

May 2021

I Bloom at Twilight

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I BLOOM AT TWILIGHT

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
School of Art and Design
In partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by
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B.F.A., Kansas City Art Institute, 2017
August 2021

Dedicated to my parents, Joseph and Mary Cerv

Thank you for adopting me and giving me a better life than I could have asked for.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	iv
I Bloom at Twilight	1
Vita	13

ABSTRACT

Driven by a vigorous passion for the ceramic material and its history, *I Bloom at Twilight* strives to bring attention to craft and construction. To engineer each piece I pull from and distort historical pottery references, lengthening or widening parts of their profile with the form of a flower in mind. By adapting a variety of forming techniques, both ancient to modern, I build vessels adorned with textures that stem from their creation. Inspired by the stunning designs of Soviet Propaganda Porcelain and Nabeshima ware, I apply vibrant glazes in stylized depictions of clouds and flowers. Finally, using wax resist between layers, I inlay Chrome colored glazes to emit a volatile mist of vivid pink onto the surfaces nearby. With this layering of reference, form, and surface my vessels hope to prompt the viewer into a feeling of timelessness and contemplation.

I BLOOM AT TWIGHT



Figure 1. Sunset on the Baton Rouge, LA levee



Figure 2. Sunrise driving to Kansas

Growing up I'd always known my brothers and I were adopted, all from different places. "Where did I come from" often paced through my mind. This feeling of discordance with my surroundings prompted me to explore the world through active observation of moments; sprawled lines of light through the blinds, a dim morning fog, or when the sky is aflame with glowing, muted colors at twilight (*Figures 1 and 2*). Often witnessing such events shifted me into a mindset of timelessness and deep thought.

Ceramics, for me, possesses the same ability to provoke contemplation. I get lost in the deep surfaces and gravity defying forms which only clay could produce. The staggering skill of past makers sends my mind on a slow-paced chase down a rabbit hole of interconnecting traditions - stopping at each in awe of what I find. What I learn of these lineages permeates into my studio in hopeful emulations of technique, ancient to modern. Despite our separations, the medium we all use ties the ceramic field together in a symphony of craft. Like notes in harmony, geographically and temporarily distinct cultures employ construction or finishing techniques that resonate with those of another.



Figure 3. Pickings from my mother's peony bushes



Figure 4. *Widened Tulip Vase*, 2021

As I look from the pottery of one culture to another, regardless of time or interaction, more similarities appear than differences. Formally, the properties of nearly any vessel type developed to follow the same principles - Vases with their bulbous bodies and flaring necks; pitchers with open spouts and handles; bowls with distortions of a hemisphere. This fascinates me. The relationships of form feel as much a part of the ceramic lineage as the makers themselves. I pull from those amalgamated profiles to join that never ending line of craftspeople. After laying my baseline, I stretch the vessel to resemble floral proportions. The most common formal relationships I use come from peonies and other bulb flowers, like those my mother grows (*Figure 3*). Interestingly, many bulb flowers are nearly vessels themselves, even holding water after a calm rain. Through this distillation of profiles, I generate designs with stem-like pedestal feet and bulbous bodies like that of my *Widened Tulip Vase* (*Figure 4*).

After designing a form, I work to find an effective means of construction. Solving the challenges a theoretical form suggests satisfies me immensely. In searching for a solution, I look to processes that can be easily replicated to craft multiples of an object as well as a strong tie to a ceramic lineage. As I discover more methods, I find that each highlights particular aspects of



Figure 5. Mold for an Arretine, Samian bisque mold
Wikiwand. "Mold for an Arretine." *Terra Sigillata*,
Wikiwand, 2021, https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Terra_sigillata. Accessed 10 April 2021.



Figure 6. My shelf of smooth bisque molds

clay through their use; the fluidity on the wheel, flexibility and rigidity of a slab, or repetition in coiling. As well as their aesthetic lean, each process works well for some forms and poorly for others. Why exhaust myself by throwing twenty pounds of clay to make a large cylinder, instead of using a process that achieves the same result quicker, easier, and with less bodily harm?

By using interlaced methods, I leave a narrative of texture. Generally my studio centers around the use of slab, pinch, and coil construction, using the wheel as a tool for consistent rotation. The branches of this technique family tree lend themselves to unique adoptions of long standing traditions. For example, I work with fired clay molds like those used in Samian ware (*Figure 5*). Unlike the ancient Romans, however, my mold surfaces are fully smooth (*Figure 6*). Called "Hump" and "Slump" molds, these tools shape slabs into replicated forms without destroying their texture. As I progressed with this technique, I realized that I wholly enjoy the stretched surfaces frozen against a bisqued form. I explored both the natural tearing of an undecorated slab and that of designs inscribed prior to molding. After removal from the model, molded components can be used individually or in pairs to construct the body of a vessel. I then coil and pinch feet and rims, using a wooden mallet to smear the pinch marks and create



Figure 7. *Bloom Cup 14/50*, 2021



Figure 8. *Bloom Cup 5/50*, 2021

overhangs to hold slip. While perhaps not as recognizable as a linear novel, these marks tell the story of my pots' creation. The surface of each piece holds reflections of my actions taken on the clay, eternally fossilized through firing - the first of three layers to develop a deep surface.

A recent addition to my toolbox is tar paper templates. Starting with the same slabs as a hump and/or slump molded vessel, forms using this technique fold together, almost as if papercraft. My edition of *Bloom Cups* utilize this process (*Figures 7, 8, 15*). Introduced to me by Mike Helke and expanded by an exploration in class with Andy Shaw, this method offers the same benefits as bisque molds: repeated form and safeguarded slab texture. Where most of my techniques are adaptations of ancient processes, this one is much newer. Even so, it's begun a strong lineage; brilliant makers like Mark Pharis who uses tar paper to construct wonderful volumetric forms that balance soft and hard lines. My addition to that heritage investigates how alterations to a form, after removing the tar paper temple, affects the end result. To achieve this in the *Bloom Cups*, I softly inflated each panel with my thumb. In doing so, the once flat walls now undulate in reference to the scalloped rim. This slight alteration completed the form. I've slowly begun to understand how a flat shape will fold together to make a three dimensional



Figure 9. *Tulip Vase Pair*, 2020



Figure 10. *[H/C]andlesticks*, 2021

object, but it almost never turns out how I expect. Much like sewing pants, it can be hard to tell if everything will fit together. I love that difficulty because it forces me to develop both my designing skills and visualization of form. In the final touches of each template pot, I flatted the seams where panels join together. This strengthens the connection and leaves a thick line as an artifact of that action.

Where tar paper templates prevent indentations from my fingers, my coiled vessels work focus on them. I press deep grooves, sometimes the length of my entire finger, into the walls of a vessel as I build it. The “peaks” of that texture are quickly dried by torch and smeared with a wooden paddle, shown above in the *Tulip Vase Pair* (Figure 9). As another exploration into the idea of decisive mark making and its connection to the maker’s hand, I firmly squeezed out my *(H/C)andlesticks* (Figure 10). Unlike the refined profiles of my molded vessels, these objects work to traverse the pinching spectrum from refined pinches to a whole-handed squash. Despite a vast difference of crafting, the properties in one reflect the other, bouncing back and forth in a game of micro and macro; The curves of squeezed crevice, the profile of a handle, the convex of a slight pinch. Itself an artifact of time, the candlestick form pulls my mentality temporally backwards.



Figure 11. *Horseshoe Crab Dish* (side), 2021



Figure 12. *Horseshoe Crab Dish* (top), 2021

Aided by the progression of available technologies, distant makers discovered and developed glassy surfaces. Produced by the settling and melting of wood ash, these shiny accidents could hardly be considered glaze. Originally a result of accidental phenomena, humanity soon learned that by mixing these ashes with clays, and eventually other materials, endless surfaces and colors were within reach. I see myself in this spirit of experimentation. It's astonishing that such beauty was found by simple trial and error for hundreds of years. Ceramicists now ride along the sails of these vanguard ceramic explorers, expanding the knowledge passed down through countless generations and across the globe. That trial and error still lives on in the people who make today. We are reviving lost recipes, discovering new reactions, and exploring colorful worlds of metallic oxide unavailable to nearly everyone just a hundred years ago - an especially exciting time to participate in the ceramic field. Widespread understanding and experimentally gained knowledge being posted online propel glaze chemistry forward and grant me an enormous opportunity to learn.

The ceramic field has grown significantly through its unending lineage. As expansive as our knowledge has become, we're still using the same basic materials - clay, slip, and glaze.

For me, the horseshoe crab symbolizes this slow, continuous growth. To highlight our unifying medium, I pressed *Horseshoe Crab Dishes* (Figures 11 and 12, previous) and covered them with drippy, white slip. Timeless and ever growing, these marine arthropod living fossils have long intrigued me. With only minor adaptations through the ages, horseshoe crabs show how powerful something deviously simple can be. Seems fitting to me that I craft the dish using a ridiculously simple technique: pressing a slab with a bisqued stamp on foam. Their lasting existence parallels that of pottery's long standing traditions. As such, I glazed each dish in satin clear so that all the aforementioned components are easily visible. Marvelous to think, too, that ancient makers would see the same species as I can now.

Much like the cultures that inspire me, I've developed a library of symbols derived from lived experiences and the things that made them pleasurable. Seen largely in the interiors of pasta bowls, my list of symbols includes clouds, peonies, tulips, peaches, apples, and horseshoe



Figure 13. Nabeshima Porcelain Dish
Christies. "Nabeshima Porcelain Dish." *AN INQUIRING MIND: AMERICAN COLLECTING OF JAPANESE AND KOREAN ART*, 2021, <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-a-porcelain-dish-nabeshima-ware-okawachi-offi-5986006/?from=sale-summary&intObjectID=5986006&sid=a989e-2ac-71dd-4ec5-9574-57ed5be4b6c5>. Accessed 10 April 2021.



Figure 14. Large Soviet Porcelain Platter
Christies. "Large Soviet Porcelain Platter." *Collecting guide!* *Soviet porcelain*, 2021, <https://www.christies.com/features/Collecting-guide-Soviet-porcelain-9294-1.aspx>. Accessed 10 April 2021.



Figure 15. *Bloom Cup 6/50*, 2021



Figure 16. *Widened Tulip Vase (interior)*, 2021

crabs. These items come from memories, like the peonies my mother grows in her backyard or the granny apples we used to bake pie. My intent is that these become catalysts to provoke my viewers own memories. I transpose current memories somewhat spontaneously into the surface so that the flow of imagery is identical to my pattern of thought. Nabeshima ware, Soviet Propaganda Porcelain, and Newcomb Pottery constantly circulate in my mind as I glaze. Each of these exhibits stunning surface decoration; from the soft, atmospheric low relief glazed surfaces of Newcomb Pottery to the crisp imagery and patterning in Nabeshima ware (*Figure 13, previous*). Soviet Propaganda Porcelain (*Figure 14, previous*), often bright and graphic as well, generally used overglaze enamels and lusters. While each of these productions got to their respective design by wildly different means, their end results resonate with me. This, however, generated its own hurdle: how do I glaze in a way that produces both atmospheric and crisp imagery?

While researching historical glazes, the pink and red fuming of Tin glazes on Majolica, Islamic Lusterware, and 80's Chrome/Tin cranberry pink wares pulled me in. These pots are produced using Tin opacified base glazes, with overglaze (brushed on unfired, dry glaze), on



Figure 17. *Peony, Pear, and Granny Apple*, 2021



Figure 18. *Jar with Stand* (detail), 2021

glaze (applied to fired glaze), and in glaze color respectively. When either chrome or copper are fired they volatilize in the kiln, turning into literal clouds of metal which are absorbed by and permanently recorded in the Tin through a chemical reaction regarding the loss/gain of oxygen molecules. Fuming like that in Islamic Lusterware opens up the idea to use gaseous colorants as a part of ornamentation, which I do by inlaying chrome glaze like on *Bloom Cup 6/50* (Figure 15, previous) rather than luster. Now I'd found my key to atmospheric and sharp: crisp lines accompanied by focused but uncontrollable fuming. Wonderfully, these pink and red tones mix with other standard ceramic colorants like paint, producing colors as if mixing pigment.

Ceramic alchemists hundreds of years ago could produce captivatingly vivid colors without any industrially calcined ingredients. With just decades of trial and error, they fired colors that still carry difficulty to produce. Almost as if tribute, I challenge myself to formulate colors in the same way: using non-calcined colorants. In my experiments to achieve this, I've made a glaze base that reacts vibrantly with metallic colorants for a wide spectrum of colors, shown in my *Widened Tulip Vase* interior (Figure 16, previous). Cobalt blue, Copper teal, Chrome green, Rutile orange, and Tin white are my primary colors. By mixing them to varying



Figure 19. *I Bloom at Twilight*, 2021

proportions, nearly every color is within reach. Any color with Tin also gets the added benefit of pink fuming when adjacent to Chrome, as seen above in an otherwise light blue turned pink in my pasta bowl *Peony, Pear, and Granny Apple* (Figure 17) and *Jar with Stand* (Figure 18).

To achieve the crisp patterning I desire in-glaze like Nabeshima ware, I applied glazes in consecutive layers. First, I sketch out the basic idea of the design in mechanical pencil. My lines must be decisive; the graphite acts as a tiny wall, resisting glaze like the lip of a penny. Rather than pour entire sections of a vessel, I use small nibbed squirt bottles to apply each color. With them I can delicately, but quickly, adorn my work with multiple glazes by trailing along penciled designs. Larger areas are filled in by brush. After sections are glazed, I cover them entirely with wax resist. Once set, the wax resist I use nearly fully repels water. I then scribe through the wax using a sharp metal tool and wash away and glaze left in each line. Finally, the lines are filled with the last color - often a glaze colored with chrome to produce vibrant pink halos.

Singing in the gallery as I set up, I am thrilled to see these pieces on display. Spreading out objects on both pedestals and wall shelves, I want to give each object, even if part of a set, ample space. That way, the viewer can explore each vessel more fully. Each grouping of objects



Figure 20. *I Bloom at Twilight*, 2021



Figure 21. *I Bloom at Twilight*, 2021

received at least a four foot spacing from the next to ensure plenty of breathing room. Originally, I'd planned to construct oak display furniture and darken it using a traditional technique called ebonizing. This mesmerizing process uses steel dissolved in vinegar to darken high tannin woods. While I still plan to use this idea in my future endeavors, the bright colors of these vessels seemed to call for crisp white furniture. For this, it is vitally important that the surfaces of these be as unobtrusive as possible, because the bright lighting needed to show the depth of my glazes will amplify the texture. Through multiple layers of spackle and paint, I smoothed every wall and pedestal so that they would not detract from my ceramic work. Objects are lit from multiple angles to reduce single direction shadows. Shown in my installation images (Figures 19-21), pastabowls and cups are displayed on the wall, smaller bowls on a table, and other works on pedestals.

Culminating in my exhibition at Glassell Gallery, *I Bloom at Twilight* celebrates clay's history of craft and its endless potential. From inception to finish, my wares look to the past to inspire new boundaries. With vivid colors, lush fuming designs, and satin surfaces, I work to bring my references into a more contemporary aesthetic. This interplay of old and new strives

to push the viewer into an unknown time, thinking “when is this from?” In inspecting for an answer, I hope the viewer will fall into the depth of my surfaces and find themselves lost in layers of reference and material.

VITA

Michael “Mike” Cerv was born in Overland Park, KS in November of 1994. Cerv discovered his love for clay in highschool. The summer after graduation, he worked as a studio assistant at the (formerly) Red Star Studios and helped teach kids summer classes. Soon after he attended the Kansas City Art Institute where he earned his Bachelors of Fine Art with a focus in Ceramics in the spring of 2017. During his time there, Cerv worked as a woodshop technician on campus, a pottery instructor at (formerly) Red Star Studios and the KC Clay guild, and sold work at live events in the downtown area. That summer, Cerv moved to Port Chester, NY to develop his artistic abilities as an artist-in-residence at the Clay Art Center. The next year Cerv moved south to attend Louisiana State University to study under Andy Shaw and Mikey Walsh. Following graduation, Cerv will further develop his research in tar paper templates to craft work for exhibit at the Ann Connelly Fine Arts Gallery.