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FOLDEROL

Article by Ronnie Watt



Top: Helga Ritsch: Porcelain cups with red cotton thread decoration, 60 mm height by 100 mm diameter presented on a small plate of 100 mm diameter nestled on a medium plate of 200 mm. (Website: www.helga-ritsch.ch)

Above: Christo Giles: Four bowls with copper glaze, 85 mm height by 160 mm diameter, 100 mm height by 210 mm diameter, 115 mm height by 265 mm diameter and 140 mm height by 350 mm diameter. Collection of Ronnie Watt.

The description that immediately comes to mind when I see yet another poorly painted or excessively ornamented pot, is "folderol" which the online Merriam-Webster¹ dictionary describes as: 'Hogwash. Claptrap. Hooey. Drivel. Malarkey. English is rife with words that mean "nonsense," and "folderol" is one of the many. Though not the most common of the words for nonsense, it's been around since 1820 and is still heard today. "Folderol" comes from "fol-de-rol" (or "fal-de-rall"), which used to be a nonsense refrain in songs, much like "tra-la-la."'

The makers of such pots would jump to their own defence with angry retorts that they are not "potters" but "ceramists", not presenting "pots" but "vessels" which gives them licence to challenge material, process, convention and reception. That beggars belief because their "vessels" so frequently speak of a dismal ignorance of elementary aesthetics and rather of their wild abandon to decorate with appendages, ornamentation, glazes and paints. It makes me think that though they have blatantly failed to master constructed (or deconstructed) form, the culprits are too proud to admit defeat and abandon clay for the sake of a different medium that would be more tolerant of their artistic endeavours. Or, they have forgotten that one of the most important tools in a studio is the hammer which the internationally acknowledged Canadian potter, teacher, author and arts activist Robin Hopper² described as 'the best arbitrator in the event of aesthetic indecision'.

A published statement by a South African ceramist³ that There can be no other creative medium that is quite so unforgiving against poor craftsmanship as ceramics is', prompted a 'hallelujah!' from me and made me rush off to investigate that ceramist's own opus. I found clever satire painted on what can only be described as (very) clunky pots. What purpose the pots serve beyond being props for painterly expressions, is beyond my understanding of both craft and art. Is the pot intended to contain and convey more than the just the painted surface? Is the ceramist in pursuit of a 3-dimensional medium that permits a reading of a narrative in the round and in doing so, compel deeper contemplation? Does she call on the positive and negative spaces which pots present to juxtapose or accentuate her satirical observations? Are the pots by themselves perhaps satirical references to pottery? And a last question, wouldn't canvas or paper have served the same purpose as surfaces for illustration... and been easier and more forgiving mediums? If this ceramist's pots by themselves had some redeeming qualities, my reception of her oeuvre might have been very different.

It is my good right to reject ceramic frivolities which smack of ineptitude in their making and presentation just as it is anyone else's right to scoff at the type of pottery that I cherish. In essence, my eye is attracted to pieces which foremost reveal their soundness of form whether that be in classical proportions or the interpretations and innovations thereof and whether decorated with simple facets, judicious pinching and scraping or merely glazed. In essence, they have gravitas and dignitas. Rather than visually scream at me to get my attention, my preferred pots seduce me into owning them through their forms, lines, planes, depth, weight, volume, spaces and every other bit of evidence that they were thoughtfully and meticulously crafted.

I thought it would be judicious to re-read what some eminent potters/ceramists wrote about form and decoration before putting down my own thoughts. Keep in mind that I write as a collector and student of pottery which influences my perspective. Because I have not experienced the challenges, frustrations and successes which befall potters and ceramists and because I have such a wide selection of excellent works to choose from, I am not as forgiving about faults and flaws and in particular when those are camouflaged with decoration.

The acclaimed British ceramist Peter Lane⁴ wrote:

"Nuances of shape, combinations of colour, styles of decoration, and the relationship between these elements are the principal areas that offer the greatest scope for innovation. ... But it is the basically simple



Left: Dale Lambert: 'Earth to Heaven and a Little Bit in Between'. Installation of 12 thrown stoneware vessels in turquoise, lime green and bright blue glazes, fired in an electric kiln, varying heights from 50 mm to 270 mm and diameters of 80 mm to 205 mm.

Above: Hannun Lynn: Reduction-fired porcelain tea bowls decorated with a daub of copper over temmoku, 127 mm by 102 mm diameter.

(Website: www.hannunlynn.com)

Below: Mary Barringer: 'Platter with Red Tab'. Handbuilt stoneware with multiple slips and glaze, fired in an electric kiln, 483 mm length by 175 mm width by 25 mm depth.

the oeuvres of other potters and ceramists who I have come to admire as makers of functional objects. With 'function' I denote both user wares and display wares. These potters and ceramists (as per their own descriptions) restrict their "decoration" to simple coloured glazes, faceting, brushwork and minimal focal elements. Even if stripped of decorative work, the very forms which they produce would suffice as statements of excellence in aesthetics. Though designed as functional wares, their works simultaneously hold merit as objects d'art. They are the South African studio potter Christo Giles, the South African ceramist Dale Lambert, the Canadian ceramist Hannun Lynn and the Swiss ceramist Helga Ritsch.

Ritsch works with stoneware as well as a very white porcelain sourced in Limoges, France to produce bowls, cups, tableware and vases. The functional pieces are wheel-thrown, decorated with plain or muted-colour slips and translucent glazes and oxidation-fired in an electric kiln. A signature decorative element which she regularly applies is a length of red cotton thread which is looped through a fine hole and over the rim. The red thread is a reference to the German expression 'der rote Faden des Erzählens' which can be translated as 'following your destiny'. With this leitmotiv, explains Ritsch⁷, she 'brings things together' and that 'my works are different, but the red thread holds them together'. At the same time it 'stitches' her works to her personal life experiences and philosophy. As a powerful albeit fragile decorative element, the thread is a visual and intellectual accent for a work but is simultaneously integral to that form because it is anchored in it. It is also a statement that the work was hand-crafted.

form which is most capable of infinitely subtle variation and expressive refinement."

The American ceramist, teacher and author Glen C. Nelson⁵ (1913-2010) also addressed form and decoration: "... in ceramics, creating a form is the most critical process, but the techniques of decoration and glazing must not be overlooked. As the final operation, the embellishment of a piece can be the deciding factor in its success or failure."

Form, wrote Hopper⁶, is not confined to concepts of physical shape and dimension:

"The usual divisions of aesthetic appraisal are: form, proportion, function, surface, colour, process, intent, and content, not necessarily in that order. Aesthetics relate not only to matters of form, function, and surface, but also to cerebral, spiritual, and emotional ideas and ideals (intent and content). ... Often, established criteria of craftsmanship are diminished in favour of the concept behind the work. Unfortunately, this has led to an acceptance of the 'laissez-faire' sloppy work that has become commonplace, even in work that can by no means be considered conceptual.

I have watched two masters at work in shaping their forms. Both paid inordinate attention to their forms long before considering the decoration that would follow. The American ceramist Mary Barringer would return time and again to her innovative forms to shape and re-shape the planes, lines, curves and edges which would much later support the subtle, tactile decorative textural features. The South African studio potter Andrew Walford, on the other hand, is exact in throwing perfectly dimensioned forms at speed but would then relax into a Zen-mode and intuitively add a pinch or scrape or to dip and daub on slips and glazes. Both know where and when to stop in adding their interpretations and decorations to forms.

This same consummate dedication to achieving form as the foundation for their various approaches to decorated surfaces is obvious in





Andrew Walford at his Shongweni studio. (Photo: Leanda Walford.)

Artist websites/Instagram pages

Giles, Christo: www.christogiles.com and <https://www.instagram.com/christogiles>
 Lambert, Dale: <http://daleceramics.wixsite.com/dale-ceramics>
 Lyn, Hannun: www.hannunlyn.com and www.instagram.com/hannunlyn
 Ritsch, Helga: www.helga-ritsch.ch and https://www.instagram.com/helga_ritsch_ceramics
 Walford, Andrew: www.andrewwalfordpottery.com and <https://www.instagram.com/walfordpottery>

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4. Lane, P. 1988. *Ceramic form*. London: Collins, p. 8
5. Nelson, G.C. 1971. *Ceramics: A potter's handbook*. New York: Rhinehart & Winston, p. 189
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10. Lambert, D. [sa] Ceramics Southern Africa. (Member's page.) (O) Available at <http://www.ceramicsa.org/Dalelambert.html>. Accessed 21 June 2017.
11. Coetsee, E. 2002. *Craft art in South Africa*. Cape Town: Struik, p. 101
12. Lane, p. 120
13. Hopper, p. 19

The Toronto-based ceramist Lyn works with a pure white English porcelain to create functional objects which reflect her conceptual self-expression. Being a Jamaican-born Chinese, living in one of the most ethnically diverse cities in the world, Lyn^{8,9} embraces her 'intuitive ethnic history' and melds that with international influences which span from Sung Dynasty glazes to Danish industrial ceramics. She does not dress up function as art but fuses art and function in the design and decoration of her forms and specifically in the paper-thin cups onto which she either slip-trails a cherry blossom design or presents in a simple glaze, the latter strongly reminiscent of Chinese celadon and sang de boeuf. The design of the cups incorporates a slightly tapered wall rising from a low pedestal foot. The wall ends in an angled rim with a protruding corner at the point of overlap. It instantly connects the viewer/user with classic Chinese porcelain and contemporary industrial design, or as Lyn defines it, 'to bring awareness and ritual to everyday life'.

In recent years Lambert has developed a range of porcelain bowls which she describes as 'robust, bold forms' in comparison to earlier works where she focussed on exploring and presenting the translucency of porcelain.¹⁰ Though indeed physically and visually bold, the works beg to be appreciated for being shapely, graceful, well-proportioned, dignified and imposing. Lambert cannot be faulted for her technical handling of her materials nor for how she breaks the constraints of a very basic (and even mundane) form by adding spin through expansive curves, generous volume, height and colour. Her use of shape and colour suffice and anything else would have been extraneous and even frivolous.

I use every opportunity to proclaim my admiration for the work of Giles and consider him as one of the leading figures in 21st century South African functional pottery and, as regards his work with copper glaze, to match the best that comes out of contemporary studios anywhere in the world. Consideration of form and function precede his decoration options. He is highly skilled in faceting clean lines or textured planes and restricts his choice of glazes to subdued colours. The effect, as described by Elby Coetsee¹¹, is '... simple but strong forms, resulting in work of unpretentious and understated beauty'. The accompanying photo which illustrates Giles' work, delivers the proof: a set of bowls in sang de boeuf with the glaze interrupted at the rim for a startling but most pleasing effect.

Grasping at decoration in pursuit of being "original" and to demand (as opposed to command) attention, is what Lane¹² decries as 'merely to prettify' and of which Hopper¹³ says that 'we are more concerned with appearances than with truth or meaning'. This becomes more apparent when we see a potter or ceramist who has achieved attention for something that was initially novel and even praiseworthy, but then falter in producing anything other than that or in a next step would load on even more decorative elements in a desperate attempt to retain the attention. Novelty is only novel until the next sybaritic twist or tweak comes along... and especially so when novelty is dismissive of all considerations of form. But here's the catch: good form by itself does not offer redemption from being bland and unattractive and yes, it can also become folderol.