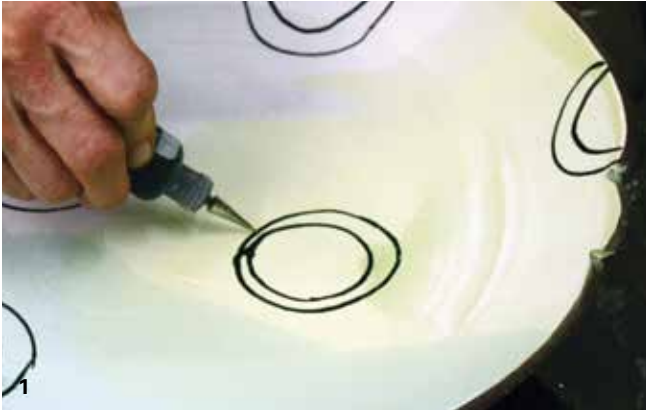


CREATING A LAYERED COMPOSITION

by Lauren Kearns





1 Apply color to the whole surface on a bisque-fired piece, then apply black underglaze outlines with a small applicator bottle fitted with a metal tip. **2** Brush on colored underglazes loosely, filling the outlines. Underglaze can be watered down to become similar to watercolor paint. **3** With an applicator bottle filled with a lighter underglaze color, apply additional details. This will melt down to give a visual texture. **4** Brush another layer of the watered-down underglaze on top of various elements to create depth.

I grew up looking at Japanese lacquerware, which is now a source of inspiration for creating patterns and decoration on my work. Emphasizing pattern over form has been a motivating drive in my work. Since playing with an English tea set at age 4, I've been fascinated with the ways that pattern can flow over forms. My intention is to wrap the form with decoration. Today, my pattern inspiration comes from nature and from a Japanese sensibility of asymmetry.

Timing, Tools, and Underglazes

I've used underglazes in a variety of methods, on bisqueware and on greenware. Working on greenware allows for mistakes to be erased easier than when working on bisqueware, as the darker blues, greens, and blacks generally cannot be fully erased in bisqueware without additional sanding. Alternately, working with bisqueware allows for greater handling of the pieces and the washes.

Currently I'm using the Mayco Stroke and Coat series, however any underglaze could be used in this manner. I buy 1-inch tall, empty plastic squeeze bottles and attach tips that are made for mechanical pencils on top of the bottles and use these to draw. These tips (#09, #07, #05) create a nice line. The viscosity of the underglazes determines which tip I use, but the most common tip is #09. These tips and bottles can be purchased on Dharma Trading Company (www.dharmatrading.com), as they're commonly used in batik and fabric design.

Preparing Underglazes Made with Stains

When I first started using color, I called Mason Color Works for advice on the best approach to begin painting with the ceramic stains. Based on their advice and experimentation, when I make my own underglaze colors, rather than using Gerstley borate

or a frit as a flux, I combine a ratio of 20 grams of my base formula (see recipe below) to 10 grams of stain to make an underglaze. I mix my underglazes with enough water to make them the consistency of watercolors, because thicker applications tend to form a crust in the firing.

For some types of decorations, and for some colors, commercial underglazes give a better result, so I use those in conjunction with the underglazes I make myself.

**LAUREN KEARNS
UNDERGLAZE BASE
Cone 010-10**

Kona F4 Feldspar*	44.44 %
Nepheline Syenite	22.22
Ball Clay	11.11
EPK Kaolin	22.22
	100.00 %
Add: Macaloid	0.22 %

Use 20 grams of liquid base to 10 grams of stain for underglazes. *Substitute Minspar 200 Feldspar for Kona F4 Feldspar, which is no longer available.

Creating the Patterns

When working with bisqueware, I rinse it to remove any dust before applying the underglazes and then wait until the next day to add the washes and color as I want an even wash coverage. When creating the composition, I consistently draw odd numbers (3–5) of major elements, such as the larger flowers/leaves or pattern. After that, it's free form. I find that having an odd number of major design elements lends to visual harmony and balance, while an even number divides the space. In my drawings, I'm inspired by and reference patterns and forms in nature.

There are several commercial underglazes that work well for creating fine lines. I use Duncan Concepts colors as well as Amaco Velvet Black and many Mayco Stroke and Coat colors. Some underglazes, like certain blues, can start to flux and become fuzzy rather than distinct lines when fired at a higher temperature, so it is important to test to see how they will work. I also use commercial underglazes as a wash by diluting them until they provide the density of coverage I'm looking for—whether watercolor strength or somewhat thicker.

I begin with several bisque-fired platters with blank surfaces. I study a piece, and decide on the colors I want to use. I then think about elements that I've used in past work that I like or that I want to investigate further. Working this way means I can explore a wide variety of interactions of colors as well as small to larger patterns.

I start by creating a wash to pour over the platter, sometimes using three washes for the base. Then, I create a freehand line drawing of the pattern (1), and start to layer the colors (2). I often sketch ideas on paper, and use those as well as objects I find in nature as references for creating the designs.

The last part is to fill the negative space with some line texture (3). I like the way that white looks on top of the colors because it bleeds into the colors when fired at higher temperatures. This is a simple technique, but it produces a wide variety of combinations. If necessary, I add more layers of transparent underglaze color to some areas (4) to create variety in tones.

Glazing and Firing

When the painting is finished, I either bisque fire the piece (if working on greenware), or if working on bisqueware, I wait 24 hours before the next step, which is applying a clear glaze, as the piece has absorbed water unevenly, and needs to completely dry for the clear glaze to adhere correctly. Patience is the number one skill one must develop when working with clay.

Remember that if you plan to apply a glaze on top of your surface decoration, the composition of the glaze can affect the colors. Information on the basic composition of most commercial stains, as well as notes on their compatibility or incompatibility with different materials found in glazes is available on manufacturers' websites like Mason Color Works (www.masoncolor.com), and on suppliers websites, like Clay King (www.clay-king.com). The clear glaze recipe that I use has a small amount of zinc in it, and I recently learned that the zinc source can make a difference in the colors, so test the clear glaze you use over all of your underglazes (including the commercial ones), to see what the colors will look like. If your glaze includes zinc, know that it will be incompatible with some colors, and be sure to consistently use the same clear glaze to achieve reliable, successful results.

I fire to cone 9, and I'm able to achieve a variety of colors with the underglazes. Lower firing temperatures will widen your color options. Yes, the labels on many commercial stains say they are recommended to be fired at cone 05/06 for best results; however, with testing I've learned that most will go higher, with the exception of the purples, which tend to be a bit fussier.

Lauren Kearns is a professional ceramic artist, teacher, and former Executive Director of Carbondale Clay Center. She has assisted students of all ages and abilities in ceramics and continues to be an active and avid promoter of the ceramic arts.



Advice For Jumping Into Surface Decoration

1. Decide on the temperature, and stick to one for exploration and testing.
2. Make tests of colors. Ignore the labels on the underglazes and test them at your chosen temperature. Test them alone as well as under a clear glaze.
3. Use whatever patterns, forms, ideas, or graphics you're drawn to as inspiration for your designs. Copy as necessary until you can find your own designs.
4. Draw on paper first to plan your pattern, then draw on the ceramic piece. Developing ideas is a process that takes time.
5. Explore the difference of drawing or painting on bisqueware versus greenware—there are advantages to both. For example, it's far easier to erase all traces of dark blues or greens on greenware. It's almost impossible to remove all of these dark colors on bisqueware, unless you grind it off, and then you might risk altering the form.
6. Make small slabs (4x3 in.) to test colors, and be sure to include tests in each kiln firing you do so you're always exploring and finding new options.
7. Use good brushes. They make a big difference. Ceramic materials are very hard on brushes, so plan for replacement often.
8. Try drawing with underglazes, slips, or glazes using metal bottle-tip applicators, brushes, an air brush, bulb syringes, fingers, wood or metal tools, ribs, etc. Make small clay canvases for tests.