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Picture This! Ceramics and Pictorial Spaces

The coming together of form and surface is particular to ceramics in specific ways and nowhere is that more relevant than when images are present on ceramic forms. Images are used to tell stories, but I will argue here that it is not so important to consider what kind of stories are being told, but instead **how** the story is told. The presence of images on ceramic forms often implies the presence and working of frames or framing devices. The frame, and the object itself are not just there to contain the image, they are both active participants in the overall composition and in the operative workings of the image.

The framing of images on movable, domestic objects like pots, is one of the most important contribution ceramics and pottery has made to art and possibly the most influential in further developments in image-making. The frame selects and shapes within its borders, making irrelevant what is exterior to its limits. The frame, this amazing gift of ceramics to art making, is an editing device, one could say a curatorial device, which defines what is included from what is excluded, what is considered from what is ignored.

The pot itself, the vessel, the object is also a frame, its very edges, its silhouette defines a border, a frame where things change, physically, visually and conceptually, where one perceived reality makes way for another, where an image, an illusion, a representation makes place for the actual, physical world. Thus a frame on a pot is itself framed by the silhouette of the object and these multiple frames affect each other in ways rarely seen, if ever, in other art forms. One frame operates within the context of images, while the other (the edge of the pot) operates within the context of objects.

All over the world, one of the most constant devices used on pottery forms and ceramic objects consist in the articulation of the overall form with lines, bands and framing devices that will then contain spaces (even empty) or pictorial elements. This compulsion to divide the form into constitutive parts is even found on objects with no picture, no image of any kind. One finds bare, blank plates with a gold line at the rim, for example, which is not there to frame an image but to frame the object itself and reaffirm in the process the nature of the object itself as a frame, operating a shift between two physical spaces, two realities. For objects are not things like other things are things. An object, while in continuity with reality and the surrounding world, always remain independent and separate from it, yet not to the degree that images are independent and separate from the world they represent. It is this ambiguous nature of objects that constitutes their greatest potential for meaning and especially when objects are containers, which magnifies the problem.

Within all these ceramic framing devices, one also often finds on a single object, an accumulation of stylistic representations, frames within frames, even with contrasting colors and tonality, some in grisaille, others polychromatic, especially on European Baroque and Rococo

ceramics. Such jumbled, even confusing accumulations, combining simultaneously on the same object decorative, descriptive and symbolic aspects, is for the longest time specific to ceramics. We are now of course very familiar with such stylistic and pictorial juxtapositions, through our exposure to collage and then within post-modern mediation, which both use such strategies, but it remains that these aesthetics developments in art first appear on ceramics.

Western and Eastern Pictorial Spaces:

Images on Greek vessels are often organized with framing devices where the scene is composed within a stretched and deformed rectangular shape on the side of pots, with one image on each side, divided by the two opposing handles. This compositional device of restricting a spatially convincing picture to a framed, rectangular space is original to Greek pottery, where it originates in the Archaic period to its final development in Greek Attic pottery of the 5th Century BCE. I dare to argue that such a compositional framing device makes its appearance there for the first time in art representation (bi-dimensional) and it will subsequently have a tremendous and continuous impact on image making, in painting, drawing, printmaking (comic books, manga, newspapers), photography, advertising and billboards, even cinema, television and computer screens, where the same editing conceit is applied.

I now quote from Philip Rawson "Ceramics": "*The Far-Eastern ceramic painter has always treated the pot surface as if it were crystallized out of a continuum of space, pre-existing as a kind of provisional segment of endless space in which objects may appear quite naturally. The artist thus has no obligation to define a perspective-box (depth-box), or to make his objects fit into a frame provided according to any formula save their own presence. The picture does not have to describe a complete visual field (as happens in European representation) to be consistent. For even when there is only one feature on it, say a single figure, the picture space is already, as it were, complete and satisfactory in the pot surface*"… "*In European decorative arts, one looks "through" the ceramic surface and for the scene to be convincing it most be bodily complete. In 18th Century porcelain, often, on vignettes inserted within framed cartouche, the edges of the image are blurred, giving the viewer the impression of loosing focus or fading reality where the rendering vanishes", as if the image could not interrupt abruptly unless it meets the clear border of the framing device. "In a Chinese picture on the other hand, we are quite prepared to accept large gaps of empty space or the vanishing of rock massifs, without reading them as an interruption in the continuity of space… Space to the Chinese is not composed of defined enclosures as it is in Western perception. It is a real but fluid medium of space and time in which the attention encounters phenomena. And since phenomena are to the Chinese truly "appearances" rather than solid bodies whose space-context indicates an absolute substance, the Chinese artist is not obliged to define complete bodies in order to convince us of the reality of the space his phenomena occupy… An organization of fragmented parts, a flower, a segment of tree, a piece of rock for ground, provide an arrangement that is believable despite its incompleteness, in a complete system of interconnected volume and void. Variation of scale to define perceptual and physical distance as well as overlap to define in front of and behind are all that is needed to create believability and completeness.*" This is due to the

fact that in Chinese art as in oriental philosophy, the void is not absence but an actual space that permits to access knowledge.

On the other hand, the European artists depict all aspects of space in order to define a believable context for the figures, by "*looking through their ceramic surface*"; they need to provide a detailed, complete image in order for it to be convincing. While the oriental artist uses the emptiness of space surrounding figures to define another spatial context that is nonetheless believable, by considering this empty space within the overall composition and the relationship among various parts, these often large areas of emptiness, gaps of void where "*emptiness and whiteness are active ingredients of the image*". These "*empty*" spaces surrounding figures in Oriental art are nonetheless perceived as real space, while the same formal use of empty space in Western art imitating Oriental art (on early Meissen porcelain, for example) is never believable as actual space but reads as void, empty ground. This is a crucial distinction between two very different and contrasting modes of pictorial space and must be clearly understood, since oriental ceramics has had such a profound influence on European (and world) ceramic traditions as well as other decorative arts.

In stark contrast, in 1960's China, during the Cultural Revolution, a large number of ceramic objects were produced for propaganda principles. Interestingly enough, these political images on pots have none of the sophistication we would expect to find on Oriental porcelain. Following the rigid principles of Socialist Realism, a Western style coming from European Academism of the worst kind, these Chinese pots are actually stylistically European at the level of surface treatment and their pictorial space, specifically the relationship of the highly defined figures to the bare, empty ground, is totally unconvincing and non oriental. These bastard objects are nonetheless important cultural archives of a specific time in Chinese history and they probably are the most important ceramic objects, historically if not aesthetically, produced in China in the 20th Century, despite their stylistic crudeness and kitschy-ness. This constant, unending dialogue between diverse ceramic cultures, notably along the East/West axis, provides for the endless influences where painters in Europe emulate potters in China and potters in China do the same with European works, usually misreading, misquoting and misappropriating from each other to create hybrids that are at times somewhat monstrous but never boring.

In Greek pottery, it is sometime noticeable that the frame cuts a figure, which is then perceived as entering or exiting the scene. This elision (partial representation) or even ellipsis (something is missing, absent) represents the use of omission to actually evoke, by absence, what is not actually shown. This conceit of incompleteness of the image is not found in oriental representation to the same degree. In oriental pictorial space, incompleteness is manifested by total absence, where a large area of the images are left empty, totally "blank", with a degree of spatial sophistication and believability never found in the bare, empty ground of the depicted scenes on Greek Attic pottery. The sophistication of representations in Greek pottery is of a different kind than the sophistication of oriental pictorialism in ceramics, one being descriptive (the Greek), the other evocative (the Chinese). Both use allegory, the representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms, very effectively in order to engage, beyond obvious depiction, with symbolism.

The frame, the “cartouche” on Greek pots creates a pictorial depth-box where representations, figures, objects, interior or exterior spaces, can all be organized logically and believably. This depth-box acts as if the image was breaching “through” the pot, penetrating the form and at times, the image even appears as if located “inside” the pot itself, and in some rare and extreme cases, the image may even appear to float in front of the surface of the object. The realism of the scene depicted is often contrasted with decorative, abstracted devices like floral patterns, organic or geometric elements, at times even architectural references, positioned elsewhere on the surface of the pot, often reframing the frame for emphasis. On Greek pottery this dialectic between figuration and ornamentation is reinforced by the figure/ground dynamic of the black on red, then red on black formal devices afforded by the materials, the technologies and the particular processes developed by the Greek potters.

The psychological necessity for borders to define space (totally absent in Neolithic art for example) contests the emptiness of undefined spatial experience. Frames are highly reassuring by controlling our perception. Our perception craves borders, if only provided by the distance in how far the eye can see, the horizon that encloses our perceived reality. Borders are psychologically comforting, which may explain their success and efficiency in the two great arts of borders, painting and photography and related media practices.

On Pictorial Space(s) in Ceramics:

Images on ceramics, usually on pots, behave in a particular way, peculiar and largely unique to the art. When a “flat” image is composed over a convex or concave surface, it is distorted by the interior and/or exterior shape of the vessel, somewhat like a photographic lens distorts the photograph. In fact, and despite the strange habit of linking ceramics to sculpture, the two have precious little in common beyond tri-dimensionality. For the sake of the argument, I am willing to make the case that sculpture and ceramics actually have nothing in common at all, conceptually. Sculptural Ceramics have little to nothing to do with other types of sculptures yet they are conceptually related to all other types of ceramics (functional, decorative, architectural, etc.) much more than they are to sculpture, per se. It could be convincingly argued that ceramics has much more in common with photography than with sculpture. The relationships between photography and ceramics connect the process of making photographs from a negative print to a positive image, while molds (a negative space) in ceramics are used to cast original, positive clay forms in multiples. Also, when transferring a visual experience to photography, a drastic aesthetic and perceptual shift happens from subject to print, mostly but not exclusively through the composition created by the borders. This aesthetic and perceptual shift is as noticeable and as important as the shift that happens between unfired and fired clay and/or glaze. The photographer, like the ceramist, must learn to adapt and compensate for that shift. There is also a strong domestic connection to the real life of real people, photography often acting as a repository for the memories of daily events and activities that are themselves often connected to ceramic objects, in various ways. A photograph is also a fragment of a larger

whole, and ceramics in its fragility often, if not always, ends as a shard, a fragment. The photographic fragment is less violent (or is it?), certainly better behaved than the ceramic fragment. Both retain and transmit important information, knowledge and experiences we would not have otherwise. At the same time, ceramic objects in their three-dimensionality and continuous surface showing only one aspect at a time, are very difficult to actually photograph and even more difficult to experience photographically. Other art forms, based on image making, are meant meanwhile, almost by definition, to be experienced in photographs, if they are not themselves photographs to begin with.

The flattening effect of documentary photography (is there any other kind?) is even more evident with images in the interior of deep bowls. The full effect of pots that can only be perceived and appreciated from real objects and that cannot be replicated or communicated photographically, something we tend to forget when we look at photographs of pots, which distorts and prevents a true appreciation. The main dynamic of these deep bowls is actually based on the contradictory aspects between the seemingly flat, visually bi-dimensional pictorial surface as it is shaped by the deeply tri-dimensional, concave interior space of the bowl. The best examples make great use of this dynamism.

The distinctiveness of the volumetric form and the surface as conceptually distinct from the form in ceramics operates on at least three levels: formally (the form of the form is different from the form of the image, in term of shape, color, texture, composition, etc.), aesthetically (form and surface are perceived, experienced and appreciated differently) and conceptually (one is volumetric and 3-D while the other is perceived as flat and 2-D). Ceramics has more in common with photography (and with printmaking as well) than with any other art forms in other ways still: both photography and ceramics are mechanical and chemical at the level of process; both imply series, reproduction and multiples; both are archival in nature, one, photography, with a relation to time based in the instant, the other, ceramics, grounded in eternity; and both use the parallax distortion of space in pictorial representation. This parallax distortion of space on convex pottery surfaces is an important characteristic of Greek vase painting for example and is at times used very effectively by the Greek vase painters to accentuate spatial depth. This distortion is quite different on concave surfaces, since the single viewpoint afforded by the interior space makes it possible to flatten the interior space reasonably successfully. This distorted, lens like, spherical surface of pots and other ceramic forms is again rather specific to ceramics pictorial space. This convex space on the exterior of pots or the concave space on certain interiors (bowls, plates and dishes, usually) distorts the representation they hold in ways that are specific and unique to ceramics, to a large degree.

The overall, continuous surface:

Things get equally interesting on the tri-dimensional exterior of vase forms where the image is all around the object. Depending on viewpoint, again, the expected flatness of images is greatly contested on pottery forms. Potters have used various strategies to counteract this effect, restricting the image to one side of the vessel or again, articulating the scene within a reserved, framed, bordered area, a cartouche. This reserved area is often rectangular (in spirit, at least,

since the edges of the rectangle are actually four curves meeting at the corners) or circular, oval and in Rococo Europe, a dynamic series of curved, opposite curlicues and arabesques. This rocaille frame, a very dynamic form of framing, while being very common in decorative arts since its inception, never really found its place in representational art which tends to prefer the geometry of the predictable square, and again very rarely as well the circle, also quite common in decorative arts from the Renaissance, on bowls, plates, etc. The European pictorial space on ceramics also tends to favor this conceit of the square frame, creating a distinct, defined, separate depth-box on the face of the pottery form, distinguishing a space for representation while the remaining surface of the vessel is usually reserved for decorative effects, for example a flat color surface, organized patterns or floral motifs. This depth-box can then be composed more clearly around conventional figure/ground relationships with elements in the foreground, middle ground and background (more often than not, the bare ground of the glazed clay body itself). The 3-D illusion of the depth-box combined in a dialectic with the 2-D of the overall design surrounding it constitutes the basic problem to be solved. The flatter decoration surrounding the depth-box often suggests a theatrical proscenium with arches, where the represented scene it contains seems to belong more to a literary dream space, an elaborate fiction, than to reality. This tension between the reality of the object and the unreality of the image is another operative tension of images on pottery forms. I paraphrase Philip Rawson freely here.

While the main system to organize narrative scenes on pottery forms remains the use of various framing devices, either independent from the form or articulating it in various ways, they always serve to isolate the image from the object itself. Another method consists in covering the whole surface of the form with a continuous picture, without borders, with no perceived beginning and no end (although, more often than not, there is still a preferred side, a privileged viewpoint). The only limits to the image are provided by the top and bottom of the vessel, and by the fact that the image endlessly repeats, in a loop, as we circle the object or rotate it in our hands. In fact, the image is then experienced not only in space but also in time, and in many ways cinematically. Such pre-filmic narrative spaces, like those found as lateral continuous images on vessels, imply the displacement of the viewer in space, while in cinema, this displacement only takes place in our imagination, as we remain in place in our seats.

When an image is framed, as we have seen, the implication is that it continues, if only conceptually, beyond the borders of the frame. But when an image is depicted all over a continuous shape like it does on the exterior of a pot, the space defined by the vessel does not extend beyond its borders, provided by the constantly shifting silhouette of the object. This is a very different phenomenological experience than the representation provided by a painting or, more believably and expectedly, by a photograph. The continuous all over image on the exterior of a vessel is a self-contained space different from the self-contained space of other forms of image making. It generates a continuous, panoramic loop that requires, that necessitates a three-dimensional experience, an actual movement of the viewer a full 360 degrees around the object, or, more likely, a tactile experience where to object is rotated for 360 degrees by the hands. When one actually experiences a landscape (for example), one is located at the center of the scene, which surrounds us completely. To see the whole view, one must rotates on the

axis of our body by 360 degrees, to return eventually to the point of origin. Our experience then is that of the Panopticon, the 19th Century utopian prison system where one guard, acting as a singular gaze located at the center could survey the whole population of prisoners, positioned in cells placed in a circular architecture, all around. As analyzed by Michel Foucault, it implies a position of control, of surveillance, an exercise in ownership and of absolute power. The Panopticon has one (rotating) viewpoint and all the views it provides are identical and fixed. This is also the authoritative viewpoint of photography and mediated technologies. On the other hand, the panorama of a continuous landscape represented on the exterior of a vessel operates as a reverse Panopticon, and implies a reversal of viewpoint, a perceptual contradiction. It provides the viewer/user with a visual, physical experience that gives the body, the eye, the impression of looking **out**, when in fact one is looking **in**, into the object and into the image, which affects the aesthetic and psychological impact of the work. Your eye and your body may be looking **in**, into the pot, but your mind processes the information, following preceding experiences, as looking **out**, from our body into the distant landscape. This creates a phenomenological reversal, which is, subtly yet actually disruptive. The perceptual viewpoint is reversed and the subject position is reversed. I think that this visual, aesthetic experience is unique and specific to realistic, descriptive representations as presented as continuous on the exterior of vessels and pottery forms. This pictorial device that implies a reversal of the normal, usual visual experience is again specific to the particular relation between surface and form found in ceramics. Similar to the cinematic experience, the image on the surface of the vase seems to be projected from the dark interior, like a static movie (!) on a continuous, circular wall, all around us. Like in cinema, the darkness inside the vase makes possible the light and brightness, the shape and colors visible on the exterior wall of the vase, as if on a screen. Such images and visual experiences on massive, solid objects would be psychologically unthinkable. While we remain, obviously, located outside the vase, physically, our perception operates as if we were experiencing the image while located inside the vase. It requires an imaginary displacement of viewpoint to operate effectively. This experience may remain instinctive but when it is intellectualized, it becomes disturbingly powerful. Of course and unfortunately, ceramic objects rarely, if ever, live up to this potential fully, so far, anyway. This generosity of the continuously changing surface provides different information from different viewpoints and provides for a variety of experiences, while stressing the three-dimensionality of the object and the 360 degrees nature of the work, with no preferred side or viewpoint, no real beginning and no end. The only “rational” and “realistic” aspects retained in these types of pictorial ceramic spaces (and they most often represent landscapes and even more rarely with figures) is the expected logic of the top and the bottom, the superior rim and the base of the object, where the sky and the ground keep their respective place. In this respect alone, the vase is more lifelike, closer to a real lived experience, similar to the one created by the renewed vanishing point as we turn our head and body around to scan a scene. The Panopticon viewpoint of static, framed images is convincing and highly effective, yet remains non-critical by directing experience and imposing interpretation. It is the viewpoint of framed images, of mediated technologies, as well as various literary texts like those of journalism, editorials, pamphlets and theory, texts that may be creative but do not require imagination, necessarily. The single viewpoint implies control and dependency, authority and hierarchy. The reverse Panopticon found on ceramic vessels is ambiguous and mobile, and it leaves interpretation open ended. It remains critical. It is the

domain of poetry, of imaginative literature, but also of certain types of objects, of pottery for example, and of practices grounded in the transmission of real experiences in a metaphorical manner. The mundane, familiar, ordinary, domestic context where this happens usually prevents us from this realization, through prejudice. Yet, while lacking the efficiency one expects from "ordinary" images, it does implies agency and freedom in experience. Few unfortunately, either makers or users, realize this and take advantage if it. Grayson Perry as a potter is a potent example of someone who makes use of that potential fully, probably intuitively.

Contemporary Examples:

Philip Rawson, again, makes another very perceptive observation about ceramics pictorial space. I quote: *"One interesting incidental point about pictorial decoration in ceramics is that human figures which actually seem to be looking "out of" the pot and addressing themselves to the spectator, are very rare…It seems to have been almost always necessary to avoid any sense of direct human address, so as to preserve, no doubt, the existential identity of the pot body from too gross an encroachment by the illusionist impact of its pictures. For the pot as a whole object to address itself to the beholder with an organic presence represents a radical further step in a transformation process".*

Rawson of course is writing this in 1971, way before contemporary ceramics would develop to challenge so many of the principles and formal criteria he establishes in his book to evaluate "quality" in ceramics and pottery forms. Before someone like Grayson Perry could challenge this very principle of direct human address by an image on a pot, the principal operative characteristic of Perry's work. In this work, we are directly confronted by the disturbing scene on his vessels, to challenge our relationship with these figures and create a direct, personal identification with them. Perry's work uses the particular spatial nature of ceramic surfaces in a variety of very interesting ways: the overall organization of the picture(s) all around the vase (and they are almost always vases); the use of layering, sometimes leading to deliberate visual chaos, which positions the images ambiguously in relation to the surface by locating them visually at various perceived distances within the form itself. He also succeeds in disintegrating the very surface of the pot completely at times, by making that surface appear as a ground on which the figures stands, locating their presence "within" the vase form itself in illusionary transparency of the surface, which dematerializes. This was achieved historically by the use of the "depth-box", in which the image was perceived as penetrating the form. Perry does this, unusually, without recourse to the depth-box, by positioning his figures on an ambiguous dark ground where they "float". This is somewhat similar to the vase painting of the "Berlin Painter" in 5th Century BC in Athens, who also, characteristically, used this method of disembodied spatial positioning, of de-contextualization to ambiguously connect his (single) figures with their surroundings, which are, altogether, the surface of the vase and the physical space which the figure itself inhabits. Thus, the ground where the figured stands represents simultaneously two realities, one the pottery surface, the other the physical space around a figure. This visual disintegration of the pottery surface is particular to ceramics pictorial space and interestingly, very rarely used totally effectively. The best example I know, using the depth-box, is a Staffordshire porcelain vase from 1851 by Charles Meigh and Sons, where a representation of

the Crystal Palace in London appears to penetrate the belly of the vase, due to the strong, deep, one point perspective at play in the image. It is a sophisticated use of the potential for ceramic form and surface to engage dynamically and more potters should take advantage of the possibilities it offers. Another effective and unusual example can be found in American Art Pottery (Rookwood, 1885), where portraits (usually of Native American Indians) are realistically, almost photographically painted with under glaze colored clay slips on a very dark brown clay ground, which is then covered with a very shiny, brilliant, clear glaze, giving the illusion that the figure is located “within” the pot and we are looking at it through a lens, as if prisoner behind a window, where they nonetheless project great dignity.

Perry usually dispenses with the use of framing devices that would imprison his images. He instead makes magisterial use of multiple layers and uses the overall, continuous surface of the form to great efficiency. When he does frame an image, it is due to the fact that the reference is photographic and framing becomes essential for the reference to operate.

Another excellent example of a ceramic artist who has exploited the pictorial space of ceramics with particular efficiency would be Michael Frimkess, from Los Angeles. He is, in my opinion, one of the most important and influential artists working in ceramics in the second half on the 20th Century, along with Pablo Picasso, and his influence, at times unaware for the very people who are following in his footsteps, is continuing into the present. He was one of the first in the 1960’s, with Robert Arneson in sculptural ceramics, to introduce obvious political commentary in his work and the very first as well to use a vocabulary of stereotypical pottery forms from the history of ceramics, which so many others have been doing since (Grayson Perry, for example). This use of historical forms, instead of inventing new ones, creates a reference to the history of ceramics, obviously, but also to its universality and timelessness, and it remains, probably, his most important contribution to the field. His work operates around the concepts of excess and reversal. The iconography of his vessels combines cultural icons, like Santa Claus as Hitler, Uncle Sam chasing four nude women, representing the four races, white, yellow, red and black, and Buddha as a Jazz musician, etc., within contemporary scenes related to ecology, racial relations and music, among others. By appropriating forms and surfaces and reorganizing them in a challenging, yet effective new combination, Frimkess shows us the irrelevancy of authorship and the necessity of a personal style (the obsession with creating new forms, etc.), the unimportance of materials (he uses stoneware to imitate either porcelain or earthenware), of techniques and processes (he throws the forms extremely thin, forms that would have been originally cast or hand-built) as end in themselves, as well as the uselessness of dates and facts in assessing works of art, by putting instead the emphasis where it needs to be, on concepts and contexts, on experiences and meanings.

In Frimkess and Perry’s work, the combination of classical, conventional, familiar pottery shapes with disturbing, challenging, confrontational images on their surface, an effective contradiction takes place between the expectations created by the innocent form and the shock created by the difficulty of the images on the surfaces. If these very images were simply drawn on paper or painted on canvas instead of on pottery forms, their efficiency to challenge and confront us would be greatly diminished and the work would not be nearly as interesting or have received

such wide critical (and commercial) reception, despite the fact that the pots themselves (as meaningful forms) are usually, if not always, ignored by the art criticism analyzing and contextualizing this work, the same way forms are largely absent from the scholarship on Greek Attic pottery. Nonetheless, it is the pottery forms that create the proper context for the work to operate so efficiently.

In German artist Daniel Kruger's ceramics, the use of photography is also very interesting. Most if not all of the images he uses come from newspapers and magazines. Some of them are painted directly on vessels, usually within the conventional, historical space for representation on pots (themselves classical in spirit, yet loosely, crudely fashioned, deliberately), a space defined by a border, a frame, a cartouche. At times, the frame is actually the outline of the vessel itself, notably with plates and dishes, a form of framing images specific to vessels and to pottery. On other pieces however, the image is a digitally printed transfer decal combining photography with ceramic materials and processes, giving the image permanency- something not present in the original image, photography being a most fleeting and impermanent medium, certainly compared to ceramics, which is intrinsically archival. These images now become frozen in time, to be transmitted to a hypothetical future, one that will reinterpret them much differently than we do now. His efficient use of media references (photography and printmaking as well as newspapers and magazines) combined with the medium specificity of ceramics and pottery forms, all come together in a subtle yet effective critique of mediation, and the seductions of mediation, in contemporary culture. The progressive transfer from flesh to photograph, from photograph to print in a magazine, from paper print to ceramic print, all these passages from soft, living, warm flesh to hard, cold, fragile clay, all serve to immortalize these images of human fleetingness.

Montreal ceramist Richard Milette needs to be reassessed here as well. If many artists use pictorial spaces as a mean to define narrative(s) in ceramics and pottery surfaces, Milette's work operates around a contestation of narrative in art understanding and appreciation. He has explored this negativity of narratives and our obsession with narratives, in a wide variety of works. In a series of Hydria shapes, exact copies of the Greek originals, on which Milette has also copied and painted, within the rectangular cartouche found at the expected, familiar location on the vase, a true size yet cropped fragment from an European history painting, implying a specific, necessary narrative content. By quoting from existing works and by choosing a small fragment from a much larger work while keeping enough iconic information to permit a possible reading of the image (a finger, a piece of clothing, a detail of an object, etc.), he challenges our incessant need to originality and to create meaning through a logical narrative, the narrative of story telling or the more pernicious narratives of history, particularly here, art history. These pots present us with a new model for appreciation and understanding, beyond the necessity of conventional discourses around art and art objects. They provide us with a potent example that ceramics has its own specificity and requires it be understood using standards and methodologies that are its very own.

In conclusion:

This relation form/surface, when it engages with representation, implies specific “ceramic pictorial spaces” which manifests themselves quite differently from culture to culture yet remains specific to ceramics as an autonomous art form.

Another interesting, fascinating category would be that of images of pots on pots, and pots as images in still-life compositions, when their performative, practical reality is subjugated to their function as image, as representation of themselves, where they become more imaginary than tangible. As we have previously seen, the pot itself in its exterior surface acts as a frame, and when a pot is represented on a pot, two distinct frames come together, the flat frame of the depicted pot on the volumetric frame of the actual pot. This volume to flat, then flat to volume dichotomy is what makes pots on pots (a conceit found all over the world since Antiquity) so effective, and their repeated use so fascinating.

When an image, a narrative scene is placed on a pottery form, the image is created in ways that are specific to ceramics, at the level of materials and processes and techniques, but most importantly conceptually. Such images on ceramics also behave differently, in their relation to the form they modify, than it would in any other context. They are also experienced differently, visually but most importantly conceptually and engage with signification and meaning in a particular, specific way as well. A descriptive image on a ceramic object has its own logic, its own aesthetics and its own relation to reality and representation, different from the operative workings of images in other contexts.

The artists presented here and their works remind us as well that in order for art to be meaningful it must by necessity be critical as well. It is not sufficient anymore to make pretty pictures or beautiful pots, whatever stories they may be telling. It remains essential to remember that what is really important is not what story is being told, but instead how such a story is told.

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