

# Painterly CERAMIC SURFACES

BY CAROLYN GENDERS

Drawing underpins all of my ceramics. I explore the natural world in sketches of soft pencil or black felt-tip marker, I need no color references—they distract me. Photographs are too indiscriminate and flatten the subject, a drawing is more intimate. I draw to see and to experience the visual world in a tangible way. The physical act of putting pencil to paper inspires me (1).

The essence of my practice is abstraction through drawing; capturing elements of the landscape (2, 3). Color, texture, and mark making are the core elements of my work and are evocative of the natural world, but yet wholly abstract.



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1 *Summer Blues*, 15 in. (39 cm) in width, earthenware, burnished terra sigillata, fired to cone 06, 2015. 2 The landscape, streams, and rivers of North Wales are a continuing inspiration for all my work. 3 Five-minute sketch done in felt pen completed while by the river in Wales. 4 *Black with Pastel Blue*, 11 in. (28 cm) in width, earthenware, burnished terra sigillata, fired to cone 06, 2015.

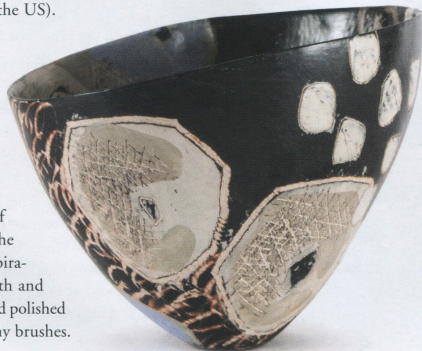
After 30 years of ceramic practice, the acts of looking, analyzing, and interpreting what I see are now part of my artistic DNA and I work intuitively.

#### Surface Development

Creating a surface that interacts with the form is my focus and I continuously challenge myself when making my coiled vessels and sculptural pieces to integrate a painterly surface that weaves around the form. Vitreous slip is the perfect ceramic medium for a painterly effect. Halfway between a slip and a glaze, it can be applied at any stage of the process: leather hard, dry, bisque, and even, at times, on top of glaze. It has the versatility and immediacy of paint; the slip becoming part of form. Once fired, no distracting glaze layer covers my forms; the semi-matte finish of the slip is my ideal surface (see 11).

Vitreous slip shares many qualities with and can be applied in the same way as paint; it has the subtlety of watercolor when mixed thin and achieves surfaces similar to that of opaque acrylics when mixed to the consistency of single cream (similar to full-fat cream in the US). It is even possible to build up layers of colors and paint freely, creating rich, textural surfaces (4).

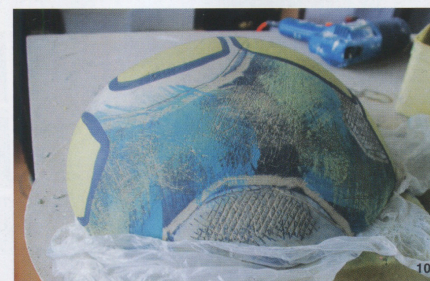
After coiling a vessel form, I scrape and smooth the clay to prepare it for the slip application. The simplicity and purity of the leather-hard clay and the form of the bowl are my inspirations for surface. The warmth and smoothness of the scraped and polished clay entices me to pick up my brushes.



I approach a form as I do a canvas, roughing in the background, applying layers of black or gray slip (5). The transformation from pale naked clay to dark mysterious richness is exhilarating. I then begin the composition by adding shapes with a white slip (6), which are occasionally followed by highlights with another color, continuing what I consider to be the base of the composition—colored shapes overlapping each other.

#### Tools

I have a comprehensive collection of brushes, each selected for its own characteristic: hard, soft, fat, wide, nylon, or bristle. As they wear, they make particular marks and often become more valuable for that. I look out for and buy utensils from cooking shops and home improvement stores to use as studio tools or collect sharp pieces of shell on the beach. I also make my own tools with which to make sgraffito marks.



5 Applying the first layer of black/gray slip to create the background. 6 Roughing in shapes as the start of the compositions and highlighting the white with nickel slip. 7 Sgraffito marks created with a flat Surform blade. 8 Additions of turquoise-green loose birthmarks and lime-green slip shapes are painted on top. Note the 'ghost' of the marks beneath. 9, 10 The exterior is treated with equal importance. Slip is applied at the same time to both surfaces, never as an afterthought. 11 *Orange Sgraffito*, 13 in. (33 cm) in diameter, fired to cone 1 and 02 in an electric kiln.

#### Sgraffito Mark Making

I scratch into the surface between painting the colors (7). The sgraffito affects the next layer of slip, creating a ghost of the marks underneath and adds a textural quality to the colored shapes. Consideration of the exterior of the piece is as important as the interior (8–10); each form is a three-dimensional canvas.

Much of my experience of working with layers of color was discovered while print making. The process is remarkably similar and therefore transferable to working with slips applied to clay. I have found this parallel activity inspires and influences my ceramic surfaces and vice versa. Nothing will ever replace my dedication to the ceramic process, but I am spell bound by the immediacy of printing. I feel that my practice is richer for the experience of working in different media and being constantly challenged.

I finally reach a point where I know that the piece is finished, a decision based on many years of practice and experience. I put it aside, returning several times to look at, evaluate, and make final adjustments. I fire my pieces in an electric kiln to the point of vitrification. Although I have a good idea of how a piece will look when it comes out of the kiln, I am constantly excited by the possibility of the unexpected (11).

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