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DESSERT

DESSERT

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

By

Glenna Michele Worrell
University of North Florida
Bachelor of Fine Arts in Art, 2007

May 2012
University of Arkansas

ABSTRACT

From an early age craft played a major role in my development as a person and as an artist. The traditional 1950s-70s crafts such as quilting, knitting, and sewing as performed by my mother began to influence me as a child and are now what I draw upon in my artwork. This thesis exhibition addresses my future role as a nurturer and how it relates to my relationship with my mother. It is my way of forming a connection with the rich history of craft and that of the studio potter. I draw inspiration from historical and contemporary ceramics, the history of American craft, and both the myth and reality of 1950s American home life. My own personal history instilled in me a desire to work in the handmade. Finally, my connection to the fifties is twofold. First, it was the time period when my mother was a child and second, it is often the most idealized version of American home life.

This thesis is approved for recommendation
to the Graduate Council.

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Special thanks to my committee; Jeannie Hulen, Bethany Springer, Alissa Walls, and Leo Mazow for all their encouragement and support.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the original inspiration for my artwork, my mother. Her constant love and support have been a continuous source of strength. Also, to my boyfriend, Alan, without you none of this would have been possible. Thank you for being my rock.

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INTRODUCTION

Some of my earliest memories include sitting in my mother's sewing room listening to the hum of her sewing machine. From an early age craft played a major role in my development as a person and as an artist. My mother performed all the traditional tasks of the homemaker, such as sewing, cooking, and cleaning. The traditional 1950s-70s crafts such as quilting, knitting, and sewing as performed by my mother began to influence me as a child and are now what I draw upon in my artwork. As I approach graduation, I have begun thinking about the next phase in my life, such as marriage and starting a family. This thesis exhibition addresses my future role as a nurturer and how it relates to my relationship with my mother. It is my way of forming a connection with the rich history of craft and that of the studio potter.

This body of work explores what kind of space I would create as both an artist and a homemaker. I pull inspiration from historical and contemporary ceramics, the history of American craft, and both the myth and reality of 1950s American home life. The most influential aspect of the studio potter is the importance of the individual's hand being present in the work; also one of the driving forces in American craft. My own personal history instilled in me a desire to work in the handmade. Finally, my connection to the fifties is twofold. First, it was the time period when my mother was a child and second, it is often the most idealized version of American home life.

HISTORY OF THE STUDIO POTTER

The medium of ceramics has a rich history, and the more recent history of the studio potter in America has been the most direct influence on my work. The predecessors of the field, such as Bernard Leach, inform the work of contemporary studio potters. As a ceramic artist, my work is

ultimately informed by the history of studio potters in America. Much of America's foundation in ceramics comes from the influence of the ceramic arts of both Europe and Asia. The first mention of the term 'studio pottery' in Europe first appeared in a trade journal in 1923. In the time between the two world wars, handmade pottery and studio craft underwent a change that was driven by optimism for continued peace and growth.

The English potter Bernard Leach popularized a revival of medieval English slipware. The other subject of interest during the interwar period was "Orientalism". These two movements in English studio ceramics have had a great influence on contemporary American potters. Much of the ceramics produced by the first studio potters in America comes from developments in Europe. This influence also brought Asian ceramic techniques and styles to America.

Chinese pottery in the beginning of the twentieth century was not very well known. Over the next ten years, Chinese pottery gained great interest among American audiences with exhibitions, articles, and reviews. Contemporary critiques and artists believed that Asian art embodied the ambitions of the modern movement in which pottery was seen as an integral element. English pottery of the medieval period was compared to Sung and Tang pottery, which many believed to be some of the greatest ceramic work in existence. During this time, early Chinese pottery became the standard upon which all other pottery was evaluated.¹

Bernard Leach greatly influenced American studio potters. He focused more on handcrafted work rather than on work produced by machines. His ideas more closely related to that of William Morris and craft rather than those of a contemporary potter and creating individualistic

¹ Greenhalgh, Paul. 2003. *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press. 55.

artworks. Leach tried to occupy both the artistic and commercial market and in some cases proved to be a failure. This failure led to his adoption of a new strategy, which involved showing his work in emerging galleries such as The New Handworker's and the Little Gallery. He also wrote many polemical articles: a vital part in changing the direction of studio pottery.² Leach's following description of studio pottery follows closely to how I feel about my own ceramic work and the work of others.

There is a need to escape from the atmosphere of the over-precious; and not only have the new craftsmen to prove that they can be creative, but as 'artist craftsmen' they must, if only for the sake of their art, contribute to national life. A growing public wants to enjoy the use of its crockery, and that can only be if it is inseparably practical and beautiful...

There is a profound and urgent need for attempting to bridge that gulf soon.³

Similarly to what Leach describes above, I look to make both functional and decorative objects. They serve a very clear purpose and are beautiful pieces. My ultimate goal as a studio potter is to create ware that works in a functional way while at the same time the user can respond to it aesthetically.

In American ceramics, groups in commercial potteries traditionally produced the ware. Labor was clearly divided and each craftsman had a particular job. Some studio potters preferred to work more independently, completing each step on their own. After World War I, art pottery production started to decline and the next generation of American ceramists turned to studio pottery. A majority of the ceramists that began in the 1920s were not part of this guild like system of art pottery. They did not learn their craft in a production pottery; instead, they studied

² Greenlagh, *Persistence of Craft*, 55.

³ Greenlagh, *Persistence of Craft*, 57.

at established art schools and universities, and were most often directly influenced by the changes taking place in European art and design.⁴ This change in the history of ceramics in America most directly affects my own work as a studio potter. The new generation of American ceramists mentioned previously formed the foundation for my own education and studio practice.

A revitalized interest in Native American pottery developed between World War I and II. The uncertainty of the Depression years led to a desire to rediscover America's cultural roots. This resulted in a conscious effort to strengthen national unity through the "collective embrace of that which is uniquely American."⁵

These episodes in art and cultural history, particularly in the history of ceramics, have come to play an important role in my work. A majority of my education as a studio potter has focused on learning techniques that have been around for centuries. The connection to this rich history has had the greatest effect on my work because it relates to my own personal desire to discover my roots. Ceramics in a way different from other materials shows the artist's hand in the finished product. This medium focuses on the artist being present in the work and in it retaining the look of something handmade. Much of my childhood, I was surrounded by things that were made by my mother or other family members for use in the home. This early exposure to these unique items instilled in me an appreciation for handcrafted objects. The ceramic works I make today, are made with the intention to be in one's home as both functional and decorative wares.

⁴ Kardon, Janet, and Rosemarie Haag Bletter. 1995. *Craft in the Machine Age, 1920-1945*. New York: H.N. Abrams in association with the American Craft Museum, 98.

⁵ Kardon and Haag Bletter, *Craft in the Machine Age*, 105.

Communities often develop when working in the field of ceramics. These artists come together to discuss and exchange ideas on new techniques and forms in ways very similar to those who participate in crafts such as quilting. This feeling of belonging to a strong group of people ultimately appealed to me the most in this art form. In a few different ways, this body of work builds on the idea of bringing people together. First, in the multitude of objects present in the exhibition, which implies that there will be a gathering of many people. Second, the objects like the cake stands would most often be used for a gathering of people at an event.

CRAFT IN AMERICA

By the late 1930s, critics and scholars persisted in labeling ceramic art as craft. So, discussing the history of American ceramics and studio pottery evokes the importance and history of American craft since the two are so closely related. Craft can provide a lot to those who work in the field and for those who appreciate it such as,

the satisfaction of imposing himself on the material world, a feeling that has deep roots in the American pioneer spirit; and second, the practice of craft is an effective means of self-realization. Despite the materialism of American society, more and more people think that total mastery of a craft offers greater satisfaction than the pursuit of purely material goals.⁶

The previous statements hold true in my own work. I take great satisfaction in creating work that goes out into the world for use by others. While the impact may not be large, I know my work will affect the user in some way.

⁶ Smith, Paul J., and Edward Lucie-Smith. 1986. *Craft today: Poetry of the Physical*. New York: American Craft Museum, 36.

The way that a handcrafted object can impact its surroundings can appeal to many. These objects are both decorative and fulfill a desire that many of us have to decorate our environments.⁷ A handcrafted piece will bring with it a different feeling than something that is mass-produced. These handcrafted objects intrinsically contain some remnant of the one who created them. There is a story contained within about how the piece came to be.

The artistic practice of craft media such as sewing and quilting provides ample opportunities for forming connections with others. Much of these crafts traditionally done by women, but now also done by men, were community builders. These crafts provided women with the opportunity to connect with others and form lasting bonds. Mothers and daughters were also able to form strong relationships through sewing. The history in America of mothers passing their knowledge to their daughters through craft can be traced back to Native American tribes. Many of these tribes often worked communally with other women. They learned these skills from their mothers, grandmothers, and aunts. An example of this is the Hopi women gathering together at “pottery bees” to make their pottery.⁸

My mother first exposed me to the community of craft. Many of my developmental years consisted of sitting on the outskirts of crafting circles, which included activities such as basket weaving and quilting. The importance of these types of relationships quickly became apparent to me. These undertakings did not only focus on the relationships amongst the women participating. They also consisted of increasing skill in particular crafts and creating both useful and beautiful objects for the home.

⁷ Smith and Lucie-Smith, *Craft Today*, 37.

⁸ Charlotte Streiffer Rubinstein, “The First American Women Artists,” *Woman’s Art Journal*. Vol. 3, No. 1 (1982): 6

One of the most well-known examples of communal craftwork is in the making of quilts. This process brought the quilters together “in times of joy, grief, friendship, and protest and has provided them with an emotional outlet and the opportunity for social interchange.”⁹ These quilting ‘bees’ were not only a way to speed the process but became an opportunity to exchange news and gossip and find companionship and support.¹⁰

Quilts are an important part of the history of craft because they “became a vehicle through which women could express themselves; utilitarian objects elevated through enterprise, imagination and love to the status of an original art form.”¹¹ Some of my first ventures into the world of craft include quilting. It developed my love of taking pieces and arranging them in different ways to create something new.

In my personal life, craft served an important role in both my development as a person and as an artist. Sewing gave me a way to form a stronger bond to a single mother who worked multiple jobs to support her four children. My mother has quilted and sewn as far back as I can remember. Developing an interest in her activities has enabled us to find a common ground and as the only one of her children to express an interest in such things, we have formed a special connection. She has taught me invaluable skills that I will be able to pass on to my own children one day. These skills, which include sewing and quilting often referred to as craft and frequently used in many domestic contexts, have provided me a sense of familial cohesion. The appreciation for

⁹ Gloria Seaman Allen, review of *Shared Threads: Quilting Together-Past and Present*, by Jacqueline Marx Atkins, Winterthur Portfolio, 1995, Book Reviews, 173

¹⁰ Allen, review of *Shared Threads*, 173

¹¹ Elaine Hedges, “The Nineteenth-Century Diarist and Her Quilts”, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (1982), 295.

craft that has been instilled in me is what led me to be a ceramic artist. Like quilting, ceramics is a medium about process and about the layering of materials.

1950s MYTH AND REALITY

This body of work, *Dessert*, references American culture of the 1950s a period long stereotyped by nuclear families, simple lives, and unlimited upward mobility. It describes an “era of prosperity, family, and fun such that many use it as the benchmark against which to measure other time periods.”¹² There are many who look back on this decade as an ideal world despite not actually having lived through it. Those who find comfort in thoughts of the 1950s long for reassurance that modern America, which in many ways is chaotic and crumbled, does in fact have a stable foundation.¹³ Mary Caputi, author of *A Kinder, Gentler America*, states that:

As opposed to the sometimes-bewildering fragmentation and vaunted diversity highlighted in contemporary American life, this era invokes the homogeneity, the accord, the like-mindedness that are frequently the by-products of cultural cohesion. It suggests the orderliness and predictability of many a 1950s sitcom rerun... Above all it implies *control*: self-controlled individuals, controlled families and neighborhoods, controlled conversations, a controlled foreign policy. It is a control that emanates from the fact that our culture’s definitions are stable and intact, for we are, in this decade, at home in the spiritual place where we belong.¹⁴

¹² Caputi, Mary. 2005. *A Kinder, Gentler America: Melancholia and the Mythical 1950s*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 7.

¹³ Caputi, *A Kinder, Gentler America*, 21.

¹⁴ Caputi, *A Kinder, Gentler America*, 22.

The above describes that control or the lack of it plays an important part in the mythmaking process. The feeling of lack of control over personal life and the world in general may lead to building a myth of what the 1950s represents. Mythmaking often occurs when there is a need to find that missing foundation.¹⁵

My childhood has left me with a feeling that I am missing my own foundation. My fixation on the 1950s comes from a desire I had as a child to have a mother more readily available to me. The fifties have always represented to me an idealized time of simplicity in family life that I have felt lacking in my own.

Researching more about the 1950s and the housewife led me to Carolyn Coggin's book *Successful Entertaining at Home*. It gives a prime example of the myth I have built in my mind about how women lived in the 1950s. This book gives step-by-step instructions on how to be the perfect hostess no matter what the occasion. The opening line of the books explains that:

Liking to have company is like being one of those characters who bet on the races. You simply can't help yourself. It is a reason for living, and you can't give it up despite the hazards of running a home, the high cost of living, or having to do everything yourself.¹⁶

Coggins' volume here implies that such a woman is selfless and dedicated to making her home environment enjoyable for others.

The housewife is also often described as committed to maintaining the household and its surrounding areas. Women have historically learned how to perform the duties of the housewife

¹⁵ Caputi, *A Kinder, Gentler America*, 7.

¹⁶ Coggins, Carolyn. 1952. *Successful Entertaining at Home; a Complete Guide for Informal Entertaining*. New York: Prentice -Hall, 2.

from a young age. This consists of another example of knowledge passing from mother to daughter. In contemporary society, however, the woman has more control over how much and the type of knowledge she acquires.¹⁷

DESSERT

I have explored the concept of dessert in two ways: first, from the point of view of the craftsperson and the studio potter, and second, from the perspective of the idealized 1950s housewife. In *Sweet Invention: The History of Dessert*, culinary historian, Michael Krondl explains that:

Dessert could be a great deal more than merely a pleasant ending to a meal. A frilly encore played after the weighty symphony was done. That the dessert itself was the purpose, the goal... – perhaps not for a whole lifetime, but quit possibly for a day spent in its anticipation and most certainly for an afternoon washed in its delights.¹⁸

This suggests that dessert carries with it a feeling of decadence for those who experience it. It is the part of the meal that is not necessary and is an extra treat. This exploration of objects meant for the presentation of dessert, for me relates to the fantasy of the 1950s housewife because in this myth, the housewife creates an opulent environment for her family and guests, which consists of both food and ware. The making of desserts is highly technical and has a rich history much like ceramics. Both take years of practice and a certain amount of training to become proficient.

¹⁷ Lopata, Helena Znaniecka. 1971. *Occupation: Housewife*. New York: Oxford University Press, 137-142.

¹⁸ Krondl, Michael. 2011. *Sweet Invention: A History of Dessert*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 3.

Dessert also holds a lot of meaning for me. When my mother baked, it was always viewed as a special occasion. It often signaled the arrival of an important event in my family. The desserts made from scratch symbolized my mother's love and care for me and my siblings.

EXHIBITION ARRANGEMENT

Upon entering the gallery space, the viewer will see the walls covered in four hundred decorative plates arranged to appear as individual quilt patches. They are separated into four sections along the length of the main wall. In between each section are four of the hanging flower bricks. The short wall in the gallery space is just hung with six of these objects. The short back wall is directly in the line of sight when the viewer enters the space. These simple yet intriguing objects lure the viewer in and then the long sidewall can be more clearly seen with the line of plates and flower bricks. The walls are also painted with a stencil of a floral pattern that closely relates to the patterns featured throughout the exhibition.

Extending through the middle of the gallery are four tables measuring two feet by eight feet.

The width and length of these tables references a buffet or catered event. In the 1950s, buffet style service became quite popular when entertaining at home.¹⁹ I painted each table white and then painted the same design as the walls down the center of the table in an off white. Each table includes a set of three cake stands in which one is tiered, ten cupcake stands, and two standing flower bricks.

¹⁹ Caputi, *Successful Entertaining at Home*, 59.

PROCESS AND FORMAL DECISIONS

The dessert plate started as my focus for this exhibition and over the past year I have experimented with various shapes and sizes. Ultimately, I decided on the scalloped edge. It references the floral patterns and scalloping used through the work tying all the forms together. It also creates a consistency in shape and size that is readily apparent. As mentioned above, dessert is often the most anticipated part of the meal. The fact that these are dessert plates also connects them with the other objects in the exhibition. When each one of these over four hundred plates comes together it forms a larger, more complete piece.

The presentation of the plates directly relates to my quilting experience and the quilting term called “pieced work” and defined as a complete process.²⁰ It is a whole that is made from parts of other things. I have taken the idea of pieced work and applied it to my wall piece. Each plate is a separate object that when together creates a whole. These plates are both functional and decorative, which relates back to the ideals of the arts and crafts movement. It is not just about the functionality of the object but also about the aesthetic value. While the plates are not immediately seen as functional upon viewing them in the gallery space, it will become clear to the viewer that there is a potential for use. The walls have been painted with a floral pattern that relates in style to the patterning on each of the plates. The color chosen is subtle so as not to distract focus from the ceramic object.

My entire body of work consists of cone six porcelain in a combination of both wheel thrown and slip cast forms. Porcelain is one of the purest of clay bodies and I chose to use it because of its clean bright white surface. Throughout my time in graduate school, I have experimented with

²⁰ Moore, Sabra. “Pieced Work,” *Women’s Art Journal*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (1982) 16.

different surface techniques and decided on the ones that best serve my work conceptually. I have made use of three main surface decorating techniques: *mishima*, *sgraffito*, and Chinese underglaze tissue transfers, which have been put into practice for centuries. Pulling from these historical references appeals to me because of my own personal desire to form a connection with the past.

The first surface treatment *mishima* is a traditionally Japanese method of decoration. I incised each pattern into the surface using a calligraphy pen and then painted black slip over it. When it dried, I scraped the surface leaving behind my original lines. This method of decoration allows me to draw freely on my forms and achieve as much or as little detail as I want. The designs I incise into the surfaces are taken from various fabric patterns of the 1950s, which relates back to my influences from quilting and the 1950s home.

Sgraffito, meaning “scratched”, is a reductive method of decoration in which a black slip is painted on the surface of the clay and then carved through. This surface treatment allowed me to loosely represent the pattern I had chosen. What is also appealing about this method is the noise left behind. The surrounding area of the design often has some left over information. It is a direct reflection of the technique *mishima*. One leaves a completely clean surface; the other leaves a little bit of extra information behind.

The final surface treatment I focused on in the exhibition is the use of the Chinese underglaze tissue transfers. I purchased these transfers during my trip to China. The transfers interested me because they are commercial. The patterns included in these transfers are very similar in style to the patterns often found in 1950s fabric. As I mentioned when discussing the history of studio potters in America, Chinese pottery has had a major influence on contemporary ceramics.

Jingdezhen, China is the birthplace of porcelain, the clay body used in my work. I am also referencing Jingdezhen through the quantity of objects present. Jingdezhen is known for its large production of porcelain objects. When using a material, it is important to be aware of its history and to pay it homage in some way. Another important part of the work is the color palette I have chosen. I settled on four colors so as not to create too much distraction. Each of them is a soft pastel color, which brings out the femininity of form and pattern.

Also on the walls in the gallery space, are twenty hanging flower bricks. Traditionally, flower arrangements have had a relationship with food service and presentation. These objects were slip cast in order to achieve a consistent appearance and finish. A 1950s inspired floral pattern can be seen raised upon the surface of each one. The surface is handled simply to work well with the other objects with more detailed designs.

After beginning with the dessert plate, which is the method of serving to the individual, I decided to focus on some objects to act as pedestals for the dessert. Included in the exhibition are twelve cake stands and forty cupcake stands of various height and shape. Each of them incorporates one of the decorating techniques described above. These stands serve as pedestals to the desserts, which emphasizes their decadence. Included alongside the cake stands and cupcake stands are eight flower bricks. These objects relate to the flower bricks hanging on the wall in both form and color. As mentioned previously, flower displays and desserts are commonly used together for table arrangements.

SUMMARY

Personal experiences have influenced me in my artwork beginning with my mother's involvement in craft and performing traditional tasks of the homemaker. Her influence has been the ultimate encouragement in pursuing a career in the arts. From a young age, I was aware of the importance of the handmade in my own life. This work has been about forming a connection with the history of my medium both in America and Asia while at the same time commenting on what the future might hold for my own life.

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APPENDIX A: INDIVIDUAL WORKS

Figure 1



Plates

2012

Cone six porcelain, wheel thrown, Chinese underglaze tissue transfers
5"x5"x1"

Figure 2



Hanging Flower Brick
2012
Cone six porcelain, slip cast
12"x6"x4"

Figure 3



Cake Stand

2012

Cone six porcelain, wheel thrown

8"x8"x6"

Figure 4



Cake Stand

2012

Cone six porcelain, wheel thrown, Chinese underglaze tissue transfers
8"x8"x12"

Figure 5



Cake Stand

2012

Cone six porcelain, wheel thrown

8"x8"x6"

Figure 6



Three Tier Cake Stand

2012

Cone six porcelain, wheel thrown

8"x8"x16"

Figure 7



Cupcake Stands

2012

Cone six porcelain, wheel thrown

4"x4"x5"

Figure 8



Cupcake Stands

2012

Cone 6 porcelain, wheel thrown

4"x4"x5"

APPENDIX B: EXHIBITION IMAGE

Figure 9



Untitled

2012

Cone six porcelain, wheel thrown and slip cast
70"x5"x2"