Short Stories

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A "family" of recently constructed vases drying
in our Edmonton studio before bisque firing.

"When do you sand 'em?" (After we bisque em)

"When do you paint 'em?" (After we glaze em)

"Did you make 'em on your spinner?" (We throw or construct them)

"My aunt took pottery once" (She better not have taken any of mine)

"Can you make a living doing this?" (check my pulse)

Potters, like Carol and myself, get a lot of questions, some with easy answers and others - "Why do you make them that way or at all?" and "When do you know if it's finished?" - that challenge us and provoke reflection. What follows are some answers about our collaborative work. The first part is about why and how we do it as a process in the sense of an artistic practice. The second part is more specifically about our majolica process in a how-to or how-is- it-produced discussion - primarily our techniques, but also some insight into why we choose them.

Although it's clearly some kind of addiction - this obsessive-compulsive love affair with clay and melted glaze, this hobby-gone-wild - I have been thinking lately that the way we work and our reasons for these collaborations are much like those of one of my literary heroes, Raymond Carver.

I like reading fiction, often novels and poems, but most of all I like short stories. Maybe it's the "bare bones" nature of this form, the economy of telling a whole story in a short space, (some teabowls come to mind) or it could be I just have a short attention span. For whatever reason, I like short stories. Alice Munroe, Richard Ford, Tobias Wolfe, Thomas McGuane and Milan Kundera are among my favorites, but

the one I never tire of reading again is Carver. The reasons I feel such a resonance in his work is that they are

stories...rendered in a more or less straightforward manner...what it's like out there.... stories...to throw some light on what it is that makes us and keeps us, often against great odds, recognizably human.

Writing, in most cases, not just about living and getting by, but about going on, sometimes against great odds, sometimes even prevailing against the odds...Writing, in short, about things that count. What counts? Love, death, dreams, ambition, growing up, coming to terms with your own and other people's limitations. Dramas every one, and dramas played out against a larger canvas than might be apparent on first glance.

Carver's stories are about "something human" in much the same way that a good piece of pottery may be about human mark-making and contemplation; sometimes about all of these.

For good short fiction and pottery, intention and nuance are important. What we do or don't do has consequences. Most of what we do as artists is a process of small, seemingly insignificant, decisions. Pots are really a tracing of our lives. In life and pots, one thing leads to another.

Another affinity I feel with Raymond Carver is about revision and rewriting. People often ask if we don't get tired of making "just pots" with an implied condescension- seen one coffee mug or pie plate or teapot or casserole, you've seen'em all. We work in series, and we go back and forth between making pots for use, and pots " about pots", and about painting and perception. We have been doing it for over twenty years and still find it challenging. In a way these shifts in focus have always been important.

For the first ten years, we worked mostly in stoneware and translucent porcelain, producing traditional functional ware, including wood-fired and salt-glazed pieces. Right from the start, we were interested in process and experimented widely with glazes and clay bodies trying to unravel the mysteries of traditional pottery.

We continue to use a lot of color and varied techniques in the stoneware tradition, but in the last ten years we have found many additional possibilities with majolica. Years ago, when he saw our work, Walter Ostrom suggested that we would love majolica (he said it was easy). After living with a piece of his for a couple of years, we began some experiments (it wasn't that easy).

We have been "riding two horses", alternating both between the high- and low-fired work, moving between the mark-making/drawing of throwing and trimming the stoneware and alternatively, constructing and painting the trompe l'oeil majolica.

The first kind of work is usually glazed with a celadon/transparent glaze, or ash alone, which creates a window to reveal the surface of the clay. These minimally glazed objects often present the immediacy of drawing. A fluid and gestural spiral emerging from the thrown plastic clay, loose hakeme brush marks, handles and stamped or rolled rope pattern. All are intended to seduce the viewer to examine a raised or incised line that emphasizes a tension in the form while catching a mobile chun or Shino glaze.

In our terracotta pieces, the pot itself, with its silhouette, becomes the drawing, while the glaze-painted majolica surface is the painting. The thick, opaque majolica glaze hides the surface of the clay (historically a way to masquerade terracotta as Chinese porcelain) and thus the mark-making on the clay surface is obliterated. The pot with its sharply defined edges is an integral part of the painting. The pieces can become anthropomorphic - a two-part pot becomes head and shoulders, an unusual top becomes a crazy hat. The figures are intended to fit the form - a roundness becomes a woman's flank, a zebra's arching neck; a dip becomes a waist; a handle becomes a snake, horn or ponytail.

Although it is always tempting to 'load up' the work with as much information as possible, the ones we keep returning to are the ones that are like good short stories. They might have a certain spirited simplicity or effortless parsimony, the same way a simple line drawing or the turned foot on a teabowl reveals a masterful wealth of knowledge and experience with what at first blush appears as a casual gesture. By switching back and forth and by reworking old ideas about forms and surfaces, one thing always seems to lead to another - to new solutions - maybe ones closer to what they are about. I think Carver would have liked this process.

I like to mess around with my stories. I'd rather tinker with a story after writing it, and then tinker some more, changing this, changing that, than have to write the story in the first place. That initial writing just seems to me the hard place I have to get to in order to go on and have fun with the story. Rewriting for me is not a chore - it's something I like to do. I think by nature I'm more deliberate and careful that I am spontaneous and maybe that explains something. Maybe not...But I do know that revising the work once it's done is something that comes naturally to me and something I take pleasure in doing. Maybe I revise because it gradually takes me into the heart of what the story is about. I have to keep trying to see if I can find that out. It's a process more than a fixed position.

A combination of reinterpreting (maybe plundering) historic pottery and a nearly constant questioning of what might be better, more appropriate or succinct - like having another try at teapots from a different perspective or altering the figure/ground dynamics of our painted surfaces - seems to be how to find out what it is about.

We may change clay bodies, firing temperatures, tools, glaze materials or even indulge in what John Chalke calls "refire madness" until we feel more certain the objects are finished. Whether it's an idea or an individual piece, by doing something else for a while we often see new solutions. As Carver says, "but, truly, I've seldom seen a piece of prose, or a poem - my own or anyone else's - that couldn't be improved upon if it were left alone for a time."

The Process

Before launching into a rave-up about our clay body, a diatribe about forming and firing, and a rant about painting technique, a few general thoughts about our view of majolica might be useful:

Our main reason for using the majolica technique on a terracotta body is access to color. The color available in the lower firing range and the appeal of the white surface for painting is undeniable and

seductive. It is a painting potter's paradise. We find these intense colors perfect for creating perceptual tricks and figurative narratives. We also like the constructivist approach to making large form. In some ways the terracotta clay used in these forms is more forgiving than stoneware, because it does not shrink and deform as much in the glaze firing. These altered forms in terracotta majolica have a particular quality that is enhanced by the vivid colors and seems unattainable or unnoticed in the more somber stoneware palette and tradition.

We very much admire traditional pottery and many historical decorative techniques and we often use similar techniques and imagery, but we don't see most of our majolica work as "decorative pottery" in the usual sense;. We often try to paint "against the form" or in ways that deny the form. Whereas others use the edge or changes in direction as a place to "hang the decoration", we like to violate the edge and get "off the piece", cropping the image in a way that makes the picture larger than the object, setting up the dynamic with the edge in the same way as an Impressionist painting. This is intended to lead the viewer off the form and allow the silhouette of the work to interact with the space around it. Particularly for round pots painted to look flat, pedestal platters, serving bowls and lasanga dishes, the inside and the outside are a continuous painting which denies the rim and usual boundaries of traditionally decorated pottery. Rather than painting one or two flowers centered in the middle of a piece with a band around the edge, we want the work to look as if a part of a large painting of flowers has covered the whole piece, regardless of the rim or foot. We see majolica as a traditional technique that acts as a springboard for contemporary painting.

Clay Body

We use a local brick clay from Athabasca, Alberta, which seems to be relatively free of calcium and thus gives an orange color. (We fire to Cone 06 for bisque and Cone 04 for glaze). It is delivered as dug, in a ten-ton dump tuck. We blunge it, add 0.5% barium carbonate, 5% Ferro Frit 3124 and 15% fine grog (30 mesh to dust). The brick plant has a roll mill and 1/2-inch shaker to make grog for the bricks. They use 35% coarse grog in this clay. We get the dust that drifts to the ground around the shaker. After drying the clay in sun pans (after Harry Davis) or a sheet on the ground it is then put through the Venco pugmill. Pugging with the screens in place removes most of the "dogs and cats", that is - sticks, rocks and brick shards and the clay is then ready for throwing. For the plates and large pieces (up to 76cm.diameter for the plates and 81cm. height for the upright constructed pieces) we then add nylon fiber to the clay and pug again (usually twice) with the screens removed to mix the fiber well. The resultant pugs, weighing 7 to 10 kilos, can then be slammed down on the slab roller and made into slabs of ½ to 1cm. In thickness.

Most terracotta clays seem to be overly plastic, somewhat thixotropic with poor green strength and thus very problematic in drying for large pieces. Some remedies are: (a) Add only insoluble fluxes, as the soluble flux will surely tend to deflocculated them and make them thixotropic and thus not stand well when the potter is throwing. (b) Add grog (preferably fine) rather than sand to open the clay, reduce shrinkage and warping and give tooth for throwing. If a coarse grog is used, it will leave rough surfaces when trimmed and pinhole problems when it is glazed. (c) Add nylon fiber to give the clay tensile strength for the stress of drying, especially plate rims and handles. (d) And last, but most important,

make the pieces in such a way that handling is minimized, thus lessening the stresses after the throwing and constructing stage to the bone-dry state. A good example of this is our method for making large plates (for much of this approach we a indebted to Kurt Weiser, former director of the Archie Bray Foundation).

We roll a slab and place it on a bisque, domed, clay disc covered with an elastic-edged cotton sheet. We cut the edge roughly and "throw" the plate down on the disc using a steel rib on the potter's wheel. We then fold the last centimeter of the "rim" back onto the plate, pound it down and "throw" this with a sponge to smooth this new irregular rim. This undulating rim will allow the decoration a chance to get off the edge of the plate, creating more of an undulating bounded area than a hard edge. Next, a fat coil is luted onto the bottom and thrown into a finished foot.

On the next day, the sheet and the plate are inverted onto a bat with the foot on dry newspaper: two holes are pierced in the foot to accept a wire to hang the plate after glaze firing. The rim is sponged and compressed with the web between the index and second finger. This resulting rim is almost double the original thickness of the plate. Since most press-molded and virtually all slip- cast plates have rims which we find visually weak, this method can help alleviate these problems.

The plate is then covered in plastic and aired briefly only once a day until it is bone dry. By drying unhandled on a flat bat, it is not stressed and the fiber holds it together, even though it will still tend to dry at the rim first. With this method, we have only about three percent losses with plates up to 76 cm. In diameter (the width of our oval kiln).

Forming Methods

Our method for making the large, illusionistic pots could be termed "constructivist with ready- mades". We make round and oval discs by press molding two low bowl shapes and joining them together. These are then cut and altered, joined to slabs as bases (finished with a profile tool) and stacked and joined to form segmented pots.

Carol "bomping" clay into mold for base

Richard joining two halves of "peanut" mold

By using ovals cut on the bias, we can get gestural pots with a lot of movement. We like the way they look much like a pot in a painting by Matisse or Braque or Picasso. With their cut-down front rim and their slightly comical spouts and handles, they become a caricature of historic "real" pots. Our pots usually have an illusionistic pot or a pot-on- a-pot "front" side and the reverse side often becomes a shaped canvas for a figurative/narrative glaze painting. We are definitely interested in painting flat things to look round and round things to look flat. These pots are about perception - that is, those visual clues that let us know the nature and dimension of things. With color, pattern, figure/ground, shading, silhouette and by using "iniversal referents", we want to create visual gaps that the viewer fills up with his/her constructed reality.

Bisque and Glaze Firing

Selfridge Majolica Base Glaze (Cone 04)

Barium Carbonate 3.00
Tile#6 Kaolin 19.00
Frit 3134 11.00
Frit 3124 62.00
Flint 5.00

100%

Add: Superpax 16%
Rutile 0.25%
The rutile addition takes the hard edge off the white

.*Note: For Plainsman terracotta there is an adjustment required. Cut the Flint in the recipe to 2 instead of 5 for a good fit of glaze to clay body.

We bisque at Cone 06 and try to cool the kiln gradually. The kiln exhaust fan makes a tremendous difference to the color response. Ours, like most terracotta clay, is contaminated with carbon (lignite) and sulfur. This creates a dirty atmosphere, which carries over into the glaze firing unless these

materials are slowly cleared in the bisque. A similar problem comes from bodies which are fluxed with talc. Gases are released in the glaze firing from the body and must get through the melting glaze surface. They get out through "blisters" which then "heal", leaving their mark - little white spots in the color of the surface painting which are sometimes an interesting effect, but at other times can spoil a piece. To combat this problem, we bisque more slowly at the top end, especially if pieces like plates are stacked. We can often see the resulting pieces with trapped gas problems in the center where they were stacked, but with the rims and protruding handles free of these "blebs".

If the kiln is not vented well during the bisque and especially in the glaze firing, the dirty atmosphere will contaminate the glaze and reduce it, making the colors dull. The exhaust fan moves a small amount of fresh air through the kiln, causing the ware to be oxidized and to cool more evenly. With uneven cooling, the large pieces are susceptible to dunting. Unlike stoneware and porcelain, which shrink and radically change size and shape in the pyroplastic state at top temperature, most terracotta bodies shrink and deform little in the glaze firing. Thus, if they can be dried without deforming, bisque without dunting and fired well supported (flat shelves for flat plates), the losses at cooling will be minimal.

Preparation for Glazing and Painting

To prepare the ware for painting, often ends up as a fastidious activity, but one ignores these things at one's peril. To obtain smooth, even, unblemished painting surfaces, we lightly sand the bisque objects, then wax and wash them thoroughly. If the body has any soluble salts, those areas where the pot dries first (edges, rims and handles) are the areas where the water and thus the soluble salts migrate to. After bisque firing, those areas may have a slight sheen (from fusion) and will not absorb as much glaze when they are dipped. These surfaces and any rough spots need to be sanded (wear a dust mask) to allow them to accept the glaze smoothly and evenly. The sanding dust must be washed off, because it and any grease or oil cause crawling. The other reason for washing off the bisque is pinholing. The bisque piece, being porous, has "holes" filled with air which compresses when the glaze flows over it. These pockets of compressed air "blow out" when the piece is removed from the glaze bucket. Washing the bisque and then glazing it (when the surface is just changing color) in about one-half to one hour fills these voids with water and minimizes the prefiring pinholes. Any that remain must be gently rubbed with a finger before painting and glaze firing. Any gas escaping from the body will choose these holes to pass through and thus we would not expect them to heal over on their own unless the glaze is extremely fluid (running off the pot). The glaze must stay in suspension and be somewhat flocculated, otherwise it will run or drip in "curtains". This is particularly bad for large pieces where a double thickness might cause the decoration to sag or slip. A nose, lip, eye, or chin sagging on a large figurative piece can spell disaster. By adding a small amount of calcium chloride to the glaze, we can usually cure this tendency. Any drips or tong marks that remain need to be gently rubbed with a finger.

It is important to use a somewhat plastic kaolin, or to add bentonite, laundry starch or sizing to combat a powdery painting surface. Do not add so much that the glaze cracks on drying, as this will cause crawling; instead, add enough to allow you to handle the pieces and dry-brush paint without raising any dusty powder. It helps to paint the pieces on the same or next day that you dip them, but this is

somewhat more difficult to paint if allowed to completely (bone) dry. Any dust on the surface is a problem and should be blown off.

Painting colors are usually made from the base glaze (without the Superpax or rutile), plus 5% to 15% glaze stains or oxides and carbonates. Our present palette consists of about forty colors. Though we have used other brands successfully, we now use mostly Mason stains; for example, 500grams of wet base majolica and 40 grams of Alpine Rose Mason stain make a pink. Colors are mixed both in the wet state and on the piece with over-painting and dry brush. (Glycerin added to the painting colors makes the brushing more fluid.) Though one can blend colors with the opacified majolica base, this results in a more pastel and less vibrant hue. We have used up to 10% tin oxide in the base glaze in place of Superpax. This gives a rich lustrous base, but if it is anywhere near chrome (chrome pinks or greens) in the glaze firing, the whole base glaze takes on a pink cast. Although this effect is sometimes interesting, it fails to provide the white ground that makes the colors "jump" and the chrome greens which are bright florals on the white become somewhat dingy browns.

Painting Methods

Carol and I both paint and build the pieces collaboratively in similar styles, often painting different parts on the same object. The trompe l'oeil pieces, after the base glaze is applied, are put in a raking light. The shadows produced and the silhouette of the pot suggest the decoration. We respond to this by drawing on the piece with soft graphite pencil, often stepping back across the room to see if the illusion works. Colors are then blocked in, often in an impressionistic or "action painting" way. Sometimes areas are waxed out to allow them to come forward from the area which we then sponge, stamp or paint "behind". Our home environment (furniture, pots, paintings and people) frequently becomes the subject of our work; in addition, we often paint still- life and sometimes figures from life. We try not to make any one piece too precious and sometimes there are conflicts about how to handle a particular piece. Our collaborative agreement is that we each can experiment with anything, accepting the " I told you so" when it doesn't work out.

A variety of brushes are used, ranging from square-headed poster brushes (some made of boars' bristle), inexpensive turkey baster or pastry brushes, good sable brushes for watercolor effects and oriental sumi brushes (cut down to points) for the black line. Although we wish sometimes that the pieces would work without the black line, the watercolor technique of separating color on the flat matt surface of the paper using only lights and darks, or positives and negatives, does not translate well to the fired gloss surface of the finished work. To us it seems the black line gives the painting an illustrative quality that reads well across most gallery spaces and moves the objects back to a drawing/painting balance. In Addition to drawing on ceramics we both engage in drawing the figure on paper, paint and do soft ground etching and wood engraving. This sort of work complements and translates well to the line work on the ceramic pieces.

Our majolica is about the joy of color, the fleetingness of fashion or mythological subjects - often rewritten with a humorous twist to contain secret tales and symbols about the makers and their lives. Making all our work is like making our life, mostly day-to-day decisions - mundane choices, but in the

root sense, "of the earth" - choices sometimes aesthetic, often ephemeral, about the things that count. For now, we make our short stories one pot at a time.

No Heroics, Please: Uncollected Writings, All Raymond Carver quotes are from Vintage Contemporaries, 1992.