



SHAWN SPANGLER

VARIATIONS ON SIMPLICITY

by Glen R. Brown

Gray-green glazes respond to gravity with syrupy lenticude, flowing downward to pool in deepening hues along the joints of spouts, below handles, and in recesses of varying shapes before thickening into candied bulges along their lowest reaches. Interrupting the glistening green are circular blots of pallid yellow that trail gently into nebulous streaks, creating patterns of diffuse illumination, like streetlights softened and obscured by a fog. At the glaze frontiers,

glassy green gives way to a pristine, slightly granular white that seems to await the liquid advance of the glaze as the dry sands of a beach lie ready to absorb the most ambitious wave of a high tide. In the vessels of ceramist Shawn Spangler, wet and dry—like the binaries liquid and solid, motion and stasis, clarity and obscurity—are primary opposing terms in an aesthetic that is at once reductive in its choice of variables and complex in the visual effects

Left: Spangler throws various parts on the wheel and then pieces them together to find new combinations and variations of form.

Right: Ewer and stand, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, porcelain with incised decoration and stain inlay, with glazes, fired in an electric kiln to cone 7, 2011.

Far Right: Pitcher, 13 in. (33 cm) in height, porcelain with incised decoration and stain inlay, with glazes, fired in an electric kiln to cone 7, 2011.



that it coaxes from these restricted means. The result is a sophisticated sparseness that elicits ripples of association while maintaining a dignified reserve.

While the tonal gradation produced by the dripping and pooling of glaze generates a subtle dynamic in Spangler's work, the effect is ultimately due more to the guiding influence of forms than to inclinations inherent in the glaze itself. In other words, the glaze achieves its variation largely in response to the physical attributes of the vessels. Angles, indentations, piercing, folds, incisions: these are the principal means by which Spangler disposes color, and they are effective substitutes for the brush strokes by which his artistic counterparts working in oils on canvas achieve similar painterly effects. Consequently, Spangler's process of making pots begins with attention not only to the particular features that a given vessel will acquire but also, and even more important, to the way in which those features will affect the movement of glaze. Especially when working with complex forms, he generally begins with a series of line drawings that serve to define paths of energy. "The sketches," he notes, "are kinetic, directing a movement and working out a strategy for where things are going to go."

While this method may suggest an organic visualization of the pot, in which a central idea germinates and unfolds with the integrity of a living organism, the next stage in Spangler's process is more mechanical. While he seeks to make each piece unique in some respects (and could hardly be called a production potter), he normally works on several closely related forms simultaneously. "I always throw four or five base elements and a number of other parts," he explains. "Then I'll line everything up and start assembling, looking at the scale and proportion and thinking about how everything works together." The constructive nature of this method of production could be compared to that of modernist vessel design at the Bauhaus, for example, but Spangler's intent is always to employ the resulting geometric clarity as a foil to the more fluid effects of glaze. Even at their most severe, his forms are mollified by the smoothing influence that glaze exerts as it flows thickly over precise edges and fills right-angled joints.

Although Spangler favors this effect of glaze soothing the severity of ceramic form, he occasionally cultivates impressions of softness in the porcelain itself, most notably by imitating the cushioned look of upholstered furniture. Poking surfaces to suggest buttons that pull fabric tightly inward against a thick padding, he produces tactile details that are also in a small way autobiographical. "I have an upholstered chair that used to sit in my family's living room," he explains. "For the past ten years, I've been taking it from studio to studio, and it's made its way into my work." In some cases the allusions to upholstery are subtle, consisting only of dots impressed into the porcelain or even tiny button-like circles punched from clay using a leather-working tool. In other instances a pillowy impression is produced when Spangler turns the long lips of bowls over themselves and attaches them midway down the exterior to produce double walls. The addition of hollow, bulbous handles creates porringers that appear inflated and even elastic.

While the indentations, appendages, edges, and joints of Spangler's porcelain forms play a vital role in his aesthetic, the crowning glory belongs unequivocally to the glaze, limited though it may be to pale green, blue, and yellow. Green predominates: a testament to an early and lasting impression made on Spangler by Song dynasty Longquan celadons and northern green wares such as thin-walled Yaozhou vessels. Spangler's glaze is not, however, a true celadon but rather an effective alternative born from necessity. After finishing graduate school and beginning a residency at the Clay Studio in Philadelphia in 2006, he found gas firing to be too costly and turned instead to firing in an electric kiln to cone 7 and a glaze that he developed as a convincing celadon substitute. After



Above: Tumblers, to 6 in. (15 cm) in height, porcelain, 2007. Below: Serving tray, 17 in. (43 cm) in length, porcelain with incised decoration and stain inlay, with glazes, fired to cone 7 in an electric kiln, 2011.

mixing a base, he typically divides the glaze into two buckets then tints each quantity with mason stains, one green (or less frequently, blue) and the other yellow.

With a chemical makeup that is nearly identical, the green and yellow glazes blend easily during firing to produce soft transitions that seem to fade and fall with gravity. Yellow may be employed as an accent color on knobs, handles or other appendages, but more often Spangler applies it to vessel walls in patterns of circles. Wax resist allows these yellow circles to retain hints of their original shape, even after the green glaze, added by dipping the vessel, begins to flow over and alongside it during firing. The yellow and green combination of descending glazes, like the “egg and spinach” palette of some Tang dynasty wares, is visually appealing for both its harmony and its subtlety. While Spangler expresses admiration for ceramists who create vibrant surfaces with a range of hues, his own inclination has always been toward a limited number of generally pastel glazes. “I enjoy things like the surfaces of Sanam Emami’s early work, all those gorgeous glazes running down,” he states, “but, for my own work, I just find that simplicity works better.”

Much can be done while remaining within the parameters of simplicity, however, and Spangler employs his restricted repertoire of colors and surfaces to masterful effect. Like the glazes, the exposed porcelain of his vessels is a key actor in his small cast of players. The final member of his formalist ensemble is a thin red line that imposes geometry on open expanses of glaze or exposed clay body. The line, like the crisp edge of a collar or a neatly ironed crease in a garment, defines the larger composition of which it is a part in terms of aesthetic decisiveness—or better still, incisiveness, since the lines actually begin as incisions while the clay is in a green state. After bisque firing, Spangler employs a syringe to fill the thin grooves with a mixture of stain, Gerstley borate, and cone 4 ball clay. Meticulously rendered, the lines convey the impression of contours in a blueprint or snapped chalk lines on a wall. Such allusions to architecture are intended, though deliberately left vague. “They’re just a reference to a generally architectonic way of working,” Spangler notes.

In part the architectural allusions creep in because of Spangler’s concern for functional form, which guides his thoughts about making despite the care that he lavishes on the aesthetic aspects of his work. Much of his reflection on utility is specific to his personal environment, although it can be equally applicable to a more general context. Contemplating, for example, a glass of water by his

bed at night and recognizing that by morning it will have collected a multitude of air-borne particles, he conceives of a ewer with a lid that serves equally well as a cup. “The pot is a basic human expression,” he reflects, “but it bridges the gap between beauty and domestic function.

I produce objects for use that are intended to enhance living spaces and to affect the experiences that people have there. I’m particularly interested in the time that people might spend with a pot, the thoughts that a ewer, for example, might inspire when it’s used: the filling, pouring out, and refilling. It’s repetitive, like a tree growing leaves, dropping them, and regrowing them.”





Teapot, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, porcelain, 2010.

For Spangler, this cyclical metaphor is equally relevant to the vessel's relationship to history, a factor that drives his creativity as fundamentally as does respect for function and regard for aesthetics. His ever forms faintly echo both Koryo dynasty Korean celadon pieces and Song dynasty examples that he observed while a resident artist in China in 2002. However, he developed his own versions as part of a much broader historical investigation that even acknowledged the etymological derivation of the word *ewer* in an anglicized form of the Old French *eviere* and ultimately the Latin *aquarius*. While Spangler recognizes that such intimacy with the lineage of forms is not requisite to making contemporary ceramics, revisiting the details, both aesthetic and utilitarian, of the evolution of those forms, is what excites him most about making vessels. That, he observes, "is what really got me into taking a lump of clay and turning it into a beautiful functional object."

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DERIVING INSPIRATION FROM PROCESS

by Shawn Spangler

Historical ceramics are a wellspring for me, influencing my approach to material. From the beginning, these images have helped me navigate through form, prompting my willingness to take risks, and led to new discoveries in the creative process. This investigation has made me particularly sensitive to the proportional relationship between parts of functional objects.

I work primarily on the wheel, throwing small forms that I piece together into complex ceramic vessels. Of the many thrown parts, a certain amount become castoffs that are fired and collected for future use. I consider these forms to be building blocks, like a three-dimensional sketch pad. Playing with these individual forms helps me find new combinations and compositional variants.

Recently, I have begun investigating proportion, scale, line, and volume on Rhino computer assisted design (CAD) software. The integration of such methods that continually advance modern ceramic vessel production have increased the capacity for expansion in my own work. Working with CAD has become a process of analyzing, sorting, and editing, allowing me to create shapes that can be stretched, deformed, and re-arranged in a manner similar to that of clay. These new mechanical methods allow for a more rapid research and development of form, ultimately permitting a more efficient process. I can investigate numerous designs in a shorter period of time and can begin creating forms on the wheel based upon the CAD designs.

My current collaboration with artist Bryan Czibesz expands on my interest in the relationship between traditional and mechanized production by exploring the ways an object can be interpreted through hand-thrown methods and three-dimensional digital technology. We are creating a succession of pieces through a system of generative appropriation. The process begins with a source object that I interpret and produce by hand. Bryan then reintroduces and reinterprets this object by the hand of the CAD/CAM machine. The project highlights the connections and margins between the manual/handcrafted and mechanical/digital process.

Shawn Spangler and Bryan Czibesz will be exhibiting their collaborative body of work Mapping Authorship during NCECA 2012 in Seattle, Washington.

For Spangler's collaboration with Czibesz, he will throw and assemble a piece on the wheel, then hand it off to Czibesz to scan three dimensionally into CAD software for manipulation. In this example, Czibesz reduces the smooth volume of the pot Spangler threw to progressively simpler interpretations of the planes that make up the form, until no further reduction is possible without losing the volume altogether.

