

2017
SCRIPPS
COLLEGE
73RD
CERAMIC ANNUAL



Ruth Chandler Williamson Gallery

Scripps College

A SENSE OF PLACE

2017

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ARTISTS

CHRIS ANTEMANN

JEFF OESTREICH

DIEGO ROMERO

RED WELDON SANDLIN

PORNTIP SANGVANICH

MICHAEL SHERRILL

ANNA SILVER

MARA SUPERIOR

W. A. EHREN TOOL

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A SENSE OF PLACE

Jo Lauria

In discussion on the theme of the Scripps College 73rd Ceramic Annual with curator Joan Takayama-Ogawa, I was prompted to consider the works of two distinct authors who have approached the topic from wildly different vantage points: the writings of the American author James D. Houston, specifically the essay, "A Writer's Sense of Place"; and the explorations of French philosopher Gaston Bachelard in his groundbreaking book, *The Poetics of Space*.¹ Houston perceives place as empowering and transformative. He avers that when a certain place moves into the conscious life of an individual, that location will forever hold meaning, memory, and become part of the landscape of dreams. Depending on the pull, or power, of a place on an individual's sensibility, that place can shape a person's perception of history and sometimes the "sense of self."² Bachelard asserts that place always traces back to shelter, to the home or the idea of home. He believes that humankind is eternally searching to discover, or recover that space (the home, the nest) that shapes emotions, creates lasting memories, and instigates imagination. Bachelard's place is both external and internal in the sense that it can be physical and actual, or conjured and animated through recollection and reverie.

Although neither of these authors is referencing the visual arts in his writings, both are providing the psychological and philosophical underpinnings of why a certain place—a personal place with its surround of specific geography, culture, and time—is at the core of storytelling. When applied to the visual arts, the actualization of space in three dimensions becomes the place of personal narrative. These literary references help inform and frame the works featured in this Ceramic Annual, serving as a springboard to understand curator Joan Takayama-Ogawa's assembly of artists. Collectively they have elevated their sense of place to a position of visual determination and dominance, grounding their work in loci from which their stories unfold, rich with layers of remembrances and intervention. Each has uniquely engaged with the theme, ranging from the literal to the poetic, from the rational to the fantastical. Geographically they represent different regions of the United States, some making their home in urban places and others in rural spaces.

For artists Chris Antemann, Mara Superior, and Anna Silver, their sense of place (a place in which they are emotionally embedded and find inspiration) is located in the history of art and decorative arts, with a focus on painting. All three artists formally studied the history and practice of painting during their college years. When they started their studio practices they soon turned to working with clay, (specifically, porcelain for Antemann and Superior, porcelain and earthenware for Silver), for the sculptural dimensionality and whiteness of form it offered, as they aspired to transcend the two-dimensional space of the canvas within its prescribed frame.

Although living in a rural area of Oregon, Antemann has found creative inspiration in 18th century Europe, in the architectural spaces of the wealthy and privileged: in houses where pleasure dining is part of the culture, and in gardens of amusement with secreted chambers that enable trysts. As an invited artist at the Art Campus of the German Meissen Manufactory,

Antemann learned the advanced skills of porcelain construction and overglaze painting. She cites as influencers Johann Joachim Kändler, the acclaimed 18th century Meissen sculptor, for his mastery of forms executed in porcelain, and 18th century painters Fragonard, Boucher, and Watteau for their palettes and figural compositions.³

While stylistically inflected with the tropes prevalent in baroque and rococo art, with a deep nod to French, German, and Italian culture, Antemann's work is a mirror reflecting forward, not backward: she skillfully blends historical attitudes of gender roles with 21st century gender politics to whiplash effect. In *An Occasional Craving* (2011), the artist constructed her fantasy space: an imaginary 18th century European banquet revealed in a frozen moment. Porcelain female and male figurines enact the erotic rituals of pleasure dining. Lust, longing, seduction, hunger, and hunger denied, are the themes spread out on the lavish banquet table. The calculated performance embedded in the figurine tradition brings into sharp focus the societal taboos and cultural proprieties operative during the period. This delicious staging is a parody of relationship roles and culinary temptations and is offered as a seductive revelation.

In *The Garden of Delight* (2016), Antemann turns to the classic Greek myth of Apollo and Daphne to function as cautionary tale, foregrounding the unhappy ending of the battle of the sexes. Set in a rococo garden, lush with ornamental architecture, love temple and cavorting couples, Apollo and Daphne fulfill their destinies as lover scorned and woman violated. This scene plays out within an imagined place—the rococo pleasure garden—conjured by the mind of the artist and realized by her sculpting skills. As her hands shape the forms, so too does this illusory place shape Antemann's relationship to history: it allows her, and by extension the viewer, to consider charged gender issues of the present through

the exaggerated recreation of relationship roles of the past.⁴

Superior's place—her nucleus of creativity—is embedded in the history of ceramics and the study of the materiality of porcelain. This intersection is her starting place: she investigates a myriad of historical forms and styles, most notably associated with ancient Greek culture, English Staffordshire pottery, Italian majolica wares, and Chinese export porcelains. Through reinterpretation of these art historical influences, a unique lexicon of shape and iconography evolves. Similar to the history painters of the past, Superior employs the medium to convey narrative, porcelain and glaze serving as her materials of choice.

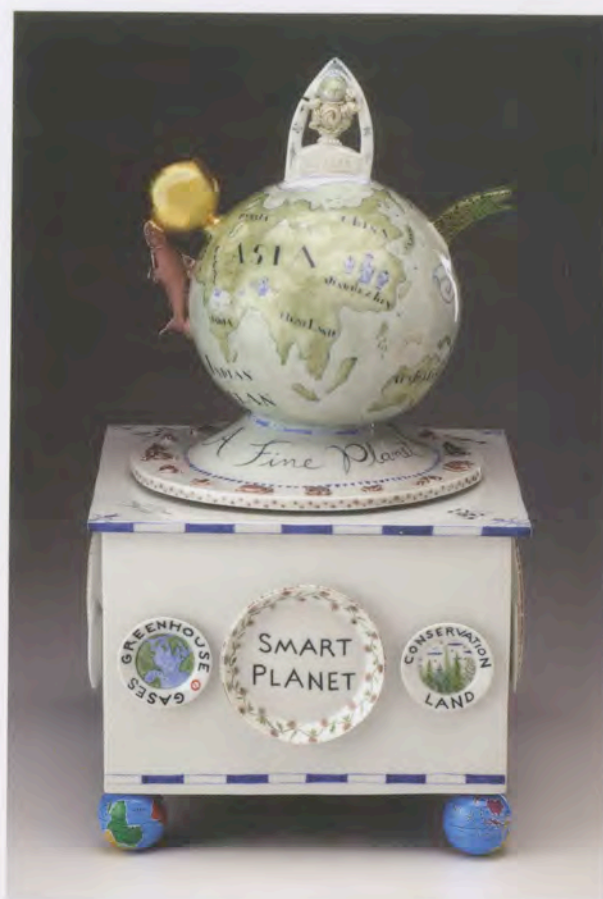
Throughout Superior's career, she has moved through various series, each devoted to a central theme. Superior realizes her experiences through painted vignettes and descriptive text, creating documents akin to an illustrated haiku. They are visual representations of Superior's perceptual geography of people, places, animals, and the natural world—the collective sensations of personal experiences. Early American architecture, country living rooted in home and garden, iconic landmarks of the European *grand tour*, and travels to faraway lands, these have all been subjects of Superior's commemorations, and some of the narratives can be interpreted as autobiographical. Her stories have portrayed both the exploits of the curious adventurer and the charming quotidian rituals of the everyday. Frequently the painted narratives connote comfort and domesticity, a connotation reinforced when painted on forms shaped like household containers, such as teapots and pouring pitchers.

In the most recent series, Superior is using her porcelain sculptures to comment on American politics. The main symbol of conveyance is the home—with all its promises of "safe space" and "protective shelter" as outlined in Bachelard's book. In *Obama White House*, a folksy portrait of Obama is placed on

top of the gleaming white "Power House" he oversees. Obama's house is immaculate and orderly. Under his wide, watchful eyes the White House is maintained as a pristine, structurally and morally sound place that supports—as text blurbs attest—humanitarianism and democratic ideals.

A very different story is portrayed through the pictogram of the house in *Piggy Banker*: the charming home on Main Street is in danger of being crushed by over-leveraged mortgages, is threatened by foreclosures, and is sinking under the weight of monies being funneled to big banks during the 2008 bailout. Commemorative plates depict the house going underwater in this "financial tsunami," and to drive the point home, a gilded pig sniffing a gold bullion bar crowns the sculpture. These homes are being sunk by greed and destructive banking policies. Superior's sense of place has evolved and changed direction, from diarist of personal experiences to journalist of political commentary. She has realized that it is impossible to keep politics from invading the home sphere. Her house has been turned upside down.

Anna Silver's ceramics are also imbedded in painting, and she found her sense of place within the dynamics of abstract expressionism. To this space, Silver brought an "expanse of memories and experience"⁵ that informed her work, an accretion that was built of extensive travel and deep study of art museum collections, globally and locally. Silver pursued painting at an early age and sought out classes with luminaries Fernand Léger, Herb Jepson, John Altoon, Joyce Thiemann, and Martin Lubner. From these mentors she learned the properties of paint, compositional structure, pattern construction, color relationship, and confidence. In the beginning, Silver applied these skills to canvas and paper. In the mid-1970s a ceramics class prompted her to jump into the dimensional space of clay sculpture. She realized this was the space in which she



MARA SUPERIOR

Smart Planet: Homage to Science, 2009

wanted to be. For the last forty years, Silver has systematically explored the relationship of painting to form through the traditional ceramic shapes of cups, bowls, teapots, vases, and plates. Silver's dramatically scaled vessels—hybrids of ancient Greek and early Mediterranean vases—and her oversized, colorful plates have become her signature work, offering the greatest surface area for her abstract designs to dance around the form.

In this exhibition, the curator has chosen to install a wall of Silver's plates. The installation showcases the artist's individual tondo paintings on the large, curved surfaces of the circular platter. Far afield from the Renaissance tondi of figure groupings, Silver uses abstract motifs to define and activate the space, either contrasting a field of black-line drawing against a white background, or

floating the colorful, gestural designs within a pool of luminous pigment. Further, the plates that feature bold color choices, shiny surfaces, and gold and platinum accents bespeak the bravura of opera: their sumptuous surfaces connect with operatic production as that is the performance space where high-keyed colors, reflective materials, and shimmering metallics are employed in costumes and sets to attract the eye. Her dynamically abstracted plates evoke emotions, command the visual space in a room, and enliven the surrounding environment. This is where Silver has marked her place—at the intersection of expressive abstraction and seductive theatricality.

Porntip Sangvanich also paints daringly with glazes, but her background is not in painting. Sangvanich studied the applied arts



PORNTIP SANGVANICH
Untitled #1, 2016

and product design in Thailand, where she was born and raised. The desire to attend a small graduate school with a progressive approach to ceramics brought Sangvanich to Los Angeles in 1982 to study at Otis College of Art and Design. Sangvanich carried with her the Thai sensibility of color and pattern—saturated, rich colors that endured in the perpetual sunshine, and complex, dynamic patterns that evolved from centuries of sophisticated textile design. To her adopted home she also transported her construction knowledge of working with wood as she had garnered these skills from her family-owned lumber business.

Sangvanich searched for the place between her two homes that would inspire a new direction in her ceramic work. She found this place positioned within the divergent fields of architecture and animation; these disparate influences have had a forceful impact on the fabrication of the work. The pseudo-functional forms of cups and teapots, and the abstracted wall and pedestal sculptures resembling deconstructed buildings, were based on the repetition of geometric shapes, primarily circle, triangle, and rectangle. The forms were glazed in color blocks, each block limited to one or two color choices, and juxtaposed with areas of pattern, mostly lines that when repeated become stripes.

Architecture is key to the integrity of these sculptures. The balancing of mass, harmony of proportions, and hidden infrastructure implanted for strength and defiance of gravity rely on skilled construction.

The influence of animation is discernible in the quirky placement of architectural elements: in *Untitled #2* (2016), the main circle is penetrated by three circles of varying sizes that intersect at seemingly random places, popping up and looping around unexpectedly. They elicit a cocked eye and require an acceptance of irrationality. Likewise with *Untitled #8* (2016): cut cylinders and sliced circles playfully cavort

around the sculpture, creating a parade of whimsy. Sangvanich refers to this technique of surprise as the "Road Runner effect": Wile E. Coyote's pursuit of the Road Runner is always thwarted by the animator's insertion of an expected escape route.⁶

The works of Red Weldon Sandlin and Diego Romero are grounded in the tradition of storytelling, and are frequently playful in their interpretation. Sandlin's sense of place originates from the pages between book covers, where children frolic in magical—and often menacing—tales, and famous characters from adult literature narrate their fictions. Romero's source material is a composite of the oral traditions of his Pueblo ancestors and the literary references of the vanquishing heroes and super heroes he encounters in Greek mythology and beloved comic books.

As a young reader from a small town in Georgia, Sandlin spent many hours in the local public library pouring over children's books, and encyclopedias—the books of knowledge. Books became her shelter: a place of comfort, a source of nurture, and a space where her imagination could play. One topic in which Sandlin became intensely fascinated was Chinese culture; China represented an exotic, faraway place so distant and different from her place in the local library in the American South.

After leaving a career in graphic design and advertising, Sandlin learned to work with clay, and soon found that it was medium where her design skills could shine. She quickly decided that the ceramic object presented the ideal surface for visual narrative and she launched her ceramic career.

Sandlin's fascination with China stuck with her through the years and inspired *The Chinese Quinteapots* (2003), drawing its source from the children's fable, *The Five Chinese Brothers* by Claire Huchet Bishop and Kurt Wiese. Rereading the book as an adult, Sandlin



RED WELDON SANDLIN
The Chinese Quinteapots, (detail) 2003

recognized the perversions in the tale. The resulting sculpture is a tower of five stacking ceramic teapots (painstakingly made by the coil method) with hand-painted narratives that interpret the story. When assembled, the totem depicts a portrait of one brother on each teapot, all identical, as they are in the book. The sculpture is perched on a painted wood base that is a facsimile of the book, as Sandlin pointedly places the book as the foundation of the work and highlights its metaphoric quality as "containment of story."⁷

Sandlin illustrates the narrative in the blue-and-white painting style associated with the Ming dynasty. Her respectful assimilation of the Chinese painting tradition serves as a critique of the book. *The Five Chinese Brothers* is an American misappropriation of a Chinese



DIEGO ROMERO
Saints and Sinners, 2016

folktale as it is mediated by xenophobia and littered with ethnic stereotypes: the Chinese brothers are portrayed as yellow-faced coolies, a stereotype that originated with the arrival of Chinese immigrant laborers in the 1850s. Sandlin corrected the imagery to eliminate this bias in her portrayal, commenting on her process: "My intent is to present them in a new contemporary light—still maintaining their fantasy, charm and wonder but bringing forth their true meaning in lessons learned."⁸ Sandlin unspools her stories, following the thread back to the books that have provided her a sense of history and self.

Romero's storytelling provides his place of reconciliation. His narratives arise from a life lived in the nest of two cultures: his father is Cochiti Pueblo Indian and his mother is non-native. Raised in Berkeley, California, and proclaiming art as his vocation, he crisscrossed the landscapes of the Southwest from Santa Fe to L.A. in search of an art education, and finally returned to the ancestral Pueblo lands to develop his professional practice as a potter. The strong connectedness to native heritage

informs Romero's work but does not mire it in the past: Romero incorporates Pueblo pottery-making methods and mines the decorative patterns of ancient Mimbres and Anasazi pottery but contemporizes the work through the use of pop culture identifiers and narratives centered on current issues.

Characters and symbols drawn from Marvel Comics and Greek myths perform as heroes and villains in Romero's stories; themes vibrate around the edges of anti-colonialism and identity. In *Death of Achilles*, the great warrior, thought to be invincible, is brought to his knees (literally) by an arrow through his heel. The felled Greek hero is the symbol of the demise of American Indian tribes that have been isolated on reservations and afflicted by poverty and alcoholism. In *Manscape*, a group of men and their dog stand in front of a mobile home, compositionally gathered together on an imaginary horizon line. Below is the soil from which the men sprang and will return (foregrounded by the buried skeleton), and above is the sky of stars and planets, in view, but unattainable—definitely unreachable by the RV, which is powered by mechanics but devoid of the spiritual power to reach transcendence. (His drawings frequently elicit humor.) Romero has found his place in the role of the visual storyteller. His closely observed narratives deftly expose the absurdities of human nature, especially those that arise when cultures collide.

Ehren Tool is another artist who has found his poetic space at the crossroads of clashing cultures and collapsing worlds. A Marine veteran of the first Gulf War (1991), Tool utilized the G.I. Bill to provide funding for the study of art and ceramics, acquiring his undergraduate and graduate degrees (BFA, USC; MFA, UC Berkeley). Once he settled with his family in Berkeley, and was fulfilling his job as senior laboratory mechanic at the Ceramic Department, UC Berkeley, he turned his attention to the vocation to which he was

destined. This involved the making of “little silly cups” stamped and impressed with images of the military and war.⁹ The imagery is often graphic and provocative—skeletons, grenades, bombs, soldiers at gunpoint, gas masks, and political blowhards. Tool states: “The cups in this show were made in America but have images from my war in the Middle East, my father’s in Vietnam and my grandfather’s war in the Pacific. We all carry our stories and they echo on.”¹⁰

The cups are displayed in large numbers, standing shoulder to shoulder on stacked shelves. Tool’s objective is to incite conversation about war and its causes, and encourage an awareness of the soldier’s experience. “Once you’re exposed to war, and that kind of violence at that scale, I think it does change you in a way,”¹¹ explained Tool.

Having a foothold in two worlds, as soldier who lived daily with the specter of death, and as veteran attempting to rebuild a civilian life, Tool uses the cups as containers of redemption and catalysts of change; they are the devices that initiate the conversion from combatant to social activist. The artist reflected, “You can be for or against a particular war but I think it is too easy for us to look away...we as a country and as humans should actually look at what’s going on... I would like my work to vindicate the principles of peace and justice in the world. That is a lot to ask of a cup.”¹² Tool’s position at the potter’s wheel, where he has created more than 14,000 cups (all subsequently given away), has become his sheltering space and place of empowerment. The labor of handcrafting cups, and the ultimate act of releasing them to the public, provide the foundation for reclamation.

Jeff Oestreich and Michael Sherrill share a more physical connection to the concept of place. Both reside in rural environments that offer ample access to nature and the creative communities that spring up around pastoral enclaves. Oestreich and Sherrill are deeply

rooted to the locations where they have settled and built studios; this strong sense of place is palpable in their work.

As apprentice at the Leach Pottery, St. Ives, Great Britain (from 1968–1971), Oestreich was tasked with making the pottery’s Standard Ware, a full inventory of functional serving pieces shaped on the potter’s wheel. These pots were to be suitable for the tables of humble homes and exemplify Bernard Leach’s principles of simplicity, utility, purposefulness, and authentic expression. As a disciple, Oestreich absorbed these aesthetic ideals, as well as Leach’s philosophy on the relationship of pottery to life: potters who holistically combined art, ideology, craft, and design in their work created a richer life.

After the completion of the apprenticeship, Oestreich returned to the familiar territory of



W. A. EHREN TOOL
400, of Thousands, (detail) 2016



MICHAEL SHERRILL
Brightly Hidden, 2016

Minnesota (he had attended the University of Minnesota) and established his pottery studio in the rural region of the St. Croix Valley. This proved to be an ideal situation: the location afforded access to participate in the St. Croix Valley annual pottery tour, a momentous open-studio event, and the stillness of country life provided the isolation necessary for a pottery practice. To this day, the artist still uses the manual wheel designed by Leach in the 1920s as he feels the “slower revolution of this type of wheel relates to the unhurried pace of life lived here.”¹³

Oestreich’s early works were handsome, well crafted serving ware that bespoke the fluidity of the potter’s wheel and were extensions of his training in Asian, English, and European

ceramic traditions. His primary concern, which has remained constant, is how his pottery “operates in a domestic setting, both physically and aesthetically.”¹⁴ Further explorations and the search to develop a unique voice led to assembled forms that combined thrown and manipulated elements, as evinced in *Sushi Tray* (2015).

Oestreich’s mature work of altered cups, plates, pitchers, teapots and trays are studies in the melding of elegant sculptural form with functional imperative. The earthiness of Oestreich’s domestic ware is tangible in its mass, weight, and tonal qualities. The coarse beauty and directness of design—based on simplified geometric volumes—recalls the view from his studio window. The artist cites the untamed natural landscape as a point of reference and source of inspiration. Oestreich has developed his glazes in direct response to the colors he experiences in his surroundings: dark greens of the pine tree forest, ochre hues from the wheat fields, and “a turquoise grey of the sky as a storm sweeps across the fields.”¹⁵ Further, several of the cups in this exhibition display a ribbed surface that is a translation of the corrugated roofs from the outbuildings on his property. In the last ten years, Oestreich has added the stylizations of art deco to his design vocabulary resulting in functional pottery that echoes the geometric and architectonic profiles of the era.

For Michael Sherrill, the sense of place embraces both physical and invented space. The ruggedness and majesty of Appalachia has offered Sherrill the opportunity for deep creative involvement. The Appalachian Mountains in western North Carolina provide the backdrop to his youth and training, as Sherrill grew up in this area and has had an ongoing relationship with Penland School of Crafts, both as instructor and student. Sherrill’s connection to color, structure, and iconography are related to the bucolic landscape in which his home and studio are situated. Relocating

in 1997 to the small town of Bat Cave, North Carolina, Sherrill positioned his workshops (for clay, metal, and glass working) on a ten-acre rural property alongside a 19th century log cabin he enlarged to serve as family home.¹⁶

The picturesque view from Sherrill's studio doors frame the cove and the verdant wild landscape on his property. This has led the artist to see nature anew, to observe its life cycle, know its needs, and be aware of its dangers. "I see a reflection of the human experience in the natural world," Sherrill commented, "there is sex, new life, struggle, and death, and after all of that, springtime comes and brings renewal."¹⁷ Sherrill builds his sprawling floral sculptures with intricacy and precision of design; the refined and perfected surfaces render them wall and pedestal jewels. The colorful palette, decorative patterns, and abstracted forms that comprise *Rhododendron* and *Brightly Hidden* are exemplars of the exaggerated tropical flora and fauna that Sherrill imagines growing in his "Southern Gothic mountain landscape."¹⁸ These heightened representations are hyper-real, intensely observed studies, amplified by chromatic saturation; they are the marriage of nature and the artist's intervention. This is Sherrill's strategy: to give the viewer the impression of the organic life he sees swirling around him now that he has become alert and sensitive to the surroundings in which he lives.

Like Sherrill, all of the artists in this exhibition are attached to the places and traditions where they find meaning and inspiration. Whether of physical space or dreamscape, whether fixed in actual time and location or mediated by memory, or devised of pure invention, place is a guiding force that sustains, shapes, and transforms their aesthetic impulses. The artists' explorations in clay have provided the platform to objectify the places that have had holding power and compelled these ceramicists to give voice to their unique stories. As Houston has stated in his essay,

it's part of an endless dialogue "between the human imagination and the world we find ourselves inhabiting and continually trying to understand."¹⁹

NOTES

1. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
2. Houston, James D. "A Writer's Sense of Place." In *A Writers Workshop In A Book*, edited by Alan Cheuse and Lisa Alvarez, 76-85. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007.
3. Houston, 76-77.
4. Chris Antemann, artist response to author's questionnaire, September 1 and 2, 2016.
5. Chris Antemann, email exchange with author, September 2, 2016.
6. On the selection of the two works for the Annual, Antemann explains the intention that governed her choice: "*The Garden of Delight* 2016 is the first major piece (and my largest to date made in the US) after the years I spent at MEISSEN making the *Forbidden Fruit* Exhibition...*An Occasional Craving* 2011... was the last major piece and one of the largest to date before I began my time with MEISSEN. I liked the idea of having these 'bookends' at Scripps, illustrating another story in addition to the ones in the pieces."
7. Anna Silver, artist response to author's questionnaire, September 5, 2016.
8. Porntip Sangvanich, conversation with the author, September 10, 2016.
9. Red Weldon Sandlin, email exchange with the artist, September 1, 2016.
10. Ibid. September 7, 2016.
11. Craft in America, <http://www.craftinamerica.org/artists/ehren-tool/>
12. Ehren Tool, artist response to author's questionnaire, August 30, 2016.
13. Craft in America, <http://www.craftinamerica.org/artists/ehren-tool/>
14. Ibid.
15. Jeff Oestreich, artist response to author's questionnaire, September 13, 2016.
16. Jeff Oestreich Statement, <http://www.redlodgeclaycenter.com/artist/jeff-oestreich/>
17. Jeff Oestreich, artist response to author's questionnaire, September 13, 2016.
18. Joan Falconer Byrd, "Natural Narratives," *American Craft*, vol. 70, no. 2, April/May 2010, 84.
19. Michael Sherrill, artist response to author's questionnaire, September 8, 2016
20. Ibid.
21. Houston, 85.