Visual Conversations, in Tangible Poems

THESIS

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Abstract

This document is a description of my artistic process, interests, motivations, and conclusions reached from the preceding two years of my studio research in ceramics, from the fall of 2010, to the spring of 2012. A chronology of my work, beginning with a process-related shift that ultimately ignited new interests in ideas surrounding pattern, order, materiality, and visual relationships, reveals the heart of the issues I am passionate about exploring.

This research has shown me the importance of order in spatial relationships and visual expression, the role and meaning of pattern, and the need for authenticity and ownership in my work. It has revealed the dynamics of the creative process, its ability to assist in the articulation of content, and its cyclic nature.
Dedication

For My wife and daughter,
Sara and Hannah
Vita

March 1997 ...........................................Lakeland High School

2006..........................................................B.S. Painting, Eastern Oregon University

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Fields of Study

Major Field:  Art
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Chapter 1: Referencing Infinity

I create object-based compositions that simultaneously serve conceptual and utilitarian functions. Through intuition, process, and material consciousness, I strive to use visual elements, such as pattern, unity, order, and materiality, as a poet uses words.

Ancient patterns were made from tiles called tessellations, the tiles created a grid and we can still see this grid pattern everywhere in architecture. I am intrigued by this genesis of pattern in early architecture. The grid is intriguing to me, in that, it’s the simplest way to divide space equally on a plane. I first began using the grid in my work years ago, in painting and drawing, and I would use it to change the scale of an image or to render an image more accurately on a large surface.

I find that pattern can provide a sense of harmony and order, and yet can reference infinity and can even seem chaotic. I work in sets largely to use the objects themselves to reference these emotive facets of pattern. It’s interesting that the French origin of the word pattern, ‘patron’, refers to a theme or set of recurring or similar objects. Patterns in nature are often chaotic, never exactly repeating but consisting from many similar elements. I’m intrigued by this characteristic of natural pattern and have found it expressed in my process and subsequent works. The conscious decision to explore these interests from the beginning never really happened; rather they evolved out of working with the materials and being aware of what was happening before my eyes. I am driven to express unity and order in my work because they also promote a feeling of
harmony and serenity. It may seem naïve, but I feel that these are things we need that are ever dwindling in our competitive, busy, global society. Then again, time is cyclic, there are patterns there too. In any case, this is what I feel I have to give the world at this time; it’s what I have to say. As Kandinsky says in his writings, “the artist must have something to say for mastery over form is not his goal, but rather the adapting of form to its inner meaning” (1977, p. 54).

My interest in materiality comes from its ability to seduce the viewer into closer observation and even physical interaction. I find that certain materials can invite touch, conjure up nostalgic thoughts and feelings, while speaking of process and the maker. In my work materials, usually porcelain and wood, often reference simplicity and natural beauty while emphasizing the importance of craft. Physical attributes like hardness and softness, warmth and coolness, are also woven into visual conversations and tangible poems. I found that this drew me into the work, allowing me to find more meaning and depth in process. Additionally, it gave me more to ponder over time. I like making work that invites recurrent use as well as continual, growing familiarity and insight.
Chapter 2: Notions of Reclamation

The body of work that resulted from the past year of intense focus on these issues began at a moment when I was uncertain about what direction to take and what questions I was truly passionate about confronting. My interest in materiality was evident then as it is now. My purpose was to literally push the material to the breaking point. Working primarily on the potter’s wheel making lidded jars, cups, bowls, and plates, the clay was mixed with organic materials like, pine needles and saw dust, as well as coarse sand, granular stone, and my own pottery shards. Glass, wire filaments from old electric kilns, and other items found their way into the clay. I was interested in erasing the line between utilitarian and sculptural form, and that between art and craft.

Figure 1. Lidded Jar, 8” x 10”
One morning, in the fall of 2011, I was doing my morning studio cleanup and discovered a discarded plaster mold for a cup form. It seemed to be a shell of a pint glass or mass-produced tumbler so I decided to cast a few cups in hopes for a spark of inspiration. I made many cups and found solace in working with multiples. The act of creation becomes a daily ritual where the familiar finds a pulse and where constants, like simple forms and industrial process, allow for experimentation in areas of surface and presentation. The harmonious contrast between the trace of the machine interwoven with my own touch harkens, in its own humble way, to notions of yin and yang, or the harmonious balance of cosmic opposites. As I worked in this rhythmic process, I found notions of reclamation, and even redemption, where the craftsman is taking back something he once owned that gave him a sense of purpose and pride.

As I continued casting these cups, they began to multiply and gather on my studio work table. I was captivated by this process of slip casting, which was relatively new to me. The casting slip itself had an allure about it, it was sensuous, a delight to pour. I taught myself how to mix casting slip and make decent molds from plaster. I was so enthralled by the process, its rhythmic pulse, and the unity in form that I persevered through the first few unsuccessful attempts to make slip and molds. The drawbacks to working with casting slip proved to be the amount of time I spent trying to perfect the rim of each cup, which seemed impossible. Also, the molds would wear out, developing pits over a few weeks of constant use. Yet, these challenges provided a greater awareness to the process and materials. Failure is a great teacher.
The minimal quality of these slip cast, porcelain cups allowed me to be more expressive with surface design and presentation. My work prior to this shift was acutely focused on the relationship between form and surface, yet the potential in presentation had not yet been realized. I continued casting cups, and for a time abandoned my use of the potter’s wheel in my studio practice. This shift in process proved to be a healthy change as it gave me new direction in which to explore the issues surrounding the multiple. Adopting a more industrial approach helped to remove the unintended overt reference to abstract expressionist ceramics. Within this shift, I recognized that quiet, simple forms were doing the same thing. In a way this process helped ground me. It gave me an avenue to explore with endless possibilities, yet with slow, incremental, intuitive changes. This process opened up the conversation to speak more poetically about the importance of pattern, materiality, our need for order, and how it all ties together visually.
Chapter 3: A Cyclic Process

With all these identical, white cups, possibilities for surface seemed endless and I began seeing the cups as blanks for surface design. Perhaps it was my experience in painting and drawing that prompted this perception of the surface. At this time I was becoming increasingly interested in the Arts and Crafts Movement and was curious to know more about the views and ideas that spawned it. My decision to appropriate a William Morris wallpaper pattern was spurred by a willingness to connect to, and reference this period of art history. It became my subtle way of bringing the Arts and Crafts ideology to the surface and continuing the conversations that began as a response to the emergency of industry and mass production.

I found another unexpected contrast between man and machine as made evident through process. The wallpaper pattern was also appealing to me because of its simplicity and reference to nature. The Arts and Crafts ideology of design was originally a reaction against the styles that were developed by machine-production, stressing the value of craft. As Adolf Loos once said, “Objects bearing the imprint of the creative craftsman’s hand will always retain their value” (Loos, 1998, p. 150). The movement was also a response to the over indulgence in decoration and the layering of pattern in architecture and design of the Victorian era. I agree with these seminal ideas toward simplicity and the handmade and feel that they apply to today’s social environment just as they did then. Yet, I also see the Arts and Crafts movement, especially William Morris, as responsible for introducing
me to pattern and its dynamic purpose in art and design. Social ideas that shaped the movement related the moral and social health of a nation to the qualities of its architecture and design. Again, I found nobility in purpose with the Arts and Crafts movement. It reflected what I was thinking all along.

Figure 2. Willow Cup Set

A cyclic process began to develop, allowing me to look and respond after the completion of each cycle. The willow pattern was flowing from cup to cup, serving its purpose well. I began wanting to see more variation, within the same pattern, and changed the scale of the pattern by enlarging it to about three times the size of the original printed image. I introduced another Morris pattern of oak leaves and acorns and when the pattern was enlarged it became a closer reference to the underlying questions surrounding pattern, perception, and ornamentation.
Figure 3. *Oak Leaves and Acorns* (enlarged pattern)
Chapter 4: A Need for Authenticity

Shortly after I completed a set of cups with the enlarged pattern I abandoned the printing technique in exchange for more direct ways of representing this significant pattern. I felt a need for authenticity and ownership, as well as immediacy in process. The direct appropriation shifted from printing to the more direct and responsive act of drawing. I began drawing the pattern on paper with a variety of mediums, looking at the thickness of the line and how it flowed and filled the space, working naturally with the cup form. My first attempts at drawing on cups fell a bit short. Looking for ownership of the imagery, I found these initial attempts were still too closely referencing the pattern and the underglaze pencils were unpleasant to use on the bisque ware. Further development of this idea was necessary.

Years ago when I was working with paint and canvas, I embraced a kind of drawing called ‘blind contour drawing’. When blind contour drawing, one looks at the image being rendered and does not allow observation of the drawing in process. I found a truth in this line, a sense of abandonment, an unrestrained freedom. Using these lines as a foundation for further explication, I painted canvases with layers of grey, blue, white, and umbers.
When I was drawing this pattern my thoughts drifted back to these paintings. The pattern began to break up and become something wild and uncontrolled. Here is where I found another significant relationship in formal elements. The contrast between order and chaos appeared out of process and intuition. The pattern had now become my own, as it was an honest reflection of my own perception. Its significance as a recognized and referenced pattern seemed to wane, and its gestural freedom became its greatest attribute. Blind contour drawing found its way back into my studio practice after a long hiatus. There was something there in that line, some kind of truth I needed to express and ascertain.

Recently, my attention has shifted back to the writings of Wassily Kandinsky. In his book, “Concerning the Spiritual in Art”, he speaks of the principle of art as being Geistige, or ‘the spiritual’. Roughly translated the word means “Spirit”. It is described as
in connection with consciousness and there are two components of meaning of the term "spirit": first relating to human cognitive abilities of perception, memory, and concentration. Second, relating to the more transcendental idea of the ‘soul’. Kandinsky associates this with the idea of visual harmony and how it is achieved through the conscious arrangement of disparate elements. I identify with how he felt, that these visual elements that make up a composition could be aligned in such a way to establish a sustained contact with the soul of the viewer.

_Geistige_, also referred to as an “inner necessity” for all beings, is this idea that “art comes from the inner necessity of the artist in a mysterious way through which it acquires an independent life; it becomes an independent subject, animated by a spiritual breath” (Kandinsky, 1977, p. 29). While deeply rooted in conjecture and mysticism, I felt that Kandinsky was expressing, in a very formulaic way, what I had been trying to scratch the surface of with my work. He boldly believed in the ability of art to express these arcane ideas surrounding “geistige’ or the spiritual. As fantastical it they may seem, ‘geistige’ is an ambitious goal for art, and an essential component in understanding my drive and what I want others to ultimately experience my work.
In thinking about how these cups would be presented in a home or gallery, I began making plywood boxes. I made one for each set of nine slip cast tumblers. The boxes were mounted on the wall in a grid pattern. I used the grid as a simple way to break up and organize space as I began working on the wall. I used it as a foundation, to let fade behind more layers of information. The boxes, mounted on the wall over the invisible grid, were made to fit the cup to increase the sense of sheltering, belonging, and place for the cups. In this way the boxes seemed like a protective shell or housing, a drawer or nest, referencing the idea of home and reliquary. In my mind, the handmade object is becoming more and more of a relic, a thing of the past that once reflected the human spirit and is slowly being buried under heaps of industrial waste and disposable garbage. I wonder, did it take all of these machines for us see what’s important about the work of our hands?

These new realizations concerning the presentation of objects informed my use of pattern, the element of unity, and the need for order. It made me consider not only the object, but the space around and within it. In working with the presentation of multiplicity, it showed me how objects can come into conversation through visual relationships, a dialogue that transcends the object alone, into a more remote, unmapped, visual territory. The continued use of the grid in aligning and organizing the boxes on a wall felt appropriate as it proved to heighten the element of harmony through an
underlying, geometric order. The importance of order in my work was also confirmed through these presentational issues. There is always a choice one has to make when working with disparate elements, a choice of order or chaos. I could have chosen to arrange the work randomly, which might have been interesting, yet there would still be an underlying order, and the viewer will be searching for it. I chose to integrate order, revealing its emotive aspects as well as the more cerebral ones. I found that this integration of order in presentation to work best when the order represented was done in a more energized way, as in the piece, Tributary. The grid is still very present, yet a curve or wave pattern is also very evident. This subtle contrast in fluidity and order harkens to natural pattern and draws the viewer in, while reaching for some semblance of ‘geistige’.

When working in the studio, I would often conserve space on my shelves by stacking the cups as they awaited a firing or surface treatment. I used this part of my process to inform my use of pattern through stacking and placement. It helped me see another way to illustrate spatial idea through presentation. The unity in the forms allowed for precise alignments of lines working within the composition. This enhanced continuity of design and pushed the idea of pattern, and layering of information even further. These are elements that I would in turn find a way to contrast in other ways. This early experimentation in presentation of the objects proved to create an interesting dialogue through the material and arrangement of the work.

Not long after I made this set of nine cups, it became clear that I wanted to continue working with boxes and wall installations. I decided to challenge myself in terms of craftsmanship with the wood as well as the ceramic. I chose to explore some
basic joinery techniques for constructing the boxes. After doing some research I decided to use a router and a dovetail jig. This was completely new to me and I went through a significant amount of walnut before I learned how to make a successful tight fitting dovetail joint. I selected walnut and oak for their natural beauty and hardness.

The joinery and the shift in wood helped to accentuate and further expand upon the conversation on materiality, order, and pattern. I discovered and association between the shapes in the dovetail pattern and the shape of the cups when arranged in a row. This tapered-rectangle motif was further intergraded into the design on the tables for floor pieces. It seems this motif assisted in adding unity to the work while broadening the idea of pattern and order. The dovetail pattern physically holds the boxes. This is another interesting association to pattern and how it holds two-dimensional space together in an organized way.

Through the acquisition of these new process based techniques, I gained knowledge that broadened my sense of what was possible with clay. I was able work with the multiple while implementing industry elements and merging them with the touch of my own hands. It allowed me to let process be the guide, while I attended to refinement in surface and presentation ideas. The incorporation of slip casting and woodworking into my process began a deeper conversation on material relationships and spatial poetics, further illustrating my interests in pattern, order, materiality, and functionality.
Chapter 6: Slow Light

The wall installation that would follow consisted of five oak boxes, each holding four cups stacked in alternating patterns. The fine level of craftsmanship and formal considerations seemed much more appropriate material for combining with a pristine material like porcelain. The boxes were mounted on the wall yet in a more flowing, wave-like pattern. The grid pattern, while still there, became an invisible element, delineated only by visually continuing the lines of the boxes. Here I attempt to set up a contrasting relationship between order and non-order. Non-order was referenced mainly on the surfaces of the cups. Order is still present with the underlying grid, yet is interrupted in a way by the wave pattern of the boxes. The cups were set into the boxes and displayed on the wall.

Further developments on presentation began on the next piece, what I call “Slow Light.” I decided to elongate the boxes into long rectangles. This meant that the cups would be arranged in a linear pattern like they would on a shelf. The long boxes still served this sort of “reliquary” function, yet spoke also of continuity and rhythm. There were three boxes in this piece, each with five cups placed in a row. The cups contained elements of the willow pattern, now abstracted through the use of blind contour drawing. Here the drawings return to a closer representation of a plant form, while maintaining an adherence to spontaneity and flowing mark making.
I drew the plant designs on the cups with an underglaze pencil after soaking the bisque ware cup in water for approximately a minute. The water seemed to help dissolve the pigment from the pencil and it created a much darker, yet variable line than when the cup was dry. I then glazed each cup with a clear glaze applying lusters and china paint after the glaze firing. These overglaze elements helped break up the surface design compositionally. There was an interesting interplay in the kind of space represented. The pattern and line work referenced flat space and the painterly application and illusory effects of the figure-ground relationship represented illusory space. Here I found an ironic contrast between special elements within a material context.

Figure 5. Slow Light
When I made the piece titled “Trinity,” I took the same concepts and the same basic presentation, while varying the drawn and numerical aspects of the cups and boxes. This piece contained three boxes, each with nine cups stacked three high and three wide forming almost a perfect square. The box framed the cups closely, referencing the intimacy of the objects and the interior space. “For knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy, is more urgent than the determination of dates” (Bachelard, 1958, p. 9). These interests in formal relationships like color, form, contrast, texture, balance, scale, light, rhythm, and the emotive aspects that rise out of them interested me then in the same ways they do now. The only difference is that I can experience them in a much more intimate way. They take on tangible form that invites interaction with the most intimate parts of the human body, the lips, and the hands.

The surfaces continued to develop in this piece. Instead of using dark blue glaze under the clear glaze, I implemented the brush only after the glaze firing. For the brushwork, I used an opalescent luster that resembled mother of pearl. Shapes formed by the blind contour designs were painted in, breaking up the composition, and allowing for a chaotic pattern, referencing natural pattern, to develop on the surfaces.

I mounted the boxes on the wall using French cleats. They were arranged in a pyramidal configuration in an effort to continue referencing the grid, where certain squares are occupied and others remain vacant. Here I’m dealing with presence and absence in a very subtle way. In other works, this concept has also manifested itself and seems to happen intuitively as I keep looking at what’s happening and responding to what
works. Why it works is always a question that comes later. In the moment of creation, that doesn’t even matter.

Figure 6. Trinity (detail)
Chapter 7: Calm Lake Where a Tree Stands

Once I had made these three wall pieces, I was ready to explore the table or pedestal approach to presentation of the objects. Before I made the tables, I had to decide what was going to be happening on the surfaces. The first table piece developed out of a variation on the stacking of the cups. I had already made and drawn on around twenty cups. For the first time, I used a smaller cup form combined with the usual taller one. I made the cup mold from a twelve ounce disposable coffee cup that I kept after realizing its potential use in my work.

After trying several variations on the stacking idea, I finalized the arrangement for the first table piece. The cups were stacked two high, and in a row of seven. The bottom cups were upside down while the cups stacked on top of them were upright. When considering the surfaces I realized a resemblance to a reflection, such as what you might see on a on the shore line. I decided to go with this idea of reflection and use a platinum silver luster to fill in the plant forms.

These drawn elements were much calmer, representing plant forms more so than the previous abstractions. The plant forms, when the cups were finished, had a mirror like surface which was exquisite on the shiny, white porcelain. The table for this piece, entitled “Willow Reflection,” was constructed using the same joinery techniques as the boxes, maintaining a strict adherence to craftsmanship and attention to detail. The table was painted with a white wash application of paint, in an attempt to bring variety to the
wood treatment as well as to the overall body of work. Further developments of wood surface treatments would later be made.

The final piece I made for this series was called “Gathering”, which consisted of a grouping of slip-cast wine bottles of various sizes and the stems of dried thistles that I gathered from a rural Ohio roadside. I had been casting the bottles along with the cups in the studio and I had quite a collection of them to experiment with in both surface and presentation. I decided to make the bottles because of the inherent relationship they have with the cups, yet for a long time I was unclear on how to work with them in terms of presentation. Ideas came, slowly, and I tried them all. The bottles seemed to be more interesting in a group, so I continued with the grid element and arranged them on the top
of the pedestal in a squared configuration. There were nine bottles in this grouping. I then
gathered the thistles and began incorporating them into the piece.

Originally, I had envisioned long thin branches, creating lines and textures that
would correspond to the drawings on the cups, emerging from the bottle tops. After
trying this approach, it seemed too predictable. So I began building a grid structure with
the sticks resting in between the bottles. I liked how this connected to the boxes and the
joinery. This sculptural approach to the presentation of the objects can be seen in the cup
boxes, yet with this piece it became much more pronounced. The result was a much
needed break from redundancy, while adhering to the interests I am passionate about
exploring.
The environment in which my work is displayed dramatically affects its content, and I found that I perceived the work differently depending on where the work was displayed. My work was created in a somewhat cluttered studio where the lighting could have been better, and was moved to the gallery to be viewed by the public. The work was transformed through focused beams of light, intricate shadows, and open, white space. Lines I had never seen on the cups appeared out of nowhere. A Pattern of shadows appeared on the wall like magic. New connections were instantly made, as was my realization of importance of light in my work. It has become a crucial element in how I create an emotive atmosphere or environment around my compositions. It reflects from the hard shiny ceramic surfaces, and is absorbed by the softness of the wood. It makes the compositions glow, in a way that harkens to the sublime or ‘geistige’. It creates shadows that bring depth, contrast, mystery, as well as lines and geometric planes of tonality.

As simple, and even arbitrary, as these shadows and lines may seem, their complexity lies in what they mean how the box relates to the cups and their users. In this case, the box and the cups have a direct symbiotic connection that can potentially be integrated into its deliberate design, which could carry over to the object-user relationship as well. I find this new layer of information broadens the scope of the content of the work to speak more directly of the relational elements within the compositions. I can see directing further attention to these relationships between the cups, their boxes, and their
users. For example, a cup can have a special place defined by light shin down through a hole in the top of the box. The place could also be left empty to reference absence. I have also been thinking about arranging the objects in a more playful, less restricted way, to enhance the mingling of industrial pattern and natural pattern.
Chapter 9: Lines Continue…

The horizon line has a subtle presence in my work and can usually be found where the glazed area of the cup meets the raw, white vitreous porcelain. The glaze appears shiny and hard, like melting ice. The unglazed section has a soft, smooth, yet dry texture. This contrast creates a line that suggests a horizon in a landscape, connecting the floral pattern to the land. This line is also a linear element that reiterates the geometric order in my work. Yet, it’s a natural geometry, created by the subtle shifts in positioning of the glaze line. In many cases, the line continues through the composition connecting glaze lines to the beginnings and endings of the cups. This line enables me to draw more attention to the surface, the glaze, the clay, and the object itself, through this subtle, contrast in reflected light. These discoveries with light, shadow, and line rose out of process when considering pattern, order, and composition. As I continue down this road, I’m sure more discoveries like these will be made.
References

