

I'd like to make you a teapot. It will be a "functional" teapot, since that is what I do. I participate in a tradition as old as civilization itself. I'm proud of that.

This teapot will be of porcelain. I'm no purist, but I am a sucker for porcelain's purity—its whiteness and its translucency. I don't know if you'll ever use this pot, but that's okay; I'm not afraid to make a "mantle pot." But it will pour well; I'll make sure of that. Its spout will long to decant its belly's contents. Its handle will be comfortable and inviting. I can tell you how many cups it will hold, and it will be up to you how many cups make it a "set."

But what color will it be? Color carries so much meaning. What do I want this pot to say? I only get to put so much meaning into a form that has been made for centuries. It carries a story of its own. What could I possibly have to add to this conversation? Do I have a comment to make? A joke? Maybe a witty observation? Perhaps a thank you. Does anyone even use handmade teapots anymore? Why make something by hand that can be purchased for far less money at the corner superstore? Is it possible that a handmade pot can significantly affect a person's life? What does handmade even mean, and is there any inherent value in being handmade? Am I willing to sacrifice function for artistic expression? At what point does expression inhibit utility? Is it okay to borrow ideas from cultures I know nothing about? Is it possible to make a "new" pot? Can I really make a pot that is "mine?" If I don't drink tea, what am I doing making a teapot anyway?

For many people, this sort of questioning may sound a lot like making pots in grad school. It can get stuffy in there. It can suck the life out of a pot. If you think it possible for an inanimate object to have a soul, grad school can suck the soul right out of a pot as well. But this is not a rebellion. Nor is it an edict for potters to stop thinking about their work. (Think). Rather, it is a dialectic aimed at finding some balance between thinking the life out of our work and turning our brains off when we sit down at the potter's wheel. And for the record, grad school can also lead to some of the most soulful pots made today. It is possible to retain passion in higher education.

I remember a particular critique in grad school when I was scowled at for admitting I made a teapot because it was such a complex form, and was therefore the most challenging design project. I was asked why I couldn't find the same challenge in making a bowl. Could I not rise to the challenge of making a new and interesting bowl? I love that. I'm grateful that my training included such

critical analysis of the decision making process. I've been trained to question everything I think I know about pottery: to make decisions for myself, to ask my own questions.

Many potters, myself included, begin grad school as functional potters, and come out on the other end making sculpture. There is nothing wrong with that. Make what you need to make. Follow your interests. But it is interesting to muse why grad school turns so many potters into sculptors. I know none of my instructors ever said, "stop making pots." They did, however, instruct me to follow my interests and ideas. See how far a thought can go. And for whatever my advice is worth, I say the same thing. How depressing it would be to feel restraint. We're trying to be artists here, aren't we? Do we not owe it to ourselves to walk the earth a little before we settle down?



Tea set, 9 in. (23 cm) in height (teapot), 3 in. (8 cm) in height (cup and saucer), wheel-thrown and hand-built porcelain, fired to cone 9–10 in reduction, 2009.

So here I am, little more than a year out of grad school. I've descended from academe, and I'm feeling okay. Ware boards full of pots are once again in my life. There's a part of returning to pots that feels like going home; there's something romantic about it. Say what you will about my sentiment, but it's true. I'm surviving the fall.

I don't think it's taking the easy way out when one stops making pots and starts making sculpture; that's not it. Although in many ceramics programs, making pottery is the hardest thing one can do. I question those who say making pots is safe, or easy. It's hard to define what makes a pot "smart." I think a smart pot is aware of its history, aware of its references. It knows what it is, and what it is not. And somehow the smart pot has a voice of its own. Undoubtedly, it's hard to make a "new" pot. I think a good potter knows how to composite, as well as how to edit. It is in the way that we balance these two processes that we find our individuality.

The struggle for relevance in contemporary culture is not unique to potters. Many people—including musicians, writers, and dancers—share in this struggle. In particular, I think of music and

ceramics along similar terms. They are siblings. To take the analogy a step further, I think of love songs in the same way I think of functional pots. They can be dreamy or morose, war-torn or sensual. Nobody's really writing new love songs. They're all about the same thing, though sometimes coming from varying points of view. But there are songwriters out there who continue to find interesting ways to tell the same story, and I think this ability to innovate within a tradition is possible for potters as well. Good songwriters know that they have to do more than riff the same old rhymes. Even when they use those old rhymes, they have to be aware of their context. The world keeps changing around us, and our perspectives change with it. We need these old stories. We need to continue exploring ways of finding our place in this world, restating phrases to ensure they retain their meaning—that they remain relevant.

This is our challenge: to remain relevant. Most of us who have been through graduate school have been caught wandering the halls of academe—talking to ourselves, working ourselves into a nervous wreck—trying to figure out what our way would be to overcome this challenge. The struggle is good for us, though it does not necessarily make us better artists. We all know that thinking alone will not lead to good pots; nor will good (even great) craftsmanship alone make a pot special. Even if it is impossible to make that "new" pot, trying to is an exercise that will, if nothing else, help us gain perspective on what it is we should be making. It will put us on the right path.

I'm choosing to make that teapot. I'm going to think about it, even lose a little sleep over it. But I'll try not to strangle it. A pot needs to breathe. I'll riff on history, but I'll add a few riffs of my own. My glaze palette, subtle as it is, will transport the viewer to a place of tranquility, while the gesture in the form will recall the human figure in motion, eliciting thoughts of dance and celebration. What affect will this juxtaposition have upon the viewer? Why combine these conceptual elements in the form of a teapot? Can I successfully investigate the contradictory relationship between the tranquility of the eastern tea ceremony, or the western teatime, and the consumption of a beverage that is full of caffeine? What kind of experience am I trying to shape? What kind of moment am I hoping to create? Can I answer all of these questions and still make an object that can hold its own under a scrutiny of aesthetics? This is the teapot I would like to make.

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