CONSIDERATIONS OF FORM AND CONTENT
RELATED TO LOW-FIRE CERAMIC SCULPTURE

A Thesis
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by
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DEDICATION

The author wishes to dedicate this thesis to Frank Ross, whose influence is strongly felt and whose friendship is greatly valued.
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INTRODUCTION

Some birds flew into my head and died there. They became clay and physical reflections of a state of mind. Later, they were no longer reflections but an image which I enjoyed putting into various contexts. The first dead birds were in contexts which implied they were edible; bird in soup, bird in bread, bird as shish-ka-bob, bird inside bagel, etc. "Obviously done by a vegetarian," the lady said. There actually was nothing obvious about it, in my opinion, except that they existed.

Considerations of form and content involved in the type of art-making shown in the plates below are abundant. Some of these considerations are applicable to any type of visual art, while others are unique to contemporary low-fire ceramic sculpture. My purpose in this writing is to examine some of those considerations of form and content which I believe to have been most essential to me in producing the sculpture pieces contained in my thesis show and pictured below. In doing so, I will present some concepts which I believe to be critical to the production of low-fire ceramic sculpture in general.
CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO CONTENT

It is my opinion that the piece should contain several different levels on which it could be considered, not only by myself, but by the viewer as well. For it to be capable of producing only one type of response, or one emotion, or one frame of reference is for it to be weak and rather boring, both to produce and to view. The excitement is in the openness, in the fact that it allows me to be someone different every day for as long as it is in existence.

Birds being fondued can be considered at a rather obvious level, which is that they are being fondued even though that is not a normal state of affairs. The response to that concept could be amusement, bewilderment, or revolt, but if initial response marked the end of the thought, then the idea would appear to me to be not worth the effort involved in bringing it to a physical existence.

A second aspect which I consider to be necessary is that any statement which is made be a personal one. To arbitrarily select images for the purpose of assured response, sensationalism, or for any other purpose is to attempt to deal emotively with an idea which has no emotional bearing on the producer. Only thoughtless art-making can result from using subject matter which has no relevance to the personal experiences of the producer.
A third consideration regarding content with which I feel obliged to deal is one which also involves craftsmanship. Specifically, it is a balance between the two notions of content and execution of the content.

Craftsmanship is undoubtedly a necessary element to the expression of ideas. To feel the necessity of a specific form in a composition is to feel the necessity of being able to make the imagined form tangible. However, to produce a form which serves no contextual purpose is a useless effort. There must be a reason for its existence, a reason which is somehow reflective of the state of mind of the artist and is brought about through an intellectual process. A dependence upon craftsmanship or ability to manipulate materials without the presence of a statement seems to imply a lack of content. No expression is involved, but only a show of manual dexterity. One can experience involvement and satisfaction from good craftsmanship, but for the artist to involve himself totally with it is to deny himself any kind of emotional or intellectual statement.
CONSIDERATIONS RELATED TO FORM

The discussion to follow will deal more directly with my own work. Most of the ideas pursued are quite general in nature and apply to visual arts in general, but because of their importance to me in arriving at the visual statements contained in my thesis show, I want to discuss them as they relate specifically to my work.

The relationship of each form to every other form in the piece is of great significance. A sense of continuity develops from a use of similar forms, and variety within the continuity comes from variation of sizes, distances, and, in the case of low-relief pieces, of heights.

By way of example, I ask the reader to refer to Plate IV, titled Bird Bread. The plate, being the largest and most colorfully prominent shape, establishes a sort of precedent for other forms contained in this piece. The blue circles on the edge of the plate further emphasize the precedent. The knife, being a linear, rather inorganic form, serves as a contrast to the roundness of the plate, and its straight-line quality is repeated in the butter pats on the other side of the plate. The butter pats, however, are not in complete contrast to the round quality because they are arranged in such a way as to follow the direction of the curvature of the plate without conforming to it exactly.

The loaf divides the plate at approximately a ninety degree angle to the knife, but the division is kept from being too sharp by the
slices, which have fallen a little to one side. The overall shape of the loaf, having a curvature on top and relatively straight sides, serves as a kind of transition between the roundness of the plate and the linear quality of the knife and butter pats. The position which the fallen slices have taken emphasizes this transition because the rounded edges of the slices are close to and nearly parallel with the rounded edge of the plate.

The projecting bird parts serve the formal function of alleviating the rather strict horizontal-vertical appearance of the rest of the composition. This contrast is not only a formal consideration but is related to the content in that the regularity or "normalness" of the bread-butter-knife-on-plate phenomenon is not disturbed or affected by the apparent absurdity of birds having been baked into the bread.

Finally, the very delicate and small quality of the bird parts is in contrast to the largeness of the loaf and plate, while the knife and butter pats take a medium position in the variety of sizes.

An additional aspect of form which I consider to have been of great importance in my work is that of texture. I found the contrast of textures to be an effective means of emphasizing content as well as a contribution to formal interest. As an example I will use the piece titled Treasure and shown in Plates VII and VIII.

The major contrast shown in this piece is between the colorfulness and glossiness of the box, denoting it as an object of preciousness and elegance, and the bird, whose flat black coloring denotes his absence of worth. The absurdity of the situation depicted is therefore emphasized by the use of texture.
The lining of the box is a carrying through of the colors used on the exterior but, at the same time, a change in texture, which was done with the intention of giving both unity and variety to the whole. The crushed velvet, antique key, and crackle glaze used under the gold luster were all chosen for the purpose of associating are with the box and its "treasure."

A concept which became a major force behind my work was one which again could be considered a formal element but is also involved in content. I became very interested in creating contrasts between elements which may be termed whimsical and ones which are synonymous with complacency, formality, and generally traditional states of affairs. In doing this, I intended to create a kind of discord which was open to interpretation as either revolting, or humorous, or confusing, or whatever.

I refer the reader to Plate III, in which a dead bird is situated, along with a knife and fork, on a plate decorated with a purple and silver rim and some rather delicate-looking violets. This is perhaps the most obvious example, with the drab, dead, brown bird seen in conjunction with the pretty plate, symbolic of a pretty type of life. The highly ornate silverware, by its presence, further emphasizes the contrast and adds to the discord by being in the position for eating. In all of the pieces using the dead bird image, the feet of the birds, being in a ram-rod position, become an element of humor and add to the contrast of the matter depicted.

Briefly, some further examples of the whimsical versus controlled issue are: (1) the dead birds and cracked eggs placed against the
tradition-conscious, domestic appearance of the background in *Family Portrait* (Plate IX), (2) the "super burger and fries" image on a regal mounting of velvet and gold frame (Plate XV), and (3) the overly-ornate, gold-lustered, glittering four jars (Plate X) which, after all, are for flour and for sugar and for coffee and for tea.

The colors which I used, because of their rather literal relationship to either actual objects or traditional concepts regarding color, were necessarily chosen with attention focused primarily on their formal function within the composition. Hue and value patterns were considered so that use of color would augment the effects produced by previously discussed considerations of form.

For example, on the piece shown in Plates XI and XII and titled *Good-bye, Columbus*, the great amount of form and color activity in the garbage is contrasted against the mass of the cans, which are essentially one color, and also against the monochromatic but undulating shape of the ground. The color complexity of the cross-section of ground is reminiscent of the complication involved in the garbage but does not approach it in color activity.
CONCLUSION

Current low-fire ceramic sculpture appears to lend itself to the abundant use of imagery, bold colors, slick techniques, and a large consciousness of materials. Used as vehicles for expression rather than conclusions in themselves, these elements can augment the production of uniquely exciting forms. The conclusion that techniques do not make art but that individuals do is not a revolutionary one, but it nevertheless applies.
Plates I and II

Is It Soup Yet?

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, luster, violet decals; approximately 7½ inches in diameter)
Plate III

Untitled

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, luster, violet decals; stainless tableware glued on; approximately 11 inches in diameter)
Plate IV

Bird Bread

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, luster, hobby enamel; approximately 11 inches in diameter)
Plate V

Bagel Bird

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, hobby enamel; approximately 11 inches in diameter)
Plate VI

Bird Fondue

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, luster; fondue forks, metal rim and legs on fondue pot, and candle fastened down with epoxy glue; approximately 27 inches long)
Plates VII and VIII

Treasure

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, luster, hobby enamel, velvet and gold braid lining, metal hinges and wind-up key; approximately 15 inches long)
Plate IX

Family Portrait

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, pearl luster, hobby enamel, woven cord and tassel; approximately 21 inches long)
Plate X

For Flour, For Sugar, For Coffee, For Tea

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, lusters; largest jar approximately 11 inches tall)
Plates XI and XII

Good-bye, Columbus

(Acrylic paint, hobby enamel, paper and coffee grounds glued on, metal chain; approximately 22 inches long)
Plate XIII

We’re Number One

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, luster, hobby enamel, ribbon, velvet ground, metal frame; 12 by 13 inches)
Plate XIV

The Winning Smile

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, lusters, velvet ground, metal frame; 12 by 18 inches)
Plate XV

For Outstanding Accomplishment in the World of
Freeze-dried, Quick-fix, One-step, Fast-frozen,

Just Add Water

(Commercial cone 06 glaze, luster, hobby enamel, ribbon, velvet ground,
metal frame; 12 by 24 inches)
Plate XVI

"I is the first letter of the alphabet, the first word of the language, the first thought of the mind, the first object of affection. In grammar it is a pronoun of the first person and singular number. Its plural is said to be we, but how there can be more than one myself is doubtless clearer to the grammarians than it is to the author. Conception of two myselfs is difficult, but fine."

--Taken from
The Devil's Dictionary
by Ambrose Bierce

(Commercial core 06 glaze, luster, hobby enamel, velvet, mirror; approximately 30 inches long)
APPENDIX

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Clay Body

The clay used in all pieces pictured was a standard stoneware throwing body composed of the following ingredients:

- 25 lbs. ball clay
- 25 lbs. goldart
- 100 lbs. fireclay
- 25 lbs. small grog

Firing

The first pieces of the series were fired in a gas kiln to approximately cone 06 for the bisque firing. The results were a porous body which readily held glaze but which was also very susceptible to breakage. The majority of the pieces, however, were bisque fired to cone 4 in an oxidation-atmosphere gas kiln. These pieces were, of course, much more durable than the ones which had been bisque fired to only cone 06. Applying glaze to their less porous surfaces was more tedious but still feasible.

Glaze firing was also done in an oxidation-atmosphere gas kiln to cone 06. Ample ventilation and a quickened firing schedule (6-7 hours) were helpful in getting the best results in reds and some types of orange.
Some pieces were fired a third time (in either gas or electric kiln) to cone 019 for lusters and decals. The lusters work best when applied thinly with a clean brush, preferably one used only for that purpose, and fired with abundant kiln ventilation during the first hour or so.

It is my experience that pearl luster must be allowed to dry sufficiently before firing, in order to prevent discoloration. The best decal results are obtained if the decals are applied with a squeegee (for the purpose of removing air bubbles) and allowed to dry at least overnight before firing.

Glazing

All glazes used were of the commercial low-Fire (cone 05) type. Special attention must be paid to their classification if they are to be used on eating surfaces or food containers. Most commercial glaze companies supply a list of their glazes which are deemed acceptable, by government standards, for those purposes.

At least two, but most often three or four, coats of glaze were applied. Reds and some varieties of orange are most successful if applied very heavily (at least four coats). In the application of low-Fire glaze, it is necessary to make certain that at least a hairline crack is left between colors used on the same piece so that running between colors does not occur.
Addition of Other Materials

Some color surfaces were obtained with the use of either hobby enamels or acrylic paint. Acrylic mat or gloss medium can be used to reverse the reflective quality of either of these two types of paint.

Fabric was added to some pieces, in all cases by the use of spray adhesive.

Metal objects or mirrors are part of several of the pieces. Epoxy glue served very well in fastening these materials to glazed and other surfaces.