

THE STUDIO POTTER



BACKWARDS *into the* FUTURE: TECHNOLOGY *and* SUSTAINABILITY



by Lisa Orr

San Antonio, Texas, is located much closer to the Mexican border than it is to any neighboring states, and we would go there often when I was young. Lots of people had colorful Mexican handicrafts, including pottery, in their homes. Whether or not it was real art, it made you smile. These handmade dolls, games, toys, and rugs were like what our ancestors used to make for their children many years ago. I grew up around all these bright, playful, clumsy things in our house, and many of our friends had them also. All of it was handmade or done with the casualness of a small production line. Much of the pottery was molded, but not in a clean, sterile, “tight” way like china from a department store or plates in an American restaurant. Instead it showed seams, bubbles, smears and fingerprints, and some fine delicate handwork on the edges. It was warm and approachable. Art hung on the wall; this was considered junky but fun.

I came to ceramics in college, and was enchanted with the wheel for many years. I used electric wheels and gas kilns, and made cone 10 reduction stoneware in college and for the first several years into my studio pottery career. My pieces included thrown dinnerware and ovenware, as well as pitchers, mugs, and bowls. I used high-temperature clays because at that time earthenware was not considered a legitimate art (or even dinnerware) material – art was supposed to be durable.

And yet, returning from college to San Antonio, I was surprised to notice how much I felt drawn to certain qualities about the charmingly awkward and slightly asymmetrical Mexican pots. Many books I pored over as sources contained ancient pots from Europe and Asia, which also happened to be earthenware. In the mid-1980s, ceramics trade periodicals began to offer more articles and technical information about earthenware, and I made the choice to use more color, sell slightly softer work, and spend less on firing by switching to low fire. Thick, rounded edges made almost anything unchippable. Though my interest was in glassy translucent glazes, I did

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not have enough technical background to know even how to begin to find this effect. Terracotta with white majolica glaze became the basis of my pottery business, and it was embraced by a city accustomed to brightly colored low-fire pottery yet wishing for a lead-free version.

My interest turned to trying to reinterpret T'ang Dynasty *san-cai* ware, eighteenth-century Whieldon ware, and sprigged Staffordshire, most of which had shallow molded elements under one or more lead glazes. I began trying to invent molds, and it was helpful to have some apparently molded Mexican wares right at hand. I wanted to make molds out of clay, but had never seen any. My first attempts were terrible. But at night, after throwing tortilla warmers all day, I kept at the project, calling it my hobby. I began to have a passion for earthenware, in spite of its purported fragility.

The after-hours approach did not yield the results I wished for, but the protected and encouraging environment of college finally did. After being in business almost seven years, I went back to college, taking continuing education courses at UC Boulder and the University of Minnesota, where I investigated everything I could about low-tech mass-production technologies that yielded beautiful individual pieces. Later, while in graduate school at Alfred in the early 1990s, I toured factories still using turn-of-the-century technologies, and got to see how natural restaurant ware looks before it is fettled and sanded to the clean industrial aesthetic. In museums I was able to study bisque clay Roman molds and view a large array of ancient glass-ware embossed and fluidly blown into molds.

I invented or reinvented all sorts of odd processes. Some of these I appropriated

and others I transformed to fit my small future individual studio. I was lucky to have access to Alfred's ceramic engineering school machinery to make pieces that resembled individually-molded Mexican wares. Even then the idea of a small "factory" workshop appealed, so others were often invited to join in the day's production. That's one benefit I did not expect: that, because so much was molded, I could expand my production somewhat easily to include others. I do find that I have to put my final touch on just about everything, but having helpers really enables me to keep productivity higher.

Finally, for the first time in my life, I felt that I was making my own work. In school, there was a saying that one would not make mature work until about ten years after finishing, because it took that long for one to deeply address all the questions that came up in graduate school. I think that has been true for me, though I only notice changes looking backward, as they appear so slowly over time. Technologically speaking, I have added to the one-piece mold a two-piece and finally a three-piece mold, where two sides interact with a bottom or top. These molds are thrown of soft clay, altered, and then bisque-fired to cone 08 to maintain necessary porosity. When making a mold, I keep in mind that I am throwing the empty space outside the pot and under it. Similar mold parts can be mixed up to create more interesting seam lines. One of my greatest pleasures is surveying the studio for what I can use to make the idea I have in my head that day, or deciding whether I have to make a new mold. I can quickly throw or hollow out a new one, let it get leather hard, and try it out before making final shaping decisions. This is why I never use plaster – I can work so much faster in clay. I have continued to utilize one-, two-, and three-piece bisque molds from the early 1990s. Aesthetically, I remain passionate about adding and enhancing the clay texture through glassy glazes, and letting the clay reveal its own fabric through the soft press-molding process.

Since graduation, I have continued to ponder the aesthetics of this process, relating it to the beauty of nature and garden and the enhancing of a healthy meal. In the last decade my life changed a lot, as I married and had children. I am interested in making pieces that my family and I want and need for use – pots that fit our table and our dining style. Because our table is not large, pieces combine multiple uses: a small salt and pepper set will become a sculpted centerpiece; a candleholder will present dessert or fruit. All of this is very nice, and my pottery holding our food gives me great satisfaction.

Lately, however, amidst peak oil prices and talk of sustainability, I am looking at my materials in terms of their carbon footprint. Almost all of them are highly refined frits, clays, and pigments that are mined or processed elsewhere and trucked in from all over the country. When I look at my work now, I see not only the object itself, but the petroleum energy use that is embodied within it, and I wonder how to calculate it. Although my pottery, to me, is about garden beauty, what am I causing in the process?

Recently I have been to Mexico to learn more about the people behind the pots of my childhood. Initially their aesthetics drew me in, but now I am interested in the whole process. The potters who utilize those molds work in the way their ancestors did for centuries. Locally dug clay is pancaked with a rock and the slabs loaded and smoothed on the interior of the mold. Local clays are often used in a sigillata to seal the pottery, and little wood is required to fire them to a light bisque temperature. I am reminded that they make something rough and fragile but technically virtuosic out of what is (for the most part) right at hand, making me wonder if I could do the same. This has made me prospect for local clays and glaze materials, partly from artistic curiosity, partly hedging a bet. My current commercially-purchased materials were created and shipped using acres of sequestered carbon or "buried sunshine" of eons ago, and I question how sustainable this system is. The technology I am dependent on may not be available my whole life, and I just may need to know how to make pottery that is even more low-tech.

