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## Layered recollections

Jennifer Elizabeth Hager

*Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College*

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# Layered Recollections

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by  
Jennifer E. Hager  
B.F.A., Georgia Southern University, 2008  
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## ABSTRACT

*Layered Recollections* is an installation of functional pottery that evokes feelings of nostalgia and longing associated with the home environment. I am interested in creating memories through the use of pottery. It is my intention to make work that creates happiness in the user's lives and brings joy to everyday routines through floral imagery. Each installation in the exhibition references an area in the home.

# 1

## INTRODUCTION

*Layered Recollections* contains ceramic table settings and functional objects that encourage interaction as well as encourage viewers to make connections among the pieces. I am compelled (by my longing) to return to the comfort and stability of home, which I address in the making of pottery. My work celebrates emotional bonds and relationships formed through references to memories of comfort and home. My work is an exploration of my own attachments to objects within the home. Through these attachments, I address the establishment of bonds between person and object.

I am drawn to the functionality of objects, interactions between the user and objects, and how users form bonds with them. Traditions, rituals, and habits compel users of ceramic functional pots to form emotional bonds and attachments to these objects by repetition of use. A tradition is a belief or behavior passed down within a group or society with symbolic meaning or special significance with origins in the past. Common examples include holidays and greetings. The word "tradition" itself derives from the Latin word *trader* or *traderer*, meaning to transmit, to hand over, to give for safekeeping. In my family, serving dishes that have been passed down through generations on my mother's side are used at holiday dinners or other special occasions. This heirloom china is special because of the memories and sentiment attached to it. My pots are special because they are handmade and made with the intention to facilitate the making of happy memories. My functional pots are meant to celebrate everyday. I want the user to take the pots down from the china hutch and use them without reservation. The inviting floral paintings on the pots bring joy and happiness to routine days.

To illustrate this concept of forming bonds and relationships, I create table settings to encourage interactions between the pieces and user. Layering is done on multiple levels on the table settings; each individual plate is a layering of slips and design motifs.

## 2 MATERIALS

I choose to work with red earthenware clay, which has connotations of being a commoner, durable material. I choose to work with earthenware rather than porcelain for these reasons. Earthenware clay is colorful, warm and when burnished, incredibly soft and inviting. The thrown plates and bowls are intentionally made thick. Weight can be comforting, like the pressing down of a pile of blankets on a cold night. A hefty pot brings me comfort by holding onto warmth from the food, warming my hands while I eat or drink.

The bottoms and sections of the raw clay are covered with terra sigillata, a fine clay slip, and burnished to seal the clay and give the clay a satin sheen. The burnished areas are inviting to touch and allow the user to create a physical attachment to the objects; users caress the undersides of pots without even noticing. This subliminal fondling is almost childlike, akin to fondling the soft ribbon edge of a blanket. I hope to instill a child-like wonder in my work.

## EMOTIONAL ATTACHMENTS TO OBJECTS

I collect objects that remind me of friends and family members, something perhaps either made or owned by them. Collecting objects is a way for me to preserve the past and remember fleeting moments tied to objects.

Through the making process, I am able to better grasp what home means to me through investigations and scenarios of home situations. I imagine how someone might use the pottery in his or her home and set up situations where pieces can be used together to create a table scape of objects, interchangeable to fit their needs.

Objects accrue sentimental value throughout their existence, and are often displayed prominently in the home on shelves or in glass cabinets. In my grandma's home (which was attached to my childhood home), her most beloved items were safely stored in the china cabinet while not in use. We would use her fine china on special occasions, and I understood as a child that these items had value, and would someday be passed down to me. The idea that someday I would be sharing homemade meals with my family on dishes that my mother and grandmother shared with us is deeply emotional for me. In the installation, *Layered Recollections*, I have arranged a collection of pots on a silhouetted china hutch to resemble collections of objects in the home.

When making dinner, I frequently use my grandmother's perfectly seasoned cast iron skillet, because I can feel a connection to her when using it. These few moments of meal preparation allow me to remember her and maybe consider what she would have made for dinner. A new, store bought cast iron pan would not have these same nostalgic memories tied to it, but would create new memories in time through use. In my work, I am interested in both creating new memories for users as well as sparking nostalgic memories or feelings tied to functional objects.

It may be hard to find people who have held onto objects for long periods of time. For example, fashion trends change quickly, as do people's taste in home appliances and other items that may show a person's social status. Jonathan Chapman explains in *Emotionally Durable Design, Objects, Experiences and Empathy* that objects are discarded quickly because the quality of products is being sacrificed for the sake of newness and changing styles.<sup>1</sup> Conversely, I am interested in cultivating long lasting bonds between people and pottery, enduring objects that create a situation where the user establishes a bond or

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<sup>1</sup> Chapman, *Emotionally Durable Design*, 65.

attachment. Is using the same mug every day simply being a creature of habit? Or is there an underlying attachment to the object that compels the user to reach for it in the cabinet every morning? I believe it is the latter; texture, shape, or a memory connected to the object can all contribute to reasons why a specific mug would be chosen over and over again. I am interested in exploring the driving forces behind the bonds people create with objects. Chapman explains that:

“Occasioanlly, humans and objects hit it off to surprising degrees; as if by accident, strong empathic bonds are formed between subject and object, forging practically inseparable unions...”<sup>2</sup>

Humans naturally seek relationships with others and also objects. Non-functional objects such as teddy bears or security blankets can be strongly comforting because they are soft and hold warmth. The bonds made between users and functional ceramic objects are similar; a mug filled with coffee warms your hands when it's cold, creating a secondary sensory experience to the drinking. Choosing to use the same object everyday creates habit and routine, which can be comforting. Knowing that a specific mug is waiting for you creates a sense of stability and adds beauty and something special to an everyday activity.

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<sup>2</sup> Chapman, *Emotionally Durable Design*, 69.

## FLORAL IMAGERY

My visual inspiration primarily comes from live flowers. Flower arrangements, bouquets, flower bushes, blooming trees and floral fabric designs are all things that I draw inspiration from. I am interested in achieving a layering of colors and textures. I am particularly fascinated by light filtering through leaves, creating a speckling of light and color orbs. The sun may be so bright that you have to squint, causing a blurring of colors and light. Figure 1 shows my interpretation of this phenomenon. Wind creates a gentle rustling and vibration that constantly creates new shapes and shades of greens. Blurred flowers are akin to blurred memories; over time these memories become less clear. As time passes, our memories of people can fade but certain qualities or memories are just as sharp as our memories of the colors of flowers.



Figure 1. Leaves plate.

After ballet recitals, I frequently received flower bouquets. This is one of my earliest memories. The baby's breath was always my favorite. The little white flowers felt so soft and delicate and I loved how these tiny flowers were presented within a bouquet of larger flowers, as supporting actors. Each flower played its part and needed each other to create a beautiful grouping. Not only receiving, but also giving or collecting flowers has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. Flowers can be a powerful positive emotion inducer. "Flowers have immediate and long-term effects on emotional reactions, mood,

social behaviors and even memory for both males and females."<sup>3</sup> I would like for my pots to evoke happy memories and feelings for the user.

For me, flowers create vivid memories tied to certain events and smells. A floral smell can trigger a memory from long ago; my grandmother's perfume, flowers from a wedding bouquet, springtime. In my work, memories of patterned fabric or a direct memory of a type of flower might prompt a memory for a user. The work can also someday become a sentimental or nostalgic object to someone through years of use and routine.

Quick movements of the paintbrush to mimic petals or leaves, as shown in figure 2, create the floral paintings on my dishes. Previously, I scanned dried flowers, traced the shapes in a 3d cad program, and cut paper stencils using a laser cutter. The negative and positive stencil shapes were used to create floral compositions, working with a cache of shapes as constants, and using color and composition as variables. The floral paintings are informed from this regimented process, but hand painting the elements allows for a more fresh, individualized flower. I am able to layer the slip colors, blurring my eyes so the colors are softer and the shapes blend together, creating a flower made from abstract shapes. Particularly exciting for me is the unearthing of the image as the meal goes on; the user can experience more of the painting as they eat.



Figure 2. Floral plate.

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<sup>3</sup> Pollan, *The Botany of Desire*, 104.



The florals on the surfaces are drawn from life (sketches, photos, and scanned petals) as well as imagined. Living flowers, bouquets, and dried and pressed flowers are sources of inspiration. I frequently press and dry flowers, and then use the petals to arrange a composition (figure 3). This allows for a multitude of compositions and helps when laying out the paintings.



Figure 3. Example of scanned flowers.

I am also drawn to textile designs that incorporate geometric patterning with floral imagery. I bring this into my work by dabbing bright polka dots on the pots to create a base pattern. I then paint floral designs on top to add depth and another layer, as shown in figure 4. Polka dots are optimistic, energetic, and playful. They don't take themselves too seriously. I want my pots to have the ability to make the user happy, like flowers do.



Figure 4. Polka dot layered serving dish

Shapes, colors, and color proportions found naturally in flowers and plants influence decisions I make in my studio. My work is filtered through botany, not a direct representation. Through the process of filtering, some portions of flowers or the composition can be left out, and others exaggerated. Organic forms drawn from observations are deconstructed and simplified to create shapes that can be overlaid to create endless compositions. I work intuitively, layering slip colors with dabs of my paintbrush to create petals and shadows. Scratched lines surrounding the flowers allow the red clay to peek through and define the floral shapes. Bare earthenware clay acts as the soil beneath the flowers, grounding the painted images. Sections of plates and bowls are pinched to mimic flower petals and leaves. The undulating surface causes the white slip to break over the peaks and settle in the valleys, creating areas of light and dark. These areas are layered with colored slips, creating depth in colors and texture.

## 5 GALLERY

### 5.1 Table Settings

The place settings are displayed on a farmhouse style table (figure 5) to show how the pieces may be used for a celebration or gathering with a large group of people. Grounded and stable, the table references family and enduring bonds with others. I felt it was important to display the functional pieces in a homelike setting; I want the viewer to immediately insert the objects into daily life situations.



Figure 5. Installation view of table setting.

The stacking of the table settings is particularly exciting to me; I am able to play with patterning on different levels of the place setting, choosing one or more aspects of a design for each component. Each place setting references a bouquet; the top plates showcase the most prominent flowers in the bouquet, in this case, ranunculus, peonies, and hydrangeas, while the larger plates or chargers underneath are filled with leaves, supporting the smaller plates above. Each dish is unique, no two plates are exactly alike, but relate in color and motif. The variable quality encourages interaction within the pieces, and offers variety

and the element of choice for the user. As a maker, I am not interested in making exact copies of dishes. Working intuitively and responding to form allow me to make decisions that keep me completely enthralled in the making process.

## 5.2 Silhouetted Furniture and Still Lifes

I find great peace in arranging objects in my home until I feel they have found their home. For example, placing objects on shelves or in cabinets creates still lifes that serve a different purpose while not in use. This purpose can be purely decorative or meditative, allowing the viewers to admire and enjoy the object. Through the making process, I am able to better grasp what home means to me through investigations and scenarios of home situations. The painted china cabinet silhouette, shown in figure 6, holds cups, serving bowls, and vases to show how pieces may be displayed in the home.



Figure 6. Installation view of objects on china hutch.



I wanted to suggest a home environment in the gallery to give the user context for the objects. I achieve this by painting silhouettes of furniture to display the pots on. The silhouetted furniture alludes to the furnishings we are familiar with and brings up memories of familial furniture for viewers. As shown in figures 7 and 8, the silhouettes act as a visual device, bridging the work with its surroundings.



Figure 7. Installation view of objects on buffet



Figure 8. Installation view of hanging cups.

## 6 CONCLUSION

In creating the installation, *Layered Recollections*, it was my intention to bring happiness to those around me. I wanted to surround the viewers with bouquets of floral pots to evoke joyous memories. The individual installations of silhouettes and shelves of work were unified through material, color and have a sense of the home setting. I have found that making pots with the intention of spreading happiness and adding joy to a meal is what make them special. Handmade pots are more personal than factory made and carry memories of the maker.

It is my hope that memories are made; through the experience of attending the exhibition and through use of the pots. Figure 9 shows installation views of *Layered Recollections*.



Figure 9. Installation views of *Layered Recollections*.

## REFERENCES

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Pollan, Michael. *The Botany of Desire*. New York: Random House, 2001.

## VITA

Jennifer Hager, a native of Atlanta, Georgia, received her bachelor's of fine arts at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia in 2008. After undergraduate school, she spent a year at the Cub Creek Foundation in Appomattox, Virginia as a resident artist. Interested in teaching and furthering her knowledge, Jennifer made the decision to enter the ceramics graduate program in the Department of Art at Louisiana State University. She will receive her Master's of Fine Arts in May 2014.