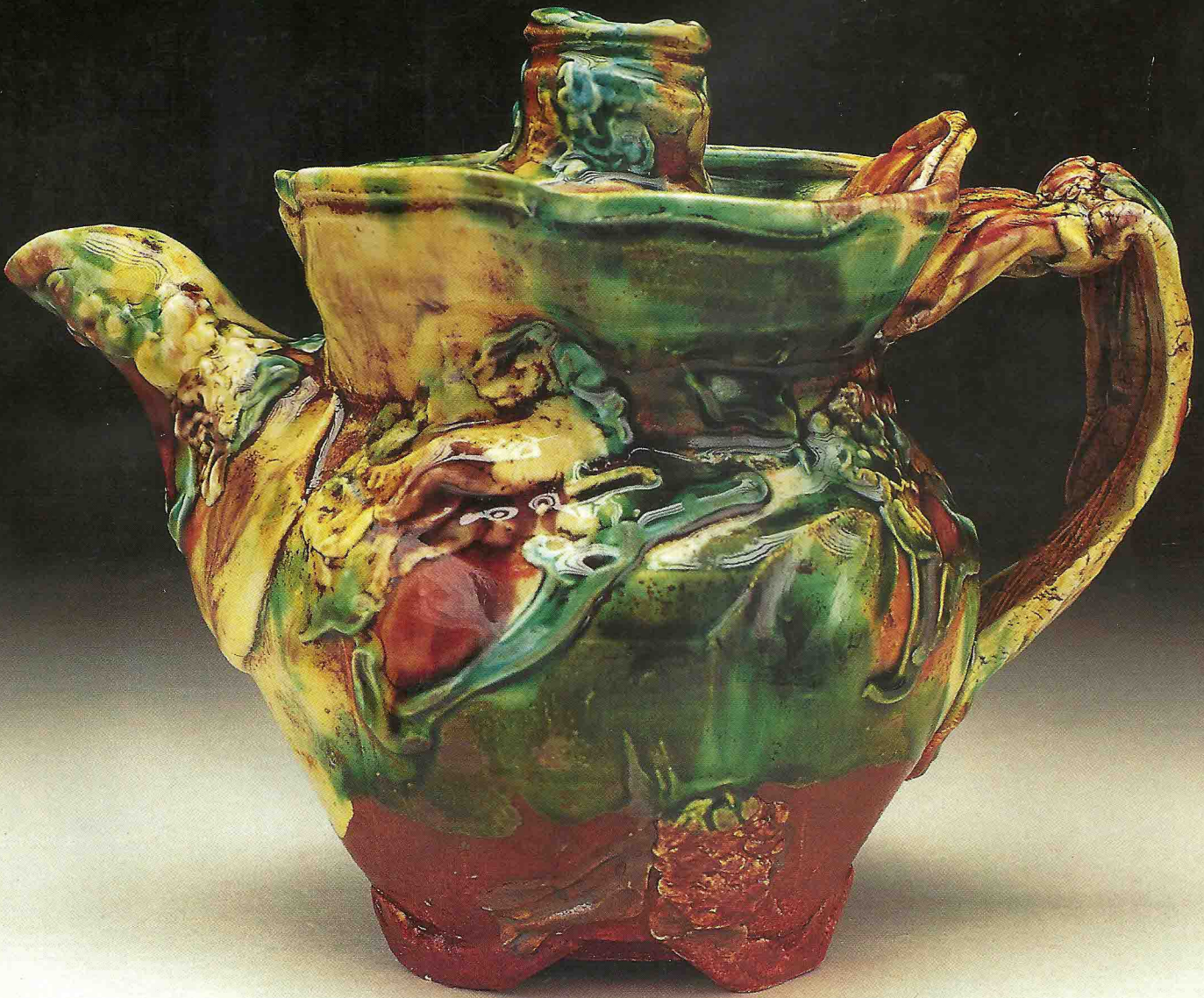


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# A Dialogue with Lisa Orr

by Rafael Molina-Rodriguez



Pitcher, 8 inches in height, earthenware, wheel thrown and altered, with sprigging, rouletting, slip trailing, terra sigillata and multiple glazes, fired to Cone 03 in oxidation, \$70.

*Texas potter Lisa Orr produces colorfully glazed wheel-thrown and altered earthenware teapots, pitchers and bowls, as well as pressed and altered platters. This interview was conducted at her studio adjacent to her home in Austin.*

**Interviewer:** How did you get started in clay?

**Orr:** I discovered ceramics in college. I went to the University of Texas at Austin and received a bachelor of fine arts. I then worked for local potters Ishmael Soto and Dee Buck to build up my experience—I would work two or three days for them and two or three days for myself. I had a little store in San Antonio for about three years, and I did craft fairs. At the same time, I took a whole bunch of workshops, and decided I needed more education.

I didn't think I wanted to go to graduate school. I thought it would be better to study with someone in particular, so I went to the University of Colorado and studied with Betty Woodman as a special student in 1989. Next, I went to the University of Minnesota where I spent nine months as a special student, studying with Mark Pharis.

My work was self-conscious, but for whatever reason, I needed to do it. We need to go through these self-conscious periods, rather than avoiding them, in order to get to something else. So I was probably making some very self-conscious terrible pottery, but it was what I needed to make at that time. It was sort of a pseudo folk-craft mingei-sota style or, at least, my interpretation of it.

I then went to graduate school at Alfred. It was a very nurturing and encouraging environment. All the doors that I didn't even know were there were flung open: the library, museum and the clay room. I tried everything that I could while I was there.

**Interviewer:** What effect did the time you spent with Betty Woodman have on your work?



**Orr:** It was very freeing. I was very interested in historical ceramics, but I had felt guilty borrowing from them. I felt like I should somehow be more original, or this was not from my time period and I shouldn't use it as a source.

One question that she always asked the students was, "Why not?" And so I started asking myself, "Yeah, why not?" It freed me to enjoy making those things and then move beyond them in my own way.

In my attempt to make good copies of ancient pots, I always wound up making something else. I also invented a lot of interesting little tools to attempt to make them.

**Interviewer:** What are some of the other influences on your work?

**Orr:** All kinds of folk pottery, including French, Oriental and Mexican, as well as restaurant ware. Mexican pottery, however, is my number-one influence. Some things, like the "Trees of Life," are done with such freedom and in a casual unself-conscious manner. There isn't anything that's less self-conscious. Mexican pottery also has the added ingredient of humor.

**Interviewer:** Prior to establishing your studio in Austin, you traveled extensively. What effect did your sojourns in Eastern Europe have on your work?

**Orr:** I first went there in 1991 because of my interest in international folk dancing. Every five years there is an international folk-dancing extravaganza in Bulgaria. This trip was between my first

and second year of graduate school. While I was there, I also toured Macedonia and Albania. I looked for potters, and made contacts. When I returned to Alfred for my last year of grad school, everyone encouraged me to apply for a Fulbright. I did and a year later I went. I received a \$13,000 stipend for travel, food and lodging.

I was based in Bulgaria from September to May. I was interested in studying the folk pottery of the region, and was loosely associated with a university as their student, but the faculty had no time or interest in my project.

I first went to the village of Etur, where there was a woman who made very nice folk pottery. She was out of the postwar generation; before the war, women didn't make pottery. After the communists took over, both men and women potters were trained in schools, rather than in the guild system.

I also traveled to Macedonia, which was far more interesting to me. In 1991, as a part of Yugoslavia, it was enmeshed in a civil war, and Fulbright would not send people there. Still, I traveled there as often as I could because the communist government hadn't changed (for better or worse) the old ways of making pottery and doing business.

Bulgaria was a mixture of old and new ways. In Bulgaria, potters are required to use electric kilns, but the energy supply was unreliable. There were unpredictable blackouts when energy was in short supply.

**Interviewer:** What was of particular interest to you about the Balkan potters?

**Orr:** Several things. I was really interested in the low-fire wood kilns that they used in Macedonia. The Roman type of kilns, which are basically a campfire with a floor above it, with holes poked in the floor and the top part of the kiln enclosed. These are large and they fire very quickly. They use thin light saggars with broken pieces for shelves and tumblestacking.

**Interviewer:** Do they tumblestack the glazed pots?

**Orr:** Yes. They're glazed. It doesn't seem so amazing to some people that they fire glazed greenware, but it is to me. And when they're in a hurry, they raw glaze and stack an entire kiln full. They can fire to temperature with scavenged dead wood in about three hours.

At 8:00 the next morning, the women were out there unloading a firing that ended the previous night at 10:00. It seemed too fast, yet the glazes were shiny with hardly any flaws.

**Interviewer:** What did you learn about the potters?

**Orr:** I wanted to know why somebody would do that job. In a village of potters, are they all marvelous and unself-conscious? Is it out of love for what they're doing or a great passion for form, or is it simply a need to have something to barter? Have they been made the same way since time immemorial?

**Interviewer:** And what did you discover?

**Orr:** I found out that a lot would do anything other than pot. For them, it's a very filthy, dirty life. In the village of Macedonia, they still made traditional items to sell to the locals and tourists; however, because of the war, their market was decreasing.

**Interviewer:** Let's talk about your work. You utilize a number of forming and decorating techniques. Will you elaborate on some of the materials and processes you employ?

**Orr:** Some things are thrown, then altered. Although I really like some of the effects that I can get from throwing, I'm looking for other effects. I like the combination of mold-made parts and thrown parts together. I'm trying many different ways of doing it. For example, I hadn't made pitchers in about a year because I'd lost my passion for making them the way I used to. Recently, I



Tureen with tray, 7 inches in height, wheel-thrown and altered earthenware, with sprigging, rouletting and slip trailing, dipped in terra sigillata and brushed with multiple glazes, fired to Cone 03 in oxidation, \$450.



made a mold that I throw the body in upside down, then add a spout.

**Interviewer:** In addition to throwing and altering, you do some unique hydraulic pressing.

**Orr:** It's different than anyone else I know. I'm using the press to get a beautiful edge. I put too little clay into a too large mold. I place it in certain shapes so that it fills the mold a certain way. Also, before I completely release the clay out of the mold, I can model it with roulettes. I cull the ones that don't fit my aesthetic.

**Interviewer:** Will you elaborate on your decorating techniques?

**Orr:** Rouletting is one. My stamping and embossing tools are made of fired clay; I use some soaking wet and some dry. I also use slip trailing and sprigs.

I dip the work in a terra sigillata made from ball-milled Alfred shale. Part of it goes away underneath the glaze, but I love the depth I get with it. I have different glazes that I overlap in different ways. It's amazing how long it takes

me to learn how to use combinations from these six glazes well. They're thick and viscous like Elmer's Glue and I apply them with brushes.

**Interviewer:** How do you fire?

**Orr:** In an electric kiln. A lot of them are fired on edge. Dennis Olson, the ceramics instructor at Amarillo College, made some stainless-steel plate racks for me. I can fire lots of plates on one shelf this way.

**Interviewer:** What temperature?

**Orr:** Bisque to Cone 01 and glaze to Cone 03 in oxidation.

**Interviewer:** Will you discuss some of the formal aspects—i.e., color, contrast, pattern, texture—of your work? Does low-temperature firing make color easier for you?

**Orr:** Yeah, for me it does. Although I've seen people do it successfully at higher temperatures, I cannot. And I don't want to. I don't want to use a gas kiln because right now I don't have a passion for high-temperature work. I work hard, glaze playfully and stack well. I don't

want to watch the kiln firing. I am content with the slightly more fragile low-fire things.

**Interviewer:** When you're designing pieces and applying the sigillata over the clay body, do you have in mind areas that you want contrasts of lights and darks?

**Orr:** Yes. Right now, I want to have less light and more dark. I don't use too much white, except on some pieces I want completely white so you can see the form better.

**Interviewer:** Texture is obviously an important element to you as well.

**Orr:** It's my favorite aspect, though I think my best work doesn't need it. Sometimes, on the best ones, I'll hold back and lightly touch them with decoration, perhaps just one sprig. I'll glaze it one single color with maybe some splashes of another color.

**Interviewer:** Asymmetrical balance is another element in your work.

**Orr:** It all started with Tony Hepburn asking me the question in graduate



Platter, 10 inches in length, pressed and altered earthenware with sprigging, rouletting and slip trailing, dipped in terra sigillata, brushed with multiple glazes, fired to Cone 03 in oxidation, \$190.





Bowls, 8 inches in diameter, wheel-thrown and altered earthenware with sprigs, rouletting, terra sigillata, slip trailing and multiple glazes, fired to Cone 03 in oxidation, \$40 each, by Lisa Orr, Austin, Texas.

school. "Why symmetrical?" I couldn't answer it then, and now I can. I've certainly thought about it a lot. The questions I ask myself now are: "Why not asymmetrical? Why not symmetrical? Why not just whatever is right for the moment?"

**Interviewer:** It's very organic and curvilinear.

**Orr:** Yes. It just keeps my eye on the piece and engaged. Hopefully, the viewer's eye as well. And there is something about the undulation, the sensuous flow of a wavy edge that I love more than maybe a straight, flat round one.

**Interviewer:** Is that part of your idea with the hydraulic press, to create that undulating rim or lip?

**Orr:** Yes. And they're all different when they come out. I can change them, too; they're still soft and malleable.

**Interviewer:** Your recent work has gone through an evolution. You have moved away from the functional to more sculptural forms. What are your thoughts about utilitarian pottery versus decorative vessels?

**Orr:** Back in the 1980s, my work was more functional. It was easier to sell because people understood it. They had seen it before. I made a lot of stackable bowls, plates and things like that. Now, I'm following what I really want to make in my heart, and not necessarily what the public easily recognizes and understands. They might find an unusual salad bowl over here and it may be the only one like it that I'll ever make.

**Interviewer:** So the work you're doing now is more one-of-a-kind?

**Orr:** They come in series. Sometimes I'll just decide I'm going to make a little batch of compotes a certain way. I'll make a new mold then. All of them will be very different in form and mood.

Whenever I look at a mold and have that slight feeling of dread, I just break it so I don't have to see it anymore. There's plaster in the driveway right now. This opens the door for new forms.

**Interviewer:** What plans do you have for your work in the immediate future?

**Orr:** I need to work on a more successful pitcher in a mold, and invent a new teapot and casserole. Right now, I'm taking little baby steps, and I'm getting awkward results, because it's the first time to do something very new.

Marketing wise, I really want to sell one-of-a-kind pieces online. I've been working with someone on my website ([www.lisaorr.com](http://www.lisaorr.com)), but it's still under construction. When it's completed, it will be ideal for me, because my entire inventory will be on view.

The website should make it easier for my wholesale accounts to order, since these pieces can be so different from one another. The pieces shown on the website will be for the galleries to see first, and for me to retail whatever they do not select.

Marketing online should be great, because I will have the freedom to make something new each time I go into the studio, rather than take orders.

**The author** *Rafael Molina-Rodriguez is an instructor at Tarrant County College-Southeast in Arlington, Texas.*

## Glaze Recipes

### Clear Base Glaze 1 (Cone 03)

Gerstley Borate .....	9.00%
Soda Ash .....	16.00
Frit 3110 (Ferro) .....	66.00
Edgar Plastic Kaolin .....	5.00
Flint .....	4.00
	<hr/>
	100.00%

Color variations are possible with additions, such as the following:

#### *Honey Yellow:*

Spanish Red Iron Oxide ..... 11.00%

#### *Turquoise:*

Copper Carbonate .....
 6.00% |

#### *Soft Blue:*

Cobalt Carbonate .....
 0.50% |

#### *Purple:*

Manganese Silicate .....
 5.00% |

(Note: when using this colorant, delete the silica in the base.)

#### *Green:*

Chrome Oxide .....
 0.25% |

Copper Carbonate .....
 6.00% |

Red Iron Oxide .....
 11.00% |

Better color variations are achieved with Clear Base Glaze 1, but Clear Base Glaze 2 is more stable.

### Clear Base Glaze 2 (Cone 03)

Gerstley Borate .....	12.00%
Frit 3110 (Ferro) .....	73.00
Edgar Plastic Kaolin .....	15.00
	<hr/>
	100.00%

Color variations are mixed with these additions:

#### *Honey Yellow:*

Spanish Red Iron Oxide ..... 11.00%

#### *Turquoise:*

Copper Carbonate .....
 6.00% |

#### *Soft Blue:*

Cobalt Carbonate .....
 0.50% |

#### *Purple:*

Manganese Silicate .....
 5.00% |

#### *Green:*

Chrome Oxide .....
 0.25% |

Copper Carbonate .....
 6.00% |

Red Iron Oxide .....
 11.00% |