

The Sweetness of Discovery

by Katey Schultz

Think *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*. Think feasts and frosting and fondant, cookie cutters and compost, art cars and gingerbread. Add a pinch of taffy or meringue. Mix well with grad school and wholesale shows. Beat in a considerable amount of determination and efficiency. Bake at a constant, high temperature for approximately ten years.

Kari Radasch's first line of work as a successful potter looked good enough to eat. Densely glazed condiment dishes, platters, cups, and saucers pooled with bright glazes, an array of drips stopping just short of the kiln shelf or table. White slips over terra cotta clay had their historical roots in Tang dynasty wares (Chinese), Oribe wares (Japanese), and more, yet the surface decoration on Radasch's work appeared utterly contemporary. Ribbioned trims and fancy feet accentuated the already decorative glazes, demanding much more than a passing glance. The recipe seemed logical enough: candied colors infer joyfulness and specialized functional forms invite celebratory events.

By and large, Radasch's line seemed complete. Yet in gaining swift success, she lost something else: the joy of discovery. Her work still contained elements that made it her own, but she worried that it wasn't an accurate representation of her vision. Trying to keep up with her wholesale orders, her understanding of that vision started to dwindle as well. "I started to feel like I was recycling the same solutions over and over again...I could almost make my work with my eyes closed," says Radasch.

Radasch's bright surfaces and intense work ethic that appeared instantly brave, were in fact just the first few, timid steps along her life path as an artist. The real bravery, it turns out, had everything to do with walking away from what she was known for and mixing things up until the joy of discovery once again came to life. While co-teaching a clay concentration at Penland School of Crafts in 2006, she was relatively free from financial pressures and wholesale orders for two months.

During this time, Radasch was able to experiment with new techniques, feed the muse, and slow down enough to listen for those elements of the personal that had been trying to speak to her all along. She wanted to make pieces for "large congregations" of both "laughter and gastronomy." She knew her work still needed to contain elements of the handmade and celebration, bringing people together for special events. She also wanted to pursue further her desire to add distinct lines to clay without disrupting the surface layers too drastically. Rather than smother those elements with glossy, dripping glazes, she learned to find depth through layers of subtlety and highlight color by making the clay surface slightly raised rather than the glaze color blindingly bright. Color and abundance were not the only way to garner attention. Being brave didn't have to mean being loud.

Radasch's new work still appears edible, but it's less like a binge and more like a well-balanced meal. Smooth, buttery surfaces appear easy and inviting from a distance, then

layered and multi-faceted up close. The satin surfaces are predominately gentle to the touch with slightly raised appliqué adding an element of the three-dimensional onto even the flattest plates or dishes. The work is sophisticated while maintaining that joyful, bright energy that harkens back to her earlier work.

This notion of quiet bravery also translates to Radasch's ideological changes as a potter. Filling large wholesale orders or customizing to a client's exact preference is no small feat. Willingness certainly has its place in the market of bravery. But the pace necessitated by Radasch's success ended in entrapment and she soon realized there had to be a middle ground. Custom orders had their place, but first and foremost was her duty to herself. She returned to a quote from Squeak Carnwath that she came across in grad school: "Art is evidence. Evidence of breathing in and breathing out; proof of human majesty." Completing the thought, Radasch says, "It is in the sharing of this evidence that the gift lies."

Breathing in and breathing out: an activity as natural as blinking our eyes. A simple act, yet one that is overlooked countless times each day. From this middle ground, Radasch's aesthetic has matured. As she slowed her pace, she saw more possibilities. Her work became layered both visually and physically and she found her trademark by combining appliqué and decals for texture and precision.

"I was making drawings with a fine point Sharpie and occasionally some watercolor. I found myself wishing that there was a ceramic pen on the market that had this line quality so that I could transfer these drawings on to my pots," says Radasch. Soon enough, she realized a technique already existed: laser transfer decals. "I like how the two-dimensional nature of the drawing [printed on decal paper] maintains the two-dimensional nature of the appliqué," she explains. "This keeps the surface flat but at the same time adds surface depth with a new layer of information."

In fact, the thin brown lines of the decal drawings often look as though they are sinking into or emerging from below the surface of the glazed piece or the appliqué on the piece. Instead of bulking up her work, Radasch found a way to deepen it with precision, bulking it up aesthetically but not physically. Furthermore, slip and score marks skirt the edges of the appliqué, referencing the handmade, personal aspect of her work—a small nod in the direction of her ideological shifts as a potter.

Now, Radasch can spend any given day in her studio working on a variety of different tasks. She may begin working through a series of four to six different dishes made on bisque molds or throwing vertical forms such as espresso cups and mugs. Some of her larger pieces are coil-built. Later, she might decorate other pieces with appliqué, playfully deciphering how to break up the space of each piece.

In her studio, fascinations and obsessions abound: circles as poppy flowers or lollipops, lines as flower stems or grass blades, "hidden" dots as raindrops or subtle patterns. "If I am looking for a new decorative motif, I will pull out different books, images, drawings,

and fabrics. Usually something grabs me and I can incorporate it into the vocabulary I have built,” says Radasch.

“The unfolding of my previous work had become rote. Towards the end there was little searching,” she says. “Now decorating reminds me of my two-dimensional design class in undergrad. I am dealing with a bunch of different shapes on a blank page and trying to find the most active and engaging way to resolve the space.”

Discovery is a possibility with every piece. The space can always be broken up in a different way. Appliques can be rolled and cut as the mood strikes. Radasch’s process has some constants, but plenty of unknowns. Within this fine balance, she has formed her new aesthetic and honed it, perfectly to taste.