

Eyes wide open.

Change has a considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening because it means that things may get worse. To the hopeful it is encouraging because things may get better. To the confident it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better.

-King Whitney Jr.

I started making my 'new work' during the fall of 2006 while co-teaching fall concentration at Penland School of Crafts. For almost five years previous to this I made functional pots formed predominately on bisque molds and frosted in white slip. They were densely glazed with rich emeralds and ambers and brightly colored pinks and yellows. They were soft and sweet, yet weighty and burnt with terra cotta. They were heavily rooted in all kinds of ceramic history: Tang Dynasty, Oribe, Mexican folk pottery, my grandmothers china cabinet, a family button bag, the thrift store. They were attractive, well received, and fairly resolved -- yet to me they hadn't felt very personal since the novelty of discovery wore off.

I was able to move rather seamlessly from graduate school to making pots full time, in part because I was very frugal. My rent was under \$300 per month, my studio was at no cost in exchange for maintenance and art-center teaching and I jumped into the American Craft Council Wholesale market right away. At the show buyers placed orders for my work, but many other professional opportunities were also created. This was a very positive experience. A successful show gave me an amazing sense of accomplishment and confidence. It felt very empowering to drive home with an entire year of work already paid for. It made the dream to be a studio potter feel palpable.

This show forced me to see my work in ways that we too seldom do as studio potters. Get the work out of the studio, place it in a clean space, sit with it for three eight hour days and watch people interact and react. This was uncomfortable at first, but by the end of a show was revealing. I came to many realizations about my work during these long days. At the outset I loved building these pots. I loved the making journey: figuring them out, unearthing new discoveries and knowing that for the first time in my life my pots were going out into the world and people were going to live with and use them. An added bonus to making this volume of work was the efficiency that transpired. Initially this was a welcome change because I am not much of a pragmatist. However, it wound up being both a blessing and a curse.

Looking back I can see that I didn't have the perspective to understand the full implications of some of the decisions I was making in regards to wholesaling my work. The first mistake I made was not building enough flexibility into the ordering process. Because of this, I gave up control of my making process to the buyer. Initially orders would go something like this: "I would like this shape with this blue glaze and this handle...oh also, I don't like the slip drips on the foot". The last year I did the show I tried a new approach and found that my best buyers understood the nature of my process/ work. They would give me a dollar range for an order and occasionally say something like "I cant sell butter dishes" or "I don't like this yellow" and leave it at that. I think that these buyers always received the best work. If the blue serving dish didn't come out as nice as the green one they didn't get stuck with it. Interestingly, these buyers are also the people that embraced my new work.

I also made the mistake of setting my prices to low. This is a common mistake made by those who have not spent much time selling their work to anyone other than their grandmother or next door neighbor. It was no wonder I felt like a factory. I was wholesaling a small lovely condiment dish for \$11, and I had come back from my first show with orders for 200 of these totaling not much more than \$2,000. In hindsight I should have raised the price, sold fewer, made the same net sales, and spent more time with friends and family.

Like that long drive so many of us have made where you can't remember if you went over that bridge or passed the red barn on the corner, I found myself able to make my work in my sleep. That is not a good place to find yourself day after day. I had been recycling the same answers over and over for too long. Eventually the lack of passion in this work made me feel dishonest and as though I was compulsively lying. These feelings might be more common place in the 'real world' but considering one of the biggest perks to our profession are the impassioned feelings we have about what we do and how it feeds our soul, I couldn't bear to feel this 8 hours a day, 6-7 days a week. It was at this time I knew something had to change.

Another contributing factor in changing was a serious technical problem I was having with my glazes crawling. It hadn't been an issue in Nebraska but started to make itself known the year I spent at The Clay Studio in Philadelphia, and it became a severe handicap after moving to Maine. I had developed a firing schedule in graduate school that pushed my glazes to the limit and allowed them to melt and move in ways that had remarkable likeness to the lead glazed wares I was referencing. Unfortunately this fluidity also seemed to encourage severe crawling. My glazes usually stopped just short of running onto the kiln shelves. It was difficult to reglaze the crawled pots because in the re-firing 50% of the time they would run onto the shelves and tear off their fanciful feet. I am embarrassed to say that during these years my loss rate was on the brink of 50%. I would prolong opening a kiln as long as I possibly could. Like most other potters, if I was making work for a show I would make extra so that I had a good selection, but then I would have to double that number factoring in my loss rate. So the feelings I had of being a small production factory were only intensified. I talked to everyone and tried everything but got nowhere. I remember a long conversation with John Britt, which boiled down to "you are going to stop making this work if you don't figure this out". He was right.

Probably the most significant reason for the shift in my work is something I referenced earlier. My work no longer felt personal. Now I question whether it ever was. It may have been a little "too pink" or a little "too chunky", but in general it was easy to position because it was so entrenched in our pottery vernacular. It was heavily rooted in historical traditions which provides validation, it flaunted the sensuality of the material with its pinched feet and ribboned rims, and it was colorful therefore joyful and celebratory. But to me much of the essence of that work felt bound up in the surface, both physically and metaphorically. It had become too "pretty", the very adjective I started out rebelling against as I entered graduate school. How had that happened?

I never made a conscious decision to stop making my old work, I just never looked back. The opportunity to make new work presented itself during the fall that I co-taught Concentration at Penland School of Crafts with Meredith Brickell. I knew that the time outside of class would be best spent mining ideas I had socked away in deep storage, and thinking about what it *really* was that I wanted to say and make. I was hoping to do what we were asking our students to do: dig deep. I left my baggage and guilt about playing in the studio in Maine and granted myself the freedom to indulge my compulsions and my practice. This was a luxury that I couldn't have afforded at home in my studio where the bills were paid one dish at a time. It makes me squirm to think about where I would be today had I not had the time and paycheck that allowed me to soul search. After graduate school this opportunity rarely presents itself.

The work started where I never thought it would matter. I needed something that would not be too demanding as my most important job was to teach. So I began work on a floor mosaic for a small entryway we have on the side of our house. I rolled 1/4" slabs and sliced out garden inspired tile motifs. I should have had some clue how these objects would grab me when I realized they were much more reminiscent of Christmas cookies than bathroom tile. During my off time I rolled, cut and shoveled tiles

onto layer after layer of sheetrock. I was a cookie factory and felt deeply satisfied by this innovation. I loved these objects and spent a great amount of time thinking about why, and thinking how I could incorporate them into my work. I loved their edge, their planar nature, the linear quality, that they were in opposition to the three dimensional form that they represented, and that they were at once both two dimensional and three dimensional. It seemed like an interesting contradiction to affix these flat stickers to a round pot. Like the topographical lines that describe the surface of a map, I hoped that they would say something about the pots they were adorning. I did not allow myself to question “if” I should fasten these objects on my pots. At the time I was trying to make my world bigger, not smaller.

The reality of making new work was invigorating until I returned home to real life. I then slowly began to feel the corollary effects on both a personal and professional level. Personally I felt very vulnerable. Although I had closed the door on my earlier work, it was extremely daunting to think about the time and discovery that was going to have to go into my new work. Professionally I was not going to go from making one well resolved body of work to another. I was going to have to make the bad pots to make the good ones. How would I make a living?

The first big hurdle was to become comfortable with the idea that I may have to get a *JOB*. I had a belief that I would no longer be an authentic potter if I was slinging espressos. Yet my rational mind knew that I would rather be a plumber and be engaged and curious in the studio than be unhappy and able to sell pots.

Secondly, what to do with all those ‘bad pots’ I was going to have to make? At first some went directly to the shard pile but that trip was a graduate school luxury I could not afford. I do not have a teaching job, a reliable adjunct gig, or even a regular class to teach at a community art center. I am married and at the time my husband, Ian Anderson, made a very modest salary teaching at a small private art college in Maine. My income from my work was both crucial and proportionate. However, I rarely felt comfortable sending this work out to major retail galleries where it would be seen by my peers. So I had to find a way to sell it myself. Something I have never been very good at.

At the same time, I had backed off from the larger craft shows for economic reasons. Between travel, lodging, and show fees my profit margin was abysmal. I was curious about how local shows would compare, so I focused on this venue during this time. They definitely grossed less money but the overhead was significantly less. In doing this I generated a sizable local mailing list which allowed Ian and I to have our first successful holiday studio sale. An added perk was that I met other local craftspeople and made lasting relationships with people in my community. I also set-up a shopping cart on my website which I later replaced with an Etsy store. At first this store sold only my seconds. These sold very well at approximately 50% of the regular retail price. Being able to move this inventory was important to progressing through this work. An empty showroom is an excellent signifier to make more work. Additionally, selling this work gave my confidence a boost (which I often needed) and it reminded me that ‘good’ and ‘bad’ are subjective terms and there is good and bad in both kinds of work. Ironically, making ‘bad pots’ enabled me to gain control of my work, make the majority of the sales, embark on a yearly studio sale with a local clientele, make relationships with my community, and start to be known as a local potter in my area.

The pots that I am currently making are also made out of earthenware clay, covered with a white slip and laboriously glazed and decalé with hand drawn imagery. They are hand built more now than ever. By this I mean that I use coils, slabs, the wheel, casting slip, and bisque molds. To me they are all just tools. I use whatever gets me to my idea most effectively and expeditiously. Although they are visibly dissimilar to my previous work, they share many similarities. They are also feminine, sweet, reminiscent of candies and confections, and embellished with many of the same decorative motifs that I have used in the past. In

contrast, my new pots are more sparse, straight forward, unencumbered by the ceramic cannon, idiosyncratic, a bit rebellious, and robust. This work also has the capacity for more questions. My earlier work had too many questions already answered.

I know that these pots have their roots in the garden, compost pile, mosaic, costume, applique, and the unpredictable. Now when I work in the studio I find myself very attentive. Not because I have achieved a higher level of being but because I never know when I will catch a glimpse of something unknown or new that will make me see things differently. I also take more risks. If I am working through a series of dishes and I get a absurd idea, I indulge it. Occasionally this leads to another 'bad pot', but is always worth the risk no matter the result. Lately, some of the eccentric solutions I like best have come directly from this uninhibited state.

I am not proclaiming that my 'new work' is the work that I was destined to make or that I will still be making this work in five or ten years. What I am saying is that I am an artist and artists are searchers. Having made this change and having dealt with the consequences, I feel unencumbered by the possibility of doing it all over again. The work will follow.

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