step in this process, I endeavored to honor a moment in the previous stage of making by responding to marks left by hand, material, or tools. When pressing, I allowed lines from the edges of the plaster mold to remain. When manipulating the edges, I used these lines to guide my finger marks and folds. When glazing, I used a celadon glaze that would pool in all of the marks left in the clay.
And, finally, when luster glazing, I used these still visible marks and pools to dictate the placement of that embellishment,

The trays are pressed with emphasis on the handedness and responsiveness, clay pushed into the mold with obvious breaks or seams, finger-marks covering the bottoms. When the pressings had been freed from the mold, I altered the edges and walls of the form by pinching, leaving obvious evidence of my fingertips and force. This strengthened the seams by compression and became decorative in its repetition and in its expressive movement of the clay.

Celadon glaze was chosen as the principle glaze for its long and respected historical lineage as a feature of precious ceramic objects as well as for its material qualities of transparency/translucency and fluidity—responsive material qualities that are well suited to showing the barest hint of differentiation in surface texture beneath. The celadon family of glazes spans a range of transparent colors, from white/gray to blue, green, or even yellow. In this work, the color of the celadon glaze is a light, glowing blue-green. The transparent, glassy nature of the glaze allows the seams and joints of the clay in the press mold to remain a presence in the object. To communicate the beauty and preciousness of clay's natural tendency to break at the joints, I traced the deepest seams with gold luster.

I employ the gold luster glaze in two different manners. The first references Kintsugi, the Japanese practice of mending a broken ceramic piece by tracing the cracks in resin coated with pure gold. I referenced the tradition loosely, and framed it with different intentions. Kintsugi celebrates not only the preciousness of an object but also the wear and use of the object by glorifying the fractures. The veins
of gold throughout these trays instead trace the evidence of process and material while still honoring the preciousness of the object. The resulting lines highlight an element of free abstraction inserted by the material nature of clay and the hand of the maker in conjunction with the system of the making.

The second method followed the handedness of much of the other materials. Fingerprints previously left in the clay were covered in gold. Gold fingerprints and strokes of gold were left on glaze. Gold dripped over folds of the forms, traced over select edges, and covered small sections.

There are parts of the luster application that begin to take on the typical decorative shapes used in European luster, such as scrolls or teardrops. But, for the most part, the application is simply responsive to the form. Although traditional methods of luster were referenced, both Asian and Western, the work does not fully appropriate either. The responsiveness and material informality remain key elements, especially noticeable in a material so prone to use in careful formalities.

**Display Methods**

I designed the display used in support of my work to reference both leisure and labor. Part sawhorses, part television trays, these table structures occupy the space between work and play. I used raw wood for the construction and did not attempt to hide that material with paint, though I had initially considered painting/staining the legs of the tables or alternating surface treatment between painted and raw. In the end, the decision to leave all as raw wood served the purpose of highlighting an informal use of materials. The tables are not considered
technically part of the pieces. They are display strategies, meant to present the work with simplicity and playfulness.

The tables resemble television trays, small table structures specifically meant for portable, modular, individual dining, often iconically paired with “TV dinners,” precooked meals originally marketed in the 1950’s for convenient consumption in front of a television. Such meals still exist and, though their connection to television is not as prevalent, they still imply portability, convenience, cheapness, and solitary dining. Interestingly, the trays, once press molded in clay, lost some of their specificity. Instead of referencing only their parent mold, plastic food trays used by individuals in communal, institutional settings such as schools or prisons, the forms became ambiguous, somewhat reminiscent of the type of plastic, cardboard, or foil trays that are intended for personal, precooked meals, in other words, objects of individual convenience or leisure. The display tables reference that personal, precooked meal. Convenient, impermanent, solitary dining appears in humorous relation to the sacred ritual of communal dining.

Television trays typically imply a loner status separate from a group, or at least that of an individual who operates as a satellite of a group, separate but related. The proportions and thus occupancies of the tables used in this installation suggest a varied number of diners, continuing the theme of differently socialized modes of dining throughout the body of work, ranging from solitary to communal, Together with the temporary implications of the sawhorse, the unfixed nature of such modular units lends an air of impermanence to the entire installation.
Works

That monster Custom, who all sense doth eat consists of a large block of nine trays that have a set of vessels spread throughout the field created by the block of trays. Despite their basic nature as vessels, they do not adhere to utilitarian concerns. In some cases, the gold luster applied to the interior renders the vessel totally unfit for function. Their positioning calls to mind a banquet, or cafeteria, or party. Just as the press-molded trays have been altered to lend organic lines to their seams and edges, the vessels have been manipulated from regular, wheel-thrown cylinders into complexly folded, gestural, forms. Gold luster covers selective fingerprints, edges, and folds in the forms. Arranged on the trays in irregular formations, as groups of individuals or as pieces on a game board, each vessel occupies only one compartment but is not limited to one vessel per tray, with the blocky, cellular compartments of the trays forming a logic and structure for such compositions. One cup is distanced from the others. The overall effect is that of a table set for a group but there is confusion, of setting and of ceremony. Who is to be served at this table? What was enacted at this table?

And when you are desirous to be bles’d is a set, containing two vessels on a double-sided, double-handed lunch tray, which seems both intimate and contentious. Although the two halves of the tray, each consisting of a distinct tray form in and of itself, facing each other, meet and intertwine, the form plays back and forth between division and unification. The meeting between the halves is very clearly divided, yet the soft, ornamental layers that line the border seem to intertwine. The two sets of handles most vividly display a sense of contentiousness
or confrontation in that their existence calls into question who could grasp the tray and how it could be carried or moved, while the head-to-head orientation of the halves implies meeting in a more ambiguous sense. There are two cups, two slightly different forms, one on each side of the tray, continuing the oppositional theme. The forms of the cups gesture towards or away from each other, depending on their positioning on the tray. They are meant to display longing in their gestures. Their confrontation is fraught with longing to reconcile, to meet.

*Assume a virtue, if you have it not* is a collection of small tray forms made by pressing a wasps’ nest stamp into the individual compartments of the lunch tray mold, nested in the compartments of a pressed and altered lunch tray. The compartments are divided, a disintegrated version of the original tray. But they are contained and connected by a nest of their parent. The implied setting is that of a single individual who has gathered their disconnected parts into the semblance of a unified whole.

*Either curb the devil, or throw him out* is a set of two bowls, the feet of which are made from a press mold of a glass dish and the bodies of which are made from a slab impressed with a wasps’ nest textured stamp. The identically made bowls rest on two different “saucers,” and are divided by a fired version of the stamps used to make the wasps’ nest textured slabs. One saucer is made of a full, intact layer or tier from a wasps’ nest, and the other is made from the fired results of pushing clay into the negative spaces of one full tier of a wasps’ nest. The two bowls, obviously a set, are poised on saucer forms that are the negative of each other. As both sides are balanced and equal, though clearly held in opposition to each other, the eponymous
“devil” is ambiguous. The divisive position of the stamp presents a more likely option. The wasps’ nest stamp is an object in which a confusing physical confrontation has been enacted between the labors of man and nature. Not only was the curious object used as a tool in production but the tool itself also accompanied the produced objects through the rest of the firing process, its, final, finished, vitreous surface signifying its worthiness as an object of contemplation.

**Conclusion**

In making these pieces, I explored my attitudes towards different methods of production as they related to my position as a maker in the field of ceramics. By focusing on a responsive and intuitive relationship with the materials and tools involved in the process, this work questions myths of intention, function, and the nature of making. The communal elements and indicators of pottery are used to enact small vignettes of confrontation, reconciliation, and connectivity, symbolizing the individual’s fluid relationship with community.
Images from the Exhibition:

*That monster Custom, who all sense doth eat*
And when you are desirous to be bles’d
Assume a virtue, if you have it not
Either curb the devil, or throw him out
Works Cited


