

Ceramics

MONTHLY



Checking the Compass

by John Glick

PHOTO: JIM BROWN/REUTERS/GETTY



A Ceramics Monthly Portfolio, Part I



Editor's note: In this two-part portfolio, Michigan potter John Glick discusses changes in his mid-career studio approaches and philosophies. Analytical and experimental throughout his 26 years as a full-time potter, Glick has continually sought something better in all aspects of his work. This, combined with a willingness to readily share his discoveries with others, has made him one of America's most influential potters.

Part II of this portfolio will appear next month. Both parts owe a debt to the retrospective of his work, shown recently at Alfred

University (New York), which served as a catalyst for Glick to reassess both his career journey and current heading.

I NEVER IMAGINED that there would be so many changes in what I make as a potter or in the profusion of my influences. But they happen regularly, predictably, nudging me off any comfortable moorings. Complacency doesn't stand much of a chance.

Examples that signal changes? Shape, surface, the spirit of the work—these are the most easily seen indicators. But there are other issues that make up a background texture: a renewed interest in using images from nature in my work; changes in physical approaches to working based on health considerations; how I work with studio assistants; and, certainly, how I feel about selling my work in a craft marketing structure that is undergoing extreme shifts of focus. And, to be sure, there are other issues to be discussed; issues that are often more complex to understand. These are the ones that get to the heart of being artists. Why do we do our work? What makes us willing to put up with the pain of discovery and learning? There was a time, some years ago, when I thought I knew more about all this. Now, partial explanations abound. I check my compass and steer with instinct and hope.

What I Make and Why

I have become very much aware of change not only in what I make, but also in what I think about making. A generalization to begin with: I see the relatively brief time I've been potting actively (26 years) in perspective. It has something to do with the evolution or the progression the work has made over those years, and what I am motivated to make now. My attitude has shifted a lot since I was "raised" in clay in the late 1950s and early '60s.

This period marked the rebirth of interest in the pot or vessel. A great deal of my history is in this direction. Yet, I have also had a constantly adventurous streak, which has found its way into my functional pots, as well as the sculpture or nonfunctional work—for example, the electroplated stoneware sculpture I did in the late 1960s.

These atypical phases of work continue, thankfully. Practically speaking, there are times when the mechanics of doing widely divergent bodies of work become cumbersome, but it's a price worth paying—such cross-fertilization is always rich.

I have thought a good deal about the term "production

potter." This is partly because I notice how readily people use that term to describe someone who earns a living making, among other things, useful pots. Earlier in my career, I may have used the description for myself. Now, however, I don't believe what I do can correctly be termed production. It has more to do with being productive in a philosophical sense. So we are not talking about numbers of pots, but about doing things in moderate numbers and being productive. All this comes about because of my interest in the pursuit of the spirit of creativity and the asking of the ever-present question "What if?"

One thing I'm clear about in my work is that I like...no, love...to decorate. The odd thing about this is that among my early influences were two teachers who were relatively conservative in decorating their own pots: William Pitney at Wayne State University; and Maija Grotell at Cranbrook. But the motivating forces for my decoration were Japanese pottery, and to a lesser degree Korean and Chinese pottery, seen in books and museums. You would probably not have too much difficulty picking out the Japanese influence in my work from the mid 1970s. This was what a friend once called my "Oribe period." It's a good thing he did, too, because comments like that help move one away from such "love affairs" before they become destructive.

Over the years, my pots' surfaces seem to tell the story of a trip that began with clay itself and led to the painting world. There is a love of the flow of color—a watercolorlike quality of revealing, yet being able to conceal as well—that keeps cropping up. And, for the past several years, I have noticed a marked resemblance between the marks on my pots and natural things, such as insects, feather patterns, satellite photos. I find it reassuring that I am creating surfaces that reflect these influences, but I have not consciously set out to do so. In the end, all anyone can do is rely on intention and instinct. And, yes, I do trust instinct.

I grew up thinking dinnerware, by definition, meant a matching set. Indeed, my earliest work in dinnerware largely reflected those notions in glaze and color. But then, in 1965, a weaver friend pushed my thinking a step forward. As we discussed the settings I would do for her, she asked me not to make them all alike, not to make "matching parts." That led to an approach that has proved much more satisfying.

Now, I insist on letting each part of a setting have its own personality. To be sure, I confer readily with customers about color choices, shape and size of the pieces in each setting; but the painterly aspects are a part of my work I must stay in touch with. So, it isn't uncommon to hear me say, "I wouldn't be interested in doing that." I would rather not take on a commission that might mean I would lose the essential freedom of surface I've come to enjoy so much.

Typically, my clients wait at least a year from the time they place an order until the dinnerware is actually made. A common request is for 12 place settings, but in the past year I've done as few as 8 settings and as many as 24.

If there has been a lesson in all this for me, it is that I'm glad I learned to trust my instinct, to stand my ground for what I know makes the work as vital as it can be. Certainly, I have had my moments of making relatively large quantities of similarly shaped pots over the years. But what I found out, time and again, was that the more repetitious the pots were, the less "affection" was available for any one



Teapot, 10 inches in height, wheel-thrown stoneware, with extruded handle, brushed and cracked glazes, fired in Cone 10 to reduction. 1989.

Dinnerware, in 11 inches in diameter, thrown stoneware, deeply etched with glazes printed, brushed and cracked in combination with wax-resist, reduction fired. 1989.

John Gluck at his studio in Farmington Hills, Michigan.



Sequential Glazing

The imagery on this 24-inch stoneware plate seems to be about flowers without being literal. I am most pleased when an idea is suggested, but does not seem to be too strong, too representational. So the gesture is there, the color is hinted at, and a feeling is generated.

This plate says much about my recent surface explorations, because it carries the results of much experimentation and playful use of material combinations that intrigue me presently. The ground or base coat is a typical Shino applied to bisque. The succeeding layers involved a building-up process. First, on the raw or unfired base coat, I applied hot waxes. On some areas, I brushed clear wax; on others, a wax mixture—with either a slip, such as Albany slip, or a colored glaze added dry to the hot wax. This was done quickly, in less than a minute, to keep the base coat from drying out too much. That is not to say that I worked on it when it was wet; I just didn't want the base too dry. Then I poured or brushed (with wide brushes) additional parts of the surface. Naturally, the waxed areas resisted.

When the wetness of these second and third applications of glaze subsided, I rubbed these waxed areas with some dry powdered glaze on my fingertips to remove the "resist" on the surface. Then I either brushed or trailed (with a fine syringe) other strongly colored washes, made from oxide or carbonate (iron, cobalt or copper) mixed with a gloss glaze, over these waxed areas or around them on the adjacent glazed areas. Additionally, I flooded this plate with an extremely thin water wash of ash, colorant and Albany slip to create a masklike masking effect around the floral areas. It was then slowly fired (approximately 30 hours) in a richly reducing atmosphere. While other work is now sometimes multifired, this particular piece received only one glaze firing.

pot. This resulted in a kind of aesthetic anemia that would spread to the series. So I tend to focus on enjoying the making process. It's reassuring to know that I can have fun as long as I don't spoil things by getting too lost in numbers.

Of course, this philosophy doesn't rule out eventually revisiting old themes. One does that naturally. After a time of rest, working with past ideas often yields fresh results, because I am ready and willing to push them that much further by then.

Take the teapot, for example. It seems as if it is impossible to exhaust the challenge of this form. I never tire of rethinking the relationships of all the parts that fit together to make the teapot work. And it isn't just an issue of function. There is something quite wonderful about being able to combine all those parts into a form that works visually, too.

I suppose I make 125 teapots each year. Often, in a work cycle of six weeks duration, I will make up to three individual groups of teapots (about 12 to a group) with varying forms and surfaces. So it is a rare kiln car that doesn't have some teapots along for the ride.

Health Considerations

Up until about four years ago, I relied on a 100-cubic-foot, walk-in, catenary arch kiln. But with the onset of back trouble, I had to take stock of how my kilns were designed. Carrying each kiln shell and each pot into the kiln needed to be eliminated. I have since built two car kilns—27-cubic-foot and about 70-cubic-foot capacity. The different sizes allow greater flexibility, so that short or long work cycles can be undertaken.

Much more important is the ease of loading. These were years when I stacked and unstacked the 100-cubic-foot kiln alone. Well, that stress added up over the years to the general deterioration of a disk that failed in my back. Nowadays, there are no more "heroics" in the loading process; my assistant and I stack and unstack the kiln together. We also use the new inside-bonded silicon carbide shelves. They are just as strong, yet thinner and subsequently lighter to handle.

The studio really is a place where we learn all about ourselves, including the physical changes in our bodies. It's important to evaluate work actions in terms of long-term health. We do physically intensive work, and should try to avoid excessive repeat-motion actions that stress parts of our bodies. Risks of carpal tunnel syndrome, tendonitis and ruptured disks come immediately to mind.

It has been necessary to make several changes in how I work, because I want to continue as a full-time studio potter. Working standing upright—no longer hunching over the potter's wheel and stressing the lower lumbar portion of the spine by bending forward and leaning sideways—eliminates the chief cause of back trouble. Almost as important was learning to lift with the legs (not bending over from the waist to lift). I also continually change work positions, varying tasks so that I'm never stuck in one position for more than an hour and a half. My new approach really involves constant change, turning at a different wheel, handbuilding, spreading the tasks throughout the day to avoid stress and repeat-motion.

Tendonitis is the repeat-motion disorder most often experienced from the stress of throwing at the potter's wheel.



art: "Box with Lid," 9 inches in length, stoneware, extruded and assembled, with multiple glazes, reduction fired, 1989

piece: Stoneware (cuboid), approximately 6 inches in diameter, with Cone 10 reduction glazes, 1989



It's a self-perpetuating condition. Once it gets to a certain point, it doesn't go away by resting for a week. Such repetition disorders are best treated by qualified physical therapists. In my experience, intervention (not avoidance or muscle relaxants or working in pain) is the best way to correct this problem. A physical therapist can prescribe exercises designed to compensate for the stress from the kind of work we're doing.

Taking advantage of labor-saving equipment also makes good sense. For almost 20 years, I hand wedged all my clay prior to use in throwing or handbuilding. In the training I received, there was a certain romance ascribed to the proper wedging of clay. But the fact is that hand wedging is enormously stressful to arms and shoulders. I felt too much of that strain, and responded by purchasing a de-airing pug mill. Whether used for clay to be thrown on the potter's wheel or for extrusion, the mill is a great asset. Recently I built a very large extruder that requires 225 pounds of clay just to load it. The idea of hand wedging that much clay would frankly rule out any pleasurable thoughts about the use of such a tool.

Another health issue worthy of attention is avoidance of airborne dusts. That can mean such things as wet cleaning whenever possible, never sweeping without a well-oiled compound going down on the floor, opening windows for cross ventilation during cleaning activities, and not allowing clay debris to build up on the floors just to be crushed and tracked around the studio. We're also investigating use of an air cleaner system that filters out airborne dust, plus a small wet vacuuming system that sprays water right next to the vacuum head.

These changes, while perhaps not revolutionary, speak about a general attitude that exists in the studio these days. It is simply one of using common sense and labor-saving devices whenever possible, being concerned about health and trying not to do the things that (however slowly) will culminate in problems later on. It's really a matter of clearing away the cobwebs about earlier thinking, and putting things in better perspective so that future work remains pleasurable.

On Apprenticeship

I no longer refer to the person who works with me in the studio as an apprentice, but more properly as an assistant. My interest in having an assistant comes out of a belief that's connected with returning something to our field by providing someone an opportunity to evolve ideas and test attitudes in a supportive environment. I didn't have that experience, but when I was in the army (drafted and sent to West Germany in the early 1960s), I was able to study the day-to-day training/interaction with apprentices at the family potteries of the Hohr-Grenzhausen area. I decided then that I would make such training a part of my own studio. Over the past 26 years, I've worked with over a dozen assistants.

In general, an assistantship tends to last about a year, but this is not a hard and fast rule. Some have gone on for two years. It's open to anyone who is interested. Whether a would-be assistant has a sculptural orientation or a functional-vessel orientation, it's fine with me; but I expect total involvement in all aspects of studio life. We do everything together—planning all projects (large and small); mixing clays and glazes; studio maintenance (be it as large as

building a kiln or as simple as repairs on existing equipment)—so that experience can be gained in the overall structure (all the nuts and bolts) of studio activities.

Being a dyed-in-the-wool tool maker, I also try to teach all aspects of tool making—design, fabrication, sharpening, repair. Knowing how to make and repair studio tools and equipment is very important to widening your viewpoint about what you might tackle as a studio artist. When you are hampered by lack of technical and mechanical know-how, many doors simply never open toward new ideas.

The amount of time available to an assistant for personal work is up to 50% of the time spent in the studio. Generally, in the early morning when we meet to discuss the day's activities, I outline what I think should happen so that each of us knows what to expect.

Often I assign specific study projects to the assistant. These are designed to really search out the essentials of a body of work. A good example would be dinnerware. I'll ask the assistant to design on paper, then make and glaze a small dinnerware grouping. The assistant is then free to do whatever is wished with the resulting pots. Or, on rare occasions, I may even turn over commissioned work that I may not have time for (provided the client is willing) so that the assistant can have the experience of working with a client who has specific needs, of dealing with different personalities, as well as actually designing, producing and pricing objects. Where better to do this than in a studio with an experienced adviser?

We also have ongoing critiques. Sometimes, prior to a firing, we will evaluate the entire group as a whole. It's an excellent time to talk about form and concept evolution, and certainly to cull any excess pieces from the group. It's hard to say exactly, but I would suspect about one-third to one-half of the assistant's personal work will be recycled.

Critiques, no matter when they occur during the working day, are also excellent times to examine the thoughts that an assistant may have about career goals—be they professional potting, teaching or some other aspect of the field. It is a time to talk about fears, hopes and other such issues, as well as all the technical matters that will affect future work as an independent artist.

We also attend visiting artist's lectures, exhibitions at local galleries, and have ongoing discussions (we call them "brick kicking") with other artists and collectors who visit the studio. This is a wonderful opportunity for a studio assistant to reflect on the diverse perspectives of people from various backgrounds with different approaches to their work.

I care about building the self-esteem and self-reliance of my studio assistants. I often say that this is the time to experiment a lot, to get the feeling of creative play locked into your brain and into your heart, to fly high with ideas. Once you enter the practical world, it can be difficult to hold onto a feeling of freedom. Creative playfulness is what's going to get you through the hard times when ideas aren't flowing; that open-minded, questioning attitude will be what comes to the rescue.

One final aspect of the assistantship that I think is important is participation in our periodic open house sales. This gives the assistant an opportunity to evaluate work in light of a fundamental aspect of studio potting—selling to the public. ▲



ABOVE Porcelain plate, 18 inches in diameter, wheel thrown and carved, with layered glazes (including copper red), reduction fired, 1980.



LEFT Wheel-thrown stoneware bowl, 11 inches in diameter, with poured, brushed and trailed glazes, reduction fired, 1976.

RIGHT Stoneware box, 16 inches in length, assembled from extrusions, with slips, glazes and oxides, fired to Cone 10 in reduction, 1977.

BELOW Stoneware pitcher, 12 inches in height, wheel thrown, with pulled handle, salt glazed, 1974.

