Growthlines

Alexandra Saunders
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses

Part of the Ceramic Arts Commons

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/5584

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
GROWTHLINES

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
Masters of Fine Arts

in

The Department of Art and Design

by

Alexandra Saunders
B.A., University of St. Thomas, 2016
August 2022
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my thesis committee including Scott Andresen, Denyce Celentano, Mikey Walsh, and Andy Shaw. A special thanks goes out to Andy for all the extra effort he put into helping me put my thesis show and paper together. Also thanks to students Matt Jones and Nellie Lyons for their emotional support and help with installing my thesis show.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... ii

*Growthlines: Ceramics by Alexandra Saunders* ......................................................................... iii

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................... iv

*Growthlines: An Essay* ............................................................................................................... 1

Introduction ..................................................................................................................................... 1

Clay .................................................................................................................................................. 2

Layers ............................................................................................................................................. 4

Color ............................................................................................................................................... 6

Decorating/Glaze ............................................................................................................................ 8

Stencils .......................................................................................................................................... 9

Function ......................................................................................................................................... 11

Forming Process ............................................................................................................................ 15

Sets/Garnitures ............................................................................................................................... 17

Flowers and Pollinators ................................................................................................................... 20

Patterns and Scale ......................................................................................................................... 22

Installation ..................................................................................................................................... 24

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 30

Vita .................................................................................................................................................. 31
GROWTHLINES: CERAMICS BY ALEXANDRA SAUNDERS

Floral Garniture .................................................................................................................. 7
X Platter .............................................................................................................................. 10
Yellow Floral Jars ............................................................................................................... 18
Blue Pollinator Plate ........................................................................................................ 20
Turquoise Floral Tumblers ............................................................................................... 23
Installation View 1 ........................................................................................................... 24
Installation View 2 ........................................................................................................... 25
Floral Mugs ......................................................................................................................... 26
Pollinator Plates ............................................................................................................... 27
Floral Platters ..................................................................................................................... 28
Purple Garniture ............................................................................................................... 29
ABSTRACT

The work in Growthlines is a collection of ceramic objects that are characterized by floral pattern and their potential for use. I make ceramic work that is functional and designed to be in the home. I think that the way something looks is an integral part of function and I seek to make objects that function well. The surface of my pottery is rich with images of flowers and I hope that the surface both draws in the user and highlights flowers and how important they are for the preservation of the natural world. My work functions as a surrogate for the things I value but sometimes lack: directness, connectivity, social acuity. I am invested in making ceramics that correct some of these faults and provide an avenue to make connections by creating work that reveals myself.
INTRODUCTION

While I may be quiet and hard to get to know, my pots are not. My pots are direct and engaging. I struggle with social interaction, but my pots do not. They are gregarious, they are deep, they are thoughtful. They are ready to talk about their layers and not afraid of questions. They are the center of room and ready for conversation. Although, I do not think about this while making them, I think my work is an expression of the things that I wish I could be. The things that though I try as I might, I cannot. Perhaps my pots can open up a dialogue for me which I fail to do so purely in conversation and help me make connections to the people in my life.

Clay has been central to my life for many years. Through clay I express my interests, feelings, and concerns. I have found that ceramics is a way to transform my emotions into physical objects that can be shared with others. In my study of ceramics I have transitioned from making work that is a solid surface into work that is abundant with pattern and color. This transition coincided with a celebration of my childhood and the objects that filled my home. Clay allows me to connect with the people in my present and past. The work in my thesis show is a reflection of these connections and hopes to develop interest and excitement around clay, pattern, and color.
CLAY

I use red earthenware for all the pieces in Growthlines. This type of clay has ties to historical ceramics. There is a long history of clay dug from the earth, made into pottery, and decorated with images important to a particular culture. The clay I use shares this connection. I buy a red earthenware called MC 107 Gator Red, from Southern Pottery in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. This clay makes me feel connected both to the earth and to the history of decorated ceramics. Earthenware was the first clay used by humans and its first use dates back to around 25,000 BCE. Significant cultures that used earthenware include Greek and Roman, Italian, and Dutch. There is a more recent history of potters using earthenware to make highly decorated work including Adero Willard and Holly Walker. Adero Willard applies layers of colored pattern including floral and geometric elements. I first started decorating my ceramic work after taking a workshop from her. I am influenced by the way she uses layered color and also the way pattern is integral to her work. Holly Walker uses bold forms, red clay, and a range of color. While not focused on pattern, her use of form and color relate to the way I make work that is considerate of the how segmented color can highlight form and influence choices in decoration.

I choose red earthenware because there is also something nice about working with a red base. I often cover the entire pot with colored slip, but when the clay peeks out at the foot of a mug or the flange of a jar, the clay seems calm and sturdy, strong enough to support the colors on it and to serve as a reminder of where the clay came from and its journey through history. The use of red clay covered by a white base has historical precedence. In both Italian Majolica and Dutch Delftware, red pots are covered in a
white glaze and then color is applied. While the process is slightly different from the one I use, the use of a red clay covered by a white base, slip or glaze, is shared. There are other, contemporary artists who use slip over red clay in a way that relates to my work. One of these is Ayumi Horie. She uses a red clay and then coats it in a white slip which she then carves through. The white slips is a prominent feature of her work as are the images she details through the slip. Hints of red clay show the thumb mark revealed by her grip as she dips the cup in slip and show sgraffito lines drawn through the slip. This is furthered by the use of animal imagery, which like the flowers in my work, highlights the abundance of the natural world and the connection to the earth.
LAYERS

Layers are part of my experience of the world. Both visually and mentally I encounter complex, multidimensional stories that resonate with my life. For me, these stories are often found within objects. Objects serve as a way to transmit a narrative through touch and observation. I seek to express layered stories within my pottery. These stories come both from decorated objects and from their function within the home. Specifically as a child, I remember evening coffee service after dinner, the vessels used, and the experience of interaction and connection as we shared in the moment and paused to reflect on the things that were truly important. Following dinner, the family would move into the living room and gather around the coffee table. My grandma would bring in a tray with a coffee pot and a sugar/creamer set. We would sit together and reflect on the day. This was an instance in which my family sought to bring the children of the house into the lives of the adults. Though we actually drank milk, we sat side by side with the adults and our comments were valued as equal to the adults. I remember these times as thinking that I was just like them, mature and aware of the world. I too held a mug in my hand and spoke about the events of the day. What seems most important about these moments is the way in which objects facilitated conversation and connection, the way the mug I held seemed to elevate my dialogue and self awareness, and the way objects brought all of us together.

I also remember a home filled with embellished textiles and the environment this created. Here, I do not just refer to one isolated memory but to an expansion of memories. My recollection of these moments is not like a continuous video but rather is a series of snapshots. These snapshots are layered in my mind and connect to the
depiction of image and pattern created with layers of color that tell about the ways decorated objects can make life richer and the ways that the makers of these objects can transmit love and comfort. As a child, I have memories of my mother and grandmother working on embroidery projects while we sat in the living room. Sometimes the television was on, sometimes music was playing, or sometimes there was silence. However, whatever background noise, both women were completely engaged in their craft. The time and effort they spent on these pieces transferred into the value and significance of the object after it was complete. Knowing that these women had recorded their time and skill imbued value. The objects they created were a source of calm and their imagery was soothing. Growing up, my home was often filled with discord. I sought out these objects for reassurance and confirmation that there was a better side of life, that angry individuals could also understand beauty. I often found myself as an observer to such conflict and found comfort in the pillows on the couch, like something soft still existed in my world.
COLOR

Color is central to my work. Color is also hard to think about and talk about. There is an established and intellectualized way to talk about color that I find challenging to master. My approach to color tends to revolve around families of color that have slight variation. For instance, I choose pink, orange, and maroon which I call the red family. This grouping of color represents colors that fall in the same family but have enough variation to be different and to be visually interesting. I believe this approach, of using colors grouped together, relates to the landscape I grew up in in Central Texas. There the colors are often a related shade of brown and the exceptions are rare but captivating. I try and replicate this in my work by using colors within the same family and sometimes adding another color that is more vibrant. I am attracted to these brighter colors because they are fun and exciting. They seem to suggest abundance, life, and growth and have a sort of energy that makes them stand out. I am also interested in the role a neutral color can play amidst a set of brighter colors. The neutral color allows for a moment of rest and tends to tone down a color palette that might be too strong or overwhelming without the neutral.

In a way, the pots I make are loud which I believe is an expression of a part of me that I usually hide and the loudness of the color is balanced by softer floral shapes (Image 1). The studio lets me be loud because it allows the opportunity for expression without judgement and provides the opportunity to take chances. While the work is eventually exposed to the world, initially it is for my eyes only, initially it is a reflection of the actual vibrancy of my life.
Image 1. *Floral Garniture*, 2022, Earthenware
I apply color to my work using two methods, slips and underglazes. The slips I use are essentially liquid clay colored with ceramic pigments called mason stains. I also use a commercial product called underglaze. Underglaze is similar to slip but has calcined elements which make it more flexible in terms of application. Underglaze can be applied to both greenware and bisqueware. Greenware refers to clay before it has been fired while bisqueware refers to work that has been fired once and all the physical and chemical water has been removed.

All of the color in my work is applied in green stage. This allows me to simplify the decorating process and minimize the complications of glazing. I seek to create depth through color and pattern and like using underglaze and slip that remains relatively true to its colors in greenware rather than the change that most glaze goes through during firing. This lets me explore color directly in the studio rather than waiting for fired results. After the work is bisque fired, I apply a white liner glaze and a clear glaze to seal the decoration under a glossy surface.
STENCILS

A stencil is a tool used to create patterns or shapes. In ceramics, generally it is a piece of paper that is dipped in water and placed onto a pot. Stencils are a kind of resist. My process works as follows: I start with a ground color, apply a layer of stencils, add a second color, apply another layer of stencils, add a third color, remove all the stencils, go back and add stencils over selected flowers and finally add the fourth color. The stencil shapes are drawn in Adobe Illustrator and cut in newsprint with a laser cutter. This leads to patterns that are precise and regular. However, because each individual stencil is laid one-by-one, the resulting surface is unique and varied.

The use of laser cut stencils creates a contrast between machine made tools and the natural world. I use the laser cutter to create floral stencils. Plants are soft and organic while machines are regimented and ordered. The combination of these elements leads to work that is both hard and soft, that has both a natural and a more graphic feel. The work almost feels like a print, like each layer has been added through a screen. The work has blocks of color with organic boundaries. Some of the work I make further enhances softness by adding a rim that looks soft and pillowy. The rim is formed through a sledging process in which I use a plastic stencil of the profile of the rim and apply it to clay spinning on the potters wheel. This creates a rim that I can then add to the body of a plate. While the rim is actually solid, it has the appearance of being hollow (Image 2).
Image 2. *X Platter*, 2022, Earthenware
FUNCTION

Visual appearance is a part function. Often, the reason we are first drawn to a mug is because of its display and then as we pick it up we feel the rim and test the handle. Appearance is the way something looks on the surface, the color, texture, or sheen we first see. Visual appearance draws us in and leads us to investigate the other parts of the object. In the natural world, it functions as a signal. In flowers, bright colors are often used to attract pollinators. There is a similar relationship between a mug and the person who uses it. The person may be drawn in because of the surface but it is the content of the object, the way that it may be used to hold a material that keeps them engaged. Pots are like nature in this way. Their surface generates an attraction but it is their function that continues the relationship. I want to make pots that people notice from across a room and are attracted to and I am also interested in how they are used. There is much more to a functional object than its appearance but its decoration can be the entryway into the object. I use my surface as this entry-point, a vehicle to draw the user in to investigate further.

While appearance might lead to the first point of contact, it is also essential that the object function well. This cannot be an afterthought but must be an integral part of the object. Factors of usability must be taken into account. Objects that function well create a relationship between the user and the object. The user becomes attuned to the intricacies of the mug and finds a connection to the shape. The user develops a fondness for the mug both immediately and over time. Immediately, there is a visual preference and the knowledge that it feels good in one’s hand, but over time the user
begins to understand the thought that went into each aspect of the object and the consideration that was given to its physical features.

I make decisions about the function of objects based on my history with ceramics and the makers that first inspired me. There is not a single, perfect ideal in terms of function of an object, but variation among makers and users. Certain people prefer a pot one way, while others have different choices. The subjectivity and value of choice in ceramics leads to a field that is varied and diverse. I celebrate this diversity and hope that my objects add to the pool and will find users who share my values.

Comfort of the handle is critical to me. Because the handle serves as the point of contact between the user and the object, this relationship is significant. Different hands hold mugs differently and I make cups the way I prefer them, with a little weight so they feel substantial in my hand. For a handle, I make sure that there is room for fingers to hold on. Traditionally handles are considered and named by their ability to hold a certain number of fingers. There’s the one-finger mug, the two-finger mug, and the three-finger mug. The worst kind of mug is one that is difficult to hold. There should also be care taken to make sure the surface of the handle is soft and feels good when touched by your skin. For even the most beautiful mug, if it has an uncomfortable handle, it will find its way to the back of the cupboard. I am very interested in the comfort that ceramic objects offer, so factors such as the physical comfort of the handle are of great interest.

The shaping of the rim is also important. The rim of a mug should be comfortable when it touches your lips. This means it shouldn’t be too thick or too thin and shouldn’t be sharp. For pots that have a spout, such as a pitcher or coffee pot, it is
important to pay attention to how the pot pours. The spout should pour evenly and ideally will stop pouring without dripping when raised up. This is achieved by making the tip of the spout sharp, but not too sharp because then it is likely to chip. While some of the success of a pot in terms of function is objective, there is also variation in preference of the factor people value in an object. I consider all of these factors when making pots but make pots in the way I find most satisfactory.

I invest in the surface of a mug because it is integral to function. This role is visual and will draw the user in to connect with the object. This importance of outward appearance comes from my history with decorated objects and the way that they served me in my past. I use my history to make choices. I have found that beautiful objects can be comforting. For me, this means that the effort of the maker can be felt in the surface. Each element was the result of an exertion by the maker and it feels like the maker is communicating with you through each exertion. For instance, in a fabric pillow, each stitch was made by poking the needle through the fabric and each stitch can be felt as the makers attempt to soothe the user. I think that the appearance and function of objects represent a communication from the maker to the user and I hope that the ceramic objects I create may be felt as an expression of calm. A factor of the ceramic objects we value most are those that fit in with our visual preferences. For me this means an object with a strong surface and an object with an emphasis on color.

Interaction with functional pottery makes life dynamic. It provides opportunities to connect with each other and connect with ourselves. For me this connection is to the female makers in my family history who taught me to enjoy handmade objects and introduced me to a set of imagery that I recreate in my own work. I feel like I have
developed a body of work that these women could share with me if they were still alive but it also feels good to have a way to connect to them even after they have passed away. I hope to develop this sense of connection for both myself and others and make everyday moments more special.
FORMING PROCESS

The wheel is all about movements. Approaching a new piece of clay, I use a series of fluid and confident movements, applying force and leading the clay into the shape I envision. This is a quick process. I try not to labor over any piece for too long because the clay is strongest when approached with efficiency. The wheel is the first tool I used in ceramics. It took many years to get to the point where I had the control to create what I envisioned. Even now, after working with the wheel for a long time, there is still a negotiation process. Not every attempt works and for success there needs to be a sort of partnership between me and the wheel. Working together, the wheel becomes an extension of me and my motions direct the clay towards a shared goal. The motion of the wheel brings an inanimate object to life. With the rotation of the wheel the clay has a life force and my motions work with the clay rather than against it. The wheel is useful for creating objects that are cylindrical and I use it to make most vertical forms.

For flatter forms, like plates and platters I use a hump mold to form the base of the object. A hump mold is plaster formed into a convex curve. I use it to form the face of the plate. I lay a slab of clay onto the plaster, compress it with a rubber rib to minimize cracking and let it dry until it is strong enough to hold its shape and then is removed. While the plate is inverted, I add a coil to the bottom of the clay slab to create a foot. I also add a rim to these handbuilt forms. I use the wheel to create the rim but in a process slightly different from throwing. Called sledging, I use a plastic model with the shape of the rim cut out in profile and then press this shape onto the clay. This creates a ring of clay with a rounded shape that I then add to the plate. This combination gives the forms a finished edge and generates a process that I find fun and interesting. This
little moment of joy that comes from combining two styles of working makes the experience of making worthwhile.
SETS/GARNITURES

My show features works that are grouped together according to function, profile, or decoration. I like to create work in series. A series allows you to trust the form that is in your hands. There is a sort of memory that comes in thrown objects. Once you throw the first one, the subsequent forms are embedded and you trust them to form a grouping of similar objects. This way of working teaches you about the intricacies of form including height, width, volume, and curve. Series highlight a specific form and offer opportunities for interaction between objects. In Growthlines, there will be sets of objects with the same form and also a sets of objects known as a garnitures. Both types of groupings offer a chance to create relationships between objects. These relationships can include form, pattern and color, and texture (Image 3).
Garnitures are groups of decorative pots that were popular during the 17th and 18th century. They typically are found on mantelpieces or atop cabinets. Originally, these vessels were imported from Asia to Europe but also began being produced within Europe as well. Traditionally these were made with porcelain clay and featured cobalt blue decorations. China first developed porcelain and porcelain was not known to be native to Europe. Thus, European cultures sought to imitate porcelain by putting white glaze over the clays that were found in Europe. While there is a long history of porcelain in garnitures, I am also interested in the alternative clays used for garnitures in Europe as they connect to the clay that I am using. I make garnitures with red earthenware clay and use decoration with a wider range of color and imagery. Other
contemporary makers exploring this garniture tradition include Mike Stumbras and Sanam Emami. Stumbras’ forms reference classical vases and urns and his decoration includes more contemporary elements. Emami’s garnitures are sets of vases and jars that have direct lines and continuous curves. The forms are utilitarian, and her decoration references Iranian culture. Both of these interpretations use the idea of garniture but transform it into their own ideas and ways of working.
FLOWERS AND POLLINATORS

Flowers have been an important part of my work since I started making decorated ceramics. When I sketch absentmindedly, I find my hands naturally inclined to draw floral lines. I think that this sort of embedded floral decoration comes from growing up around floral textiles created by my mother and grandmother. These objects were often soothing and offered comfort during stressful moments. Without thinking, I am predisposed to flowers. With thinking, I begin to consider the lifetime of a flower and the role that pollinators play in the continuation of floral species. Because of this connection, I started including pollinators in my work. Pollinators were prominent in my work in the previous year, but find lesser emphasis in Growthlines (Image 4).

Image 4. Blue Pollinator Plate, 2021, Earthenware
Instead of bees and butterflies, I am interested in the underdog pollinator who does the work without getting much of the credit. For instance, moths and beetles are also important pollinators and without them some species of flowers could not survive. The primary flowers referenced are Blanketflowers and Zinnias which are both important for summer pollination. I am also interested in Sap Beetles and a range of moths including Tiger Moths. I like the notion of an underdog and relate to the idea of working hard without being noticed or receiving the same appreciation as others.
PATTERNS AND SCALE

I am interested in how changing the scale of a pattern can cause a different visual impact. In general, I tend to use oversized pattern because I like the way the size of the pattern interacts with the form when the two are of a comparable size. This interaction can make the pattern feel dominant and can make the form appear softer. I am also interested in using the same pattern in different sizes within one piece. This diversity of scale makes the pattern more alluring and draws in the viewer. Making larger platters and jars led to the need for larger pattern and feeling like the imagery needed to be scaled up to match. However, after increasing the size of the stencils I tried using larger stencils on smaller pieces and found that I liked the way the image and the form interacted with this combination and began using this idea on much of the work (Image 5).
Image 5. *Turquoise Floral Tumblers*, 2022, Earthenware
INSTALLATION

The installation of *Growthlines* was meant to be open and spacious to allow the viewer to see the work from a distance and have the opportunity to further investigate it (Image 6).

Image 6. *Installation View 1, 2022, Earthenware*

I sought to highlight the work that was produced in series. Because of this, I purposely installed some of the shelves higher than usual to replicate the mantelpieces on which garnitures are usually placed (Image 7).
Image 7. *Installation View 2, 2022, Earthenware*

Much of the work in *Growthlines* was grouped according to function meaning that cups were placed with cups and plates were placed with plates (Image 8, 9).
Image 8. *Floral Mugs, 2022, Earthenware*
This again highlights the idea of work produced in series and also emphasizes the range of color schemes. Particular features of the show include a series of platters hung on the back wall of the gallery and larger garnitures on pedestals placed throughout the space (Image 10, 11).
Image 10. *Floral Platters*, 2022, Earthenware
Image 11. *Purple Garniture*, 2022, Earthenware
CONCLUSION

Growthlines is a collection of ceramic work that portrays floral pattern on functional objects. The objects are visually attractive and meant to be used. They are also meant to highlight the role that flowers have in nature and their importance in the continuation of nature. These objects are also significant to me because they represent my attempt to communicate with the world. They help me make connections and begin a dialogue with viewers. The choices I make in the work are defined by a set of values that I have learned from my childhood, my interactions with makers, and my attempts to understand myself. I seek to share these values and leave viewers with an impression of my life.
VITA

Alexandra Saunders was born in San Antonio, Texas and earned her Bachelor of Arts in Studio Art with a concentration in Ceramics from the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas. She completed a residency at Flower City Arts Center in Rochester, New York. After completing her Master of Fine Arts she will be the Salad Days Resident at Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts. She plans to receive her masters degree in August of 2022.