

o f T I M E a n d P L A C E

by Elizabeth Robinson

Technology, in itself, does not hold an interest for me. I certainly never thought, when it came time to write about my work, that technology would be the theme from which I addressed my ideas. But living in an age where industry is so closely connected to culture, how can I not?

As an undergraduate, I came to pottery making with passion, with romantic feelings about the power and autonomy of making something useful by hand. Seduced by the elemental nature of clay, water, and fire, I kicked the treadle wheel, chopped wood, and stoked the kiln. The act of making something as simple and necessary as a dish gave me a sense of empowerment. It still does. Above all, I am seduced by the tactile softness and malleability of clay, by its ability to record each step of its history in its form and on its surface.

I have a fascination with the oldness of this craft, with its history, its very non-technological associations. I love how the soulful vessels of the past are so intimately connected to both the time and the place in which they were made – that the clay dug from nearby had a certain color and texture, that the processes that made the objects left telltale marks of tools and hands, that the wood that stoked the kiln left a certain mark on the work and the color of the glazes.

Besides geography, changing technologies have also steadily left their mark upon the vessel. Each innovation has shaped the form and surface of the pots in ways that characterize particular times and cultures. The intersection of geography and technology, with the marks it leaves, creates a subtle narrative about the time and place in which pots are made that I find captivating.

Thus, my interest in technology as it informs my artwork is a historical one. Having moved frequently since childhood, and, like many Americans, having no direct ethnic roots to call upon, my object-making felt displaced. The almost ritualistic act of making a domestic object, I realized, represented a nostalgic yearning on my part to ground myself in a place and a moment of my own. As much as I love the pots of the past, I yearned to make forms that spoke of my own lineage, of the juxtaposition of my heritage and identity.

With ambiguous cultural roots to work with, I was free to identify my own. I am of European descent, middle-class, educated, and working near the turn of this century – I could consciously choose what sources and resources would shape my work. Both experience and research would play a part, and I began to look toward the transformation of objects and culture by the Industrial Revolution for inspiration.

I began to make forms that still spoke of the softness of clay, and whose surfaces still paid tribute to atmosphere and fire, yet whose details referred to more recent European roots. In graduate school, and for some years, I used slip-casting in a nod to industrial mass-production of tableware, but made singular, oversized wall platters, whose runny areas of abstract color bespoke the both academic setting I was in, with its modernist heritage, and my admiration for the fluid surfaces of the T'ang Dynasty and Whieldon ware. Rather than using molds to make multiples, I let the process make its mark upon each unique piece. Rather than wiping away the marks of the mold, I highlighted them. I exploited the absorption and fluidity of casting slip to make complex, detailed rims that reminded me of fluting on fine china plates, yet said everything about the progressive hardening of liquid clay. Reentering the “real world” after leaving school, the forms scaled down and began to live on the table again, becoming accomplices in the elusive dance between use and display that characterizes a contemporary pot.

Where my pots used to be all softness and curves, lately they have become more



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streamlined and sleek, at first implying the stiffness and rigidity of industrial dishes, but with soft moments and celebrated flaws that you only notice during handling. The forms have become simple and straightforward canvases for the graphic decoration wrapping the surface, yet underneath is the subtle layering of linear elements, from the soft line of ribbed throwing slip to the curve of a handle emerging from the profile of the form. The pots are often incised with fine lines when bone dry and scrawled with underglaze pencil on the bisque before I coat the whole pot in clear glaze and daub colors on top. These layers of conscious yet incidental marks at each stage of the process form the ground upon which I add the graphic elements of laser transfers to the glaze-fired pot. When decorating, I respond to these layers with imagery, using a linear element to continue the line of a handle, a solid shape that will fold or crack nicely over the swell of a belly, or the sepia tones of a rendered image that might shift subtly in color over an iron splotch of glaze. The decoration envelops the form, without the traditional regard for the boundaries of rims and edges, forming compositions that shift with varying perspectives. Often, the back of a platter, the bottom of the foot, contain as much detail as the exposed surfaces. These hidden areas help build layers of information, not readily accessible, that must be discovered over time, through interaction with each piece.

My use of decals derived from a desire to use imagery as yet another layer of surface treatment. I use images appropriated from various sources – textbooks, antique botanical texts, manuals on ornamentation – then alter them using the computer. I combine images and cut patterns apart, exploiting design qualities such as scale, repetition, line, and density so that the imagery wraps around the form, interacting with the shape and surface of the pot as well as the other images. My use of imagery is both nostalgic and iconic, familiar yet slightly out of context, evoking traditional ornamentation and contemporary painting, juxtaposing the old with the new.

As I was struggling for a way to transfer images to round forms, I fussed with silk-screening ceramic materials, but found the process too tedious and more suited to flat surfaces than my curvaceous pots. A teacher gave me a handout that described a way to use a common laser printer to make decals – some older laser printers and copy machines happen to have enough iron in their toner cartridges to use as a colorant during firing – and I have been working with that technique ever since. Laser printing fuses the iron so it won't dissolve in water, thus making it possible to use for “water-slide” decals. To make the decals I simply print the images onto pre-covered water-slide decal paper. This process suits me because it is direct and immediate. I can change the scale or density of the design or generate new imagery in response to the work I am currently making, without the long preparation and chemicals required for silk-screening ceramic decals. Conceptually, I also appreciate the connection between the artistic opportunity these technological developments have given me and the manner in which printing processes of the eighteenth century changed the surfaces of dishes.

In the eighteenth century, European printing technologies evolved to the point where it was possible to transfer detailed imagery onto mass-produced pottery, making highly decorated ware available and affordable to the middle classes. Called transfer-ware, these pots have appealing qualities of both sophistication and commonness. The imagery, though detailed, is often spare and has an awkward way of fitting the form that I find charming. Today, home laser printing technology, computer software, and the availability of printing media allow me, as a solo craftsperson, to use current print technology to make highly decorated and individuated pieces for the few willing to pay for the work involved.

Where do the objects I make by hand fit into the larger context of my time and culture? Where do I place myself in the long lineage of potters? I make functional objects by hand out of desire and not necessity, making luxuries out of common household objects. I juxtapose the refined lines of my industrial, technological



ABOVE: *Mug*, 2007. *Mid-range porcelain with laser transfers*. 5 x 5 in.

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: *Teacup and saucer*, 2007. *Mid-range porcelain with laser transfers*. 3 x 6 in.

OPPOSITE PAGE BOTTOM: *Covered jar*, 2007. *Mid-range porcelain with laser transfers*. 7.5 x 5 in.

culture with my love of clay's softness and the narrative its process creates.

I still love the romance of being a potter and the power that a handcrafted object can conjure, but I am indebted to and embrace technology in so many ways. With a few flicks of the keyboard I can find the answer to a technical problem or be inspired by an online exhibition. I buy pre-mixed clay, made from sources dug and shipped worldwide. These days, when I fire my kiln, instead of stoking wood, or constant turn-ups and monitoring, I program the computer of my electric kiln and go home to dinner with my family. This convenience has allowed me to add speed and consistency to my firing process, which has both helped me to eke out a living with my studio work and facilitated the development of surfaces that would not have happened if my firing process were more labor-intensive.

Living in a remote town, where few visitors seek out my Main Street studio and showroom, and those that do scratch their heads at my anachronistic lifestyle and too-expensive pots, my computer is the tether that connects my work to the outside world. Though an image is in most ways a poor substitute for the actual object, I am indebted to the magic of digital photography and the Internet, which allows me to showcase my work on the Web and communicate quickly and efficiently with gallery directors, magazine editors, and customers. My Web site functions to introduce and expand knowledge of my work to others. In all these ways, technology, my birthright, eases the path through which, finally, my handmade mug might be cradled lovingly in the hand of some appreciative stranger across the country.

