

Mr. Rives

Name: _____

Ceramics

Date: _____ CLASS/BLOCK: _____

Ehren Tool

Background

Ehren William Tool was born in 1970 in Charleston, South Carolina (Smithsonian American Art Museum, 2018). Tool grew up in what was once called South Central Los Angeles but is now North University Park. Thinking about his childhood, he recalled, that, although he was aware of his privilege, he was often bullied. As a result, he wanted to be a helper and be a defender (E. Tool, personal communication, November 13, 2018).

Tool wanted to be a policeman after graduating high school, but was too young. After visiting with a recruiter, he decided to join the Marines. His father served in



Vietnam and his grandfather served in World War II, so Tool felt that the military was the best option. In 1989, he was deployed and served in both Desert Shield and Desert Storm during the Gulf War. Initially, Tool felt that he was the “good guy” fighting in the good war, and he believed in what he was doing; however, it didn’t take long for the horrors of war to challenge his beliefs. “The gap between what I thought I was going to do and what I did was vast and painful” (E. Tool, personal communication, November 13, 2018). He began to question the events in which he was taking part. Early on, Tool began to consider the real cost of war (Powell, 2004).

When the first bombs started dropping on their side and not ours, a cheer went up. We were so anxious and stressed out that, when the war finally kicked off, we sort of relaxed, but then a little bit later, you start thinking, 'OK, so we're just hitting military targets and all,' but then it's like - 'Ooh. *I'm* a military target. And someone would be sad if I died.' There comes a point when you have to think about the other side (Powell, 2004, ¶ 10).

The disappointment of discovering that the reality of war that was so different from what Tool had pictured in his mind overwhelmed the young soldier, and motivated him to take his life in a very different direction (E. Tool, personal communication, November 13, 2018).

Transitioning from soldier to civilian was a decisive time for Tool. His time serving in the war gave him an appreciation for life and a new outlook that drove him to really enjoy every moment he could. (E. Tool, personal communication, November 13, 2018). After his time in service, he decided to utilize the G.I. Bill to find a career he would enjoy. He also wanted to speak out about his experiences in the war, but he struggled to find the appropriate way to do so. With the G.I. Bill, Tool enrolled at U.C. Berkley, where he began to study art (Sauvion, Bischetti, & Guthrie, 2014).

Medium

Tool was still searching for an outlet to express his views of society's ignorant and cavalier views of war.

I wanted to talk about that a little bit but I wasn't sure how. I started with drawing and painting, but that seemed too big or too kind-of overtly didactic

or something you know, but the cup, it's a little thing, it isn't confrontational, it's just a cup (Sauvion, 2014).



Tool liked the idea that gifting a cup is a simple hand-to-hand gesture. Tool's pieces are simple hand thrown handle-less cups, but what separate these cups from a normal potter's cups are the surface decorations. These simple forms became a canvas for Tool to depict images of war and violence with a menagerie of methods, from stamps, molded relief, decals, and glazed accents.

Tool's cups are full of imagery made from stamps, sprig molds and photos (Jao, 2012). These images highlight how abstract the concept of war has become to the general public (Grattan, 2011). A cup is a common object and is used thoughtlessly. People are comfortable with them, and they blend into the backdrop of everyday life. Tool often depicts a fallen cup amongst other upright cups as a metaphor for a casualty of war. The brilliance in what Tool has done with the cup is that he sneaks very serious content into the everyday and ordinary (Jao, 2012).



Creative Process

Although Tool claims he did not deliberately chose clay as the medium with which to communicate his ideas on war, he has consciously stuck with it. He very humbly stated, "I am not convinced anything I'm doing is of any value to anyone outside

of a very small group.” Despite this, it is obvious that he feels called to produce his mugs. His wife calls them “war awareness ware”, and that is precisely what they are. When Tool is considering his own work, one of the elements of which he is most conscious of is what takes place outside the gallery or museum. The conversations that the mugs spark are the ultimate goal of his pieces. So all his hard work and efforts in making his beautiful cups that highlight the ugly truths of war are in hopes that someone will be better educated on what real war is and its cost to society and the human race as a whole (E. Tool, personal communication, November 13, 2018).

Tool feels fortunate to be on staff at U.C. Berkley, where he claims to be the “head kiln bitch”, his proper title is Senior Laboratory Mechanic. He is also able to create his art and sometimes teach. Tool is very aware of the permanence that fired clay offers. Tool encourages the students to contribute to the archeological record, and he takes pride in the weight of such responsibility. No one else is telling his story to the generations to come (E. Tool, personal communication, November 13, 2018). Several years ago, Tool was interviewed for an online art journal, *In the Make; Studio Visits with West Coast Artists*. He spoke about his vision for his son, who was seven at the time. After following in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, Tool expressed this vision for his own son:

There are many ways to be a man, to serve your country, to be brave, to challenge yourself, and do good and noble things without a sword. I don’t want my son to be a dragon slayer. Unless it is in the way of Abraham Lincoln— ‘I destroy my enemy when I make him my friend.’ (Grattan, 2011)

Tool has space in which to work at U.C. Berkeley, but the majority of his art is created in his small studio space in the basement of his home. Although it is small and

dense, he is able to easily find what he is looking for during his creative process. He stated that he usually works in stages, first throwing his forms, and then decorating with stamps and molds. After this step, he glazes then decorates with photographic decals. Tool has to rearrange his whole studio to accommodate each step in the process; his work is obviously a labor of love (Grattan, 2011).

Tool, like Ohr, has a strange approach to the business aspect of his artwork. His actions indicate that he's not seeking fame or fortune, and he has given away the vast majority of his work. His teacher, well known ceramic artist, Ken Price, once said, "We need a division of Labor in the Arts... it would kill you to try to sell your own work." Tool's response was, "I agree. I have an opinion about what I'm making but that does not mean I am correct". He is slow to try to explain the meaning of his pieces, slow to try to sell, but fast to continually create. He feels his job is not to promote, sell or even validate his work, but simply to create (E. Tool, personal communication, November 13, 2018).

Tool's voice has been developing since long before he ever threw his first mug. A young child who was bullied grew into a young man who desired to be a protector and defender. When the Military gave him that opportunity, he was devastated by the realities of war. He decided to turn his life in a different direction and find an outlet to express his grievances. What began with a ceramics class turned into a passion and channel to express his vision of dispelling the ignorance that society possesses regarding the horrors of war. Now many of Tool's processes are so second nature to him that he seems to produce naturally without too much thought. His work is simple and honest, but very personal and passionate. Tool pointed to a quote by Jalal Al-Din Rumi, a poet and Islamic scholar of the 13th century: "You say you can't create something original? Don't

worry about it. Make a cup of clay so your brother can drink” (E. Tool, personal communication, November 13, 2018).

Message

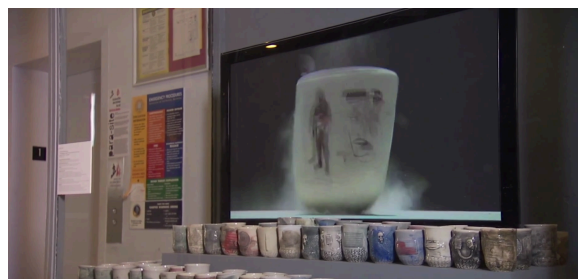
The imagery on Tool’s cups are meant to draw attention to societies misconceptions of war. The often gruesome and shocking subject matter is tool for Tool to start conversations amongst his viewers about how wrong the glamorized Hollywood ideas of war are far from the truth. “When I returned from the 1991 Gulf War, I was surprised to see a G.I. Joe version of myself, my gas mask and my war, in stores, ‘for ages 6 and up’. I am compelled to make work that talks about the strange places where military and civilian cultures collude and collide” (Tool, 2016).

There’s nothing I do that I think is going to change the world, but there's nothing in the world that releases me from my obligation to try. I don't believe in memorials, but I made the 1.5 second war memorial and it's just the cup being shot and then another cup being shot. If you wanted to watch it



for everybody killed in World War II you'd have to watch it for almost two years at 1.5 seconds per life. If you want to watch it for the Americans killed in my war, you

would watch it for like eight minutes. Those cups, all those cups could have gone un-chipped for 500 thousand to a million years but a little piece of lead found them and they're broken forever in the same



way all the war dead they could have had kids and grandkids and contribute to medicine or something but a little piece of lead found them and all that possibility is no more. I think that peace is the only adequate war memorial (Sauvion, 2014).

When asked what he wanted his art to accomplish, Tool responded by saying,

If I get to make a wish, it's to create world peace. That was hard to type because I was laughing so hard. I have had issues with the stated goal and the outcome. I just make cups. If the cups become something more, that is great and completely out of my control. There is something in the hand-to-hand aspect of my work though— these cups that I make with my hands are going out into the world into other people's hands, and hopefully the imagery and insignia I use create powerful impressions. (Grattan, 2011)

Since 2001, Tool has made over 18,000 cups, most of which he has given away.

1. When and where was Ehren Tool born?
2. Before going to the Marines what did Ehren Tool want to do but was unable because of his age?
3. What was the reality of war the Tool discovered? How was it far different than what he had thought it was going to be?
4. After being disillusioned with war Tool began to transition into civilian life. What did this time look like for Tool? What did he do? Where did he go?
5. Tool wanted to express his views of society's ignorant and cavalier views of war. But he struggled to find an appropriate outlet to express his views. How did he discover that outlet?
6. Why is the mug or cup form a very good vessel for communicating a message about the horrors of war?
7. Tool often mentions clay and it's ability to archive a message for hundreds and thousands of years into the future. What in particular has Tool said about clay's ability to take messages far into the future?
8. Obviously, paints fade, fabrics deteriorate, but when you look at the history of art what mediums (types of art) do you see have lasted the longest historically speaking?
9. Tool, has given away many of his pieces, in fact, it is very hard to buy one of his mugs. Obviously, he is driven by his desire to communicate and not motivated by his desire to benefit monetarily. Do you think that his continual gifting of these pieces says anything about his priorities?

10. What issues would you like to see other ceramic artists tackle through their work?