

WorthMoreThanAGlance

by Sue Grier

As a maker, I like to investigate a pottery form that I find particularly compelling. My first response is an absolute need to pick it up, to feel its weight and gauge the wall thickness with my fingers. I enjoy discovering how handles, spouts, or lids were accomplished. This physical exploration of the crafting of the pot always reveals strengths, weaknesses, and even surprises in the form. Touch and sight work together; even though seeing it was what drew me in the first place, there is much more to know. When I feel the glazed or unglazed surface I discover it tactilely. Is it warm and satiny, cold and glassy, or just plain rough? Beneath the skin of the glaze, there will be further layers of information: marks from tools, hands, and fingertips; slips, washes, and how the pot was trimmed, signed, and fired. And I'll note if the form is symmetrical or asymmetrical, formal or casual, thrown or hand-built – even what type of clay was used. All these facets of the piece show the memory of its making. My final exploration is an examination of how the pot fits into the world of other pots. I'll ask myself if it calls out to the generation of its making, reflecting the trends of the time. Is it very traditional, with quiet strength in its proportions, or does it have a louder, contemporary voice – maybe even an edgy one? Do I know anything about the maker, or does what I know about the period or art movement stand in for individual style? Within its style, I can see which moment in history it belongs to and whether it expresses conceptual information and makes known the artist's intent. A pot reveals so many layers of information.

Similarly, a potter brings layers of understanding and experience to their work over time. A human generation being roughly a thirty-year span, I have spent a generation's worth of time working with clay, and watching clay trends, techniques, styles, and makers emerge, each in their turn adding to the wealth of knowledge in this field. You get to know a material pretty well in that time. In *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell writes that successful people put in 10,000 hours to get to a level of excellence. It is so important to put in this time – shortcuts cannot impart real experience. This expertise or level of craftsmanship gives the practiced potter the intimate knowledge necessary to get the most from the materials.

My dad once quipped, "You can't know who you are if you don't know where you came from." He was referring to his passion for genealogy, for the unusual names and colorful stories from our family's past generations who came from Scotland, England, Holland, Germany, and Austria. Between the 1600s and 1800s, my ancestors arrived here in big sailing ships, trekking into the North American continent to embark on fresh beginnings. They were farmers, merchants, soldiers, and preachers – risk-takers and hard workers – moving westward and, with each generation, seeking new opportunity. I see their faces in old tin-types and photographs and know a few through objects passed down: a few plates, an ivory pipe, a necklace or ring. Regarding these objects is a welcome encounter with their lives.

Each generation learns from the one immediately before and influences the

ones who follow. Everything about this line has an impact upon who I have turned out to be. Curiously, there may be an even subtler influence, unique to me, which leads to my creative work. In an article about his personal experience with genetic imprint, barely perceptible triggers passed down from our genetic past, Raymond M. Lane states, “There are studies out there that suggest we’re all born with genetic memories – that we move through time carrying the experiences and cultures of our ancestors.” I find the idea of this genetic imprint, revealed through habits and tendencies, pretty intriguing. I know, it sounds far-fetched. But as I ponder my aesthetic choices, those things that have really grabbed my imagination time and again, the idea of such an imprint makes sense. I grew up in the Desert Southwest and was always drawing and painting landscapes of wind-eroded sand dunes, stark rugged mountains, and wide horizons of color. I moved to the Southeast, switched to clay, and worked as a production potter for eighteen years. When I returned to graduate school I delved into understanding and articulating my aesthetic choices and investigating where my sensibility finds resource and nourishment. Recently, I Googled images of the area of Scotland whence my long-ago ancestor had emigrated. The landscape that popped onto the computer screen was amazingly similar: eroded, stark, and rugged, with wide horizons. Perhaps the landscapes of my personal and familial past are connected, part of a genetic *memory* that I can bring forth in my own creative way.

And finally, how might I understand

how belonging to my generation has influenced me? Looking through the lens of world events, sociologists and historians sort information and tag the generations. For an artist, it is also pertinent to be informed of art movements and periods. It’s not only about whom you consider yourself to be, but also how your community and world views you. I am considered a Baby Boomer, raised by parents of the Quiet Generation (between the Greatest Generation and the Baby Boomers). I don’t really relate to that tag, as I am late in that generational cycle and missed out on all the hoopla. What I am very aware of are the benefits of societal change, artistic movements, technological developments, and political change as they have affected my choices. As I came to understand the impact of ceramic artists such as Voulkos and Soldner, and how their work moved from pots-on-the-table to sculpture and wall pieces, my own definition of functional pottery broadened. And in important readings such as *Ceramic Art: Comment & Review 1882-1977* or Rose Slivka’s “The New Ceramic Presence,” the conversations about the advancement of ceramics through abstract expressionism to post-modernism were beginning. These writings brought new perspectives to my thinking about my work – took me beyond my individual style. Additionally, my life’s particular details (gender, birth order, ethnicity, socio-economic status, education, sexuality, marriage, children, health) are unavoidable influences upon my creative voice, as much as what “generation” I belong to. For example, I have always

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NOTES

Ceramic Art: Comment and Review 1882-1977, ed. Garth Clark, E. P. Dutton, NY, 1978
Gladwell, Malcolm. *Outliers*, Little Brown and Company, NY, 2008
Slivka, Rose. “The New Ceramic Presence,” *Craft Horizons*, no. 4, 1961
Lane, Raymond M. “My Mother’s Deep Green Secret.” *The AARP Magazine*, Feb-Mar 2013



ABOVE: Eight Chairs, 2009.
Stoneware, thrown, altered
and assembled, handbuilding,
Anagama wood-fired.
6 x 37 x 8 in.

LEFT: Continuum, 2007.
Stoneware, thrown, altered
and assembled, handbuilding,
Soda-fired. 20 x 10 x 6 in.
Photograph by Tim Barnwell.

been attracted to making sets and pairs, families of pots that have a visual and physical relationship. I attribute this to my own family structure: female and married, with children and grandchildren.

“Sometimes you have to play a long time to be able to play yourself.”

Miles Davis

I find this simple-sounding quote intriguing when considering my ideas about generation. Davis may have had a different intention, that of playing



beyond self-consciousness, teachers, and influences to a freer self-expression. But for me the act of asking enough questions to find self-awareness has been valuable and could not be hurried. Like exploring a compelling pottery form, the time spent mastering my craft, incorporating my family's past into my work, and examining my artistic influences in grad school have resulted in freer, more nuanced means of expression. Looking at the passage of time, generations in macrocosm and microcosm, has fine-tuned my aesthetic awareness. I can

see my unique combination of cultural experience and history, personal place and aesthetic, and long-running dedication to art-making and process, all bound together, evaluated, and ultimately inescapable as an artist. It has taken me time – a lot of time – to uncover all this. It wasn't easy or quick, but it has been worth more than that glance.