Earthbound: Celebrating the Natural World Enjoying Good Food and Company

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Earthbound is a body of utilitarian work created as a tribute to regional plants and animals, to beloved family members, to revered masters of ceramic art, and to the enjoyment of good food and conversation.

Earthbound explores the role of flora and fauna found throughout Southeast Georgia. These handmade functional objects celebrate aspects of nature I encounter on a daily basis. Each place setting is crafted to enhance the pleasure of eating and drinking while fostering a connection to the natural world.

I have long held an interest in the human connection to nature, which was fostered by both my parents and oldest brother. As a child I was encouraged to observe wildlife and to read about the natural world. The objects on view celebrate the environment as it exists in my backyard, and convey a hope for awareness and preservation.

INDEX WORDS: Utilitarian Pottery, Functional Pottery, Functional Ceramics, Plants and Animals on Ceramics, Pottery as Part of Communal or Solitary Meals.
EARTHBOUND:  
Celebrating the natural world  
Enjoying good food and company  

by  

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EARTHBOUND:
Celebrating the natural world
Enjoying good food and company

by

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the people who taught me to love the plants and animals around me: my parents, Fielding and Virginia Russell, and my oldest brother, Fielding Russell, Jr.
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A big Thank You to my committee: Marc Moulton, who always insisted that I be clear; Julie McGuire, who never tired of sending visual suggestions to me; Marc Mitchell, who insisted on re-writes until it met his standards; and Derek Larson, who pushed me to reach beyond my first ideas. Thank you also to Jeff Schmuki, who told me about Rosanjin and suggested manmade materials.

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Finally, a large thank you to my daughter Margo McCoy, who, if she has been aghast at having an eccentric mother, has been gracious about it. I can't imagine having a dearer child.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

*Earthbound* is a set of dishes with hand-drawn and colored images of animals and plants that live in Southeast Georgia. Making useful objects is important to me for several reasons. A plate or a cup is not just seen; by its weight and texture it also engages kinesthetic and tactile senses. Filled with food or drink, it becomes a part of a meditation or a communal gathering. Images on it can be triggers for memory or revelation.

I began work with a series of memories from my childhood: my oldest brother bringing me snakes as pets; my mother carefully setting a table for dinner or sitting at the window with the Peterson Bird Guides; my father on his knees cleaning mortar from old bricks that would become the patio. These three people played crucial roles in shaping my development, and I wanted to honor them and what they loved through my project. As it turned out, the final product became much more than I planned.

Living in Nature

To paraphrase Wordsworth, if the child truly is the mother of the woman, my childhood should offer some explanation as to why I am the person/artist I am today. To explain myself as an artist, I follow two threads: one exploring my relationship with art, and one exploring my relationship with nature. My relationship with nature is more easily explained, and I’ll begin with it. Here are some vignettes:

My family was the first and most important influence on my interest in nature. I spent many hours out of doors following my parents and brothers around as they
gardened. My mother’s desire was to have something blooming in the yard every month of the year, and so there was a great variety of plant life there. Our next door neighbor was a biologist, and she was handy for native plant identification. Many plants had been brought from my grandparents’ north Georgia yards. I learned early on that plants and weeds had names. Another family friend was an ornithologist who identified any unusual birds that stopped by. My oldest brother was in charge of all the other animals, and so my education included local arachnids and reptiles.

An owl had made his home in a pear tree in our front yard. The tree died, and my father cut it down. I have been told that I cried for days about its losing its home. Some years later, my father cut down a crabapple tree that was in the footprint of an outdoor kitchen he and my brothers were building. I again cried for days. Looking back on it, I think it is possible that my reactions to both of these episodes grew out of my father's
skill at storytelling. I'm sure he had talked about the owl and the scent of the crabapple flowers in glowing terms, little guessing that I would form such a strong attachment to them. After he read Alice in Wonderland to me, every anole in the yard was named Bill.

Figure 3. Observing a fawn.

When I was three or four years of age, I came up out of the back yard with a black widow spider to show my mother. She very carefully took my hand and tipped it so the spider fell off. She taught 5th grade science and always had an aquarium and a terrarium in her classroom, so she wasn't particularly squeamish. My oldest brother once brought me a black racer snake for a pet. It escaped on the screened back porch, to the consternation of a friend, who sat all one evening with her feet off the floor. We never did find it. I had anoles and small green turtles (bought at the store) as pets. That practice stopped when I found the remains of one I had left for safe-keeping--and forgotten--under a box.

Collecting bugs one day, I went across the street to our neighbor's hive, stuck the
jar up to the slit in the front, and ran home pursued by a cloud of bees. I ended up in a soda bath with my mother combing bees out of my hair (she counted 40). Collecting lightening bugs at family reunions was a much safer activity.

![Figure 4. My brother showing his daughter how to feed ducks.](image)

My oldest brother, in particular, always took time to explain how animals should be handled. Sometimes his lessons produced unusual results. The hog-nosed snake he was showing me first puffed out its throat to look like a rattler, then rolled over and played dead, and finally vomited up three frogs, becoming a vivid lesson for me about the behavior and diet of snakes. Another time, he and I were on the way home from North Georgia when he spotted a large rattlesnake in the road. He slowed down and drove the wheel of his VW Beetle onto the snake so he could safely show it to me. By the time we got out of the car, however, it had extricated itself from the tire, and was unhappy about our interference.
Years later, at Buddhist monastery in Southern California, I watched a monk "invite" a small Western diamondback rattler into a PVC pipe so it could be relocated away from the cabins. The snake did not strike at him; in fact, it tried very hard to escape him. In our cabin, we were able to peacefully relocate two scorpions, and share the bathroom with the black widow that lived behind the toilet. It occurred to me then that the reactions of animals to us depend in part on our behavior toward them.

The experiences I had with my parents and my brother did away with any fear I might have had of the natural world. My mother and brother were matter-of-fact in their interactions, while my father's stories imbued nature with a sentience I might not otherwise have recognized.

I was too scattered to be a strong student in English literature, but class reading deepened my understanding of nature. One poem significant to me was Pied Beauty by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Glory be to God for dappled things –
For skies of couple-colour as a brinded cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches’ wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced – fold, fallow, and plough;
And all trádes, their gear and tackle and trim.

All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.¹

When I was a junior in college, I didn't understand Hopkins very well, but I was impressed by the way he piled up visual details in this poem. At the same time I was studying upper level English literature courses, I was beginning an exploration of art through introductory courses. Agnes Scott College required a year's worth of studio art and art history for admission to upper level courses, so to take ceramics, I had to learn something about two-dimensional art and art history. In both art and literature, details create images. Writers use words, while artists use lines, colors, and shapes. At 20 years of age, I wasn't aware of that distinction, or of the complexity of either task. I was, however, already aware that working with clay gave me as much satisfaction as reading anything in English literature did. I chose to stay with the English major rather than stay in school another year, though. Ironically, I didn't stick with English; the journey back to ceramics took me almost 40 years.

The American Literature courses I took in graduate school helped me see myself as a part of nature rather than a separate being. I found that Emerson and Thoreau had been reading about Eastern religions--Hinduism in particular. One of the ideas I took from my reading was that there is an Oversoul composed of everything in the universe. I'm not sure that my idea is an accurate interpretation of what Emerson was saying, or even that it is an accurate interpretation of any facet of Hinduism, but I believe even more strongly now that the lives and fate of humans and other animals--all of nature in fact--are inextricably bound together.

My second husband introduced me to Buddhism and nature writing, and I began to notice changes around me that pushed me into serious concern for the environment.
A lot has changed in the world since the 1950's of my childhood--many more people, widespread air conditioning, large equipment that can alter landscapes, and for many, loss of connection to the environment. Scientific evidence of climate change is scary, as are reports of increasing numbers of endangered species. I feel a great urge to record the life I see around me.

Today environmental issues are the primary ones I follow. It seems to me that if we can't drink the water or breathe the air, no other issues matter. I take some comfort in knowing that at least some of nature will survive the destruction humans are creating, but I hate the thought that mankind is so bent on its own destruction. I don't want to preach to people about the importance of the environment to our survival as a species, but I do want my work to reflect what's important to me. To that end, I cover my ceramic work with plants and animals whose survival hangs with ours.

**Not so much art**

I do not come from an artistic family. Whatever creativity my family possesses is verbal or musical. The art department at Georgia Southern once offered art lessons for faculty members, and my father came home with a pastel of zinnias. It is colorful, and primitive. Frieda Gernant, who taught the class, was a big believer in encouraging children to color outside the lines in coloring books. I don't know what she made of my father as artist.

My mother loved dinnerware and had frequent dinner parties. When I was a child, she had three sets of china: one, a Noritake pattern she had gotten when she and
my father married; one, a Havilland pattern he had given her; and one, a set of JohnsonBrothers Indian Tree we ate from every day. I am told that when I was a baby, I was content if my buggy was pushed into the dining room so I could see and hear my family as they ate together. My mother set a fancy table with her good china for special occasions like dinner parties. The sounds of conversation and laughter drifted tantalizingly upstairs. Later, when my two oldest brothers came home from college at holidays, I loved sitting and listening to their stories. Meals were almost always happy times; my brothers sang, imitated professors, and demonstrated how they had learned such skills as how to toss biscuits. My father and brothers sometimes sat at the table on the porch, and played a sort of game of dare with food. One of my brothers brought home limburger cheese, and the four of them sat and ate it with crackers. They were just as likely to sit and eat five pounds of boiled peanuts at a sitting; chewing, telling stories, laughing. I have friends who don't understand the importance of mealtimes and food to Southerners; our family life revolved around food and conversation.

I was informally exposed to some of the ceramics that have influenced my work. My mother had been given Italian majolica pieces in 1931 as wedding gifts, and I grew up loving the bright colors and figures on them. My Grandmother Russell had also given her grape leaf-shaped majolica plates which she had been given in 1890 as wedding gifts. Those pieces were some of my mother's treasures.

After World War II, Georgia Southern became a large center for Rotary International exchange students. Because they couldn't go home for holidays, my
father often invited some of those students to meals with our family. It has only recently occurred to me that among the gifts they brought my parents were ceramics from Italy, Korea, and Japan.

**Return to art**

My childhood experience with making ceramics was limited. Once I painted figurines at the home of friends of my parents. As a Girl Scout, I earned a pottery (or an art) badge. Somewhere in my house are some very small and ugly coil and pinch pots from that time. Then, as a senior in high school, I visited a friend at Agnes Scott College. She was taking ceramics, and when she showed me how to throw a pot, I was hooked. When I finally was able to take the class, ceramics became an oasis for me in a time of turmoil. I can still get into a quiet meditative place while I'm throwing. More often than not, I begin work and forget time. Thinking back to 2003, when my husband and I came from Tennessee to live with my mother, I realize now how badly I needed a quiet place to be. That first year was very difficult. My mother was feeble, and in and out of the hospital a lot. I had taken a year's leave of absence because I thought she would die that year, but I dreaded going through that time. By 2004, we had changed some of her medications, she had developed a strong relationship with my husband, and it was apparent that she was much better, so I retired from my fulltime teaching job in Tennessee. By 2005, I had visited Club Mud several times and had talked to Jane Pleak about taking a class. She was encouraging, and the chairman of my department was willing to work my schedule around it, so I took up ceramics again after almost 37 years.
It wasn't what I remembered. As a college student, I had given pitchers, cups and teapots to relatives. They still had them, so I knew I hadn't imagined making them. I had used the plates and bowls that I made, so I knew that I had made functional things.

But my hands had forgotten, and I had lost my courage. I spent months trying to get back the skill I had acquired effortlessly as a 20 year old. I kept hearing the voice of one of my artist friends, who came back home to Tennessee from New York City and taught art at the local community college. He would point at 30-something students who were just coming to college, and declare that they could have been great artists, but that they were now too old to make it in the art world. To keep my spirits up, I would think of Beatrice Wood, who was still throwing pots in her 90's.

Then, in the space of 18 months, my mother died, I lost my job, and my husband and I divorced. I was living alone for the first time in my life. I had a lot of time and not a lot of money. Since I couldn't afford to escape my troubles by travelling, I chose the next best alternative: work through my troubles and continue developing my skills in ceramics. Applying for graduate school seemed a logical step. After years of buying other people's work, I was going to wade in and commit to making my own. I am reminded of Jackson Browne ("you watch yourself from the sidelines; like your life is a game; you don't mind playing to keep yourself amused"

\[2\]  when I think of my tendency

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2 Jackson Browne, "Your Bright Baby Blues." The Pretender. (Elektra/Asylum, 1990.) CD
toward passivity and second-hand living. I've never been a big risk-taker, but I was tired of looking on. Making ceramics seriously and putting it out there is one of the scariest, riskiest things I've ever been aware of doing.

I began the graduate program making work using stoneware clay. I did some exploration into sculptural forms, but settled into utilitarian pieces. If I was going to make a body of work, it made sense to me to make work that could be used. Sculptural work seems to me to require more space than most people have to set aside in their offices or houses. Further, I had spent my entire working life involved in two fields—psychology and English—that have become increasingly esoteric and effete, and I wanted to produce work that was accessible to many people.

By the end of my first year of the program I had grown discouraged at how my designs were being affected by the glazes and firing process. It was then that Jane Pleak suggested I switch to earthenware clay with its potential for brighter colors. That summer I spent testing different clay and slip formulas, and by the time my 30 hour review arrived, I had developed an earthenware body of work I titled Predator vs. Prey. I used Korean Buncheong pottery as an inspiration for the figures I put on the collection. Towards the end of my second year, Jane Pleak suggested I look into Japanese Oribe style, and so I began to explore ways to combine abstract pattern with the portraits of plants and animals on my work.

In my final year, I found myself in the scary position of having a new and unknown ceramics professor. I knew he did not use a lot of ceramics in his work, and I
feared that he would not be supportive of someone who wanted to make utilitarian work. Fortunately, he was not only supportive, but he made a number of good suggestions for me to research and use. It was he who suggested that the architectural elements in my yard could substitute for fabric designs in the Oribe tradition, and he who suggested I look at Rosanjin to see how he designed and made utilitarian work for his restaurant.
Chapter 2: Thesis body of work

My dinner service was made of red clay and thrown on a potter's wheel. As I have mentioned, I spent a semester developing a clay body that was relatively easy to throw and which had a dark red color. I didn't want to use commercial glazes, and so I spent time mixing and testing oxides found in the studio. I was able to get greens, blues, yellows, and browns that I was happy with, but to get reds, I had to use commercial stains. In the end, I also used some commercial glazes to get depth of color.

When pieces were leather hard, or firm, I dipped them in a white slip made mostly of a clay called OM4, named for the mine it comes from. When the slip was no longer shiny on the pieces, I drew plants or animals onto their surfaces, and then used a sgraffito tool to incise the design through the slip so that the red clay below showed through. Pieces were first fired to approximately 1800 degrees Fahrenheit. After they cooled, I added color to different parts of the design, and dipped the pieces into a clear glaze. The second firing was to just under 2000 degrees Fahrenheit. The resulting pieces are commonly called earthenware.

The Predator vs. Prey work of the 30 hour review evolved in my third year into a more general collection of dishes decorated with portraits of plants and animals, often with backgrounds of manmade elements, the most common of which were chain link fencing and bricks. To emphasize the function of the work, the place settings were to be displayed on tables. That idea grew into having a dinner party in which they would be put to use. Tables were built by Jason McCoy of eight 2" x 12" x 12' boards, and
mounted on turned table legs. For the gallery show, 16 place settings were displayed; for
the dinner, 24 place settings were produced.

I first tried to imagine what dishes might be required for an elaborate dinner, and
decided upon five: a plate, one or two bowls for soup or salad, a dessert or bread plate, a
water or tea goblet, and a cup for a hot beverage. Because I invited 24 people to dinner,
I ended up making more than 120 pieces.

![Figure 5. Virginia Russell, Place setting #1, Earthenware, 2013.](image)

Each plate has a fairly deep well, and a flattened lip one to two inches wide.
When I was making them, I measured nine inches before forming the lip, aiming for a
fairly deep well and two inch rim. Bowls were of two sorts: one more upright, and one
more open. Unfortunately, I didn't get all 28 bowls made, and ended up using a mix of
the two styles. There were two sorts of mugs: one smaller for people who preferred
black coffee, and one larger for those who wanted to add cream. Desert or bread plates I
threw almost flat, so they would frame a plant or animal portrait. I had initially decided not to attempt goblets (or tumblers) because I wanted to serve wine in clear glasses. However, on my way into the studio one day, I happened to see a goblet by Shauna Lyons, and I couldn't resist. The goblets were made last, and quickly. The last of them came out of the kiln just before the dinner began.

There are a number of different colors on the figures, unified by the same background color and shape. I used a creamy slip, and drew the figures through it so that the red clay below would be revealed. On some pieces, I left the decoration at that, and on some, I went full out with sgraffito. All pieces had some color added. I used as many oxides as I could, and where I couldn't get a particular color (red, for example), I used commercial glazes or stains.

I chose the animals and plants I did for a number of reasons. Some animals--notably spiders--have their own special purpose and beauty, but have been demonized in literature and film. The drawings of spiders on my dishes show non-threatening beings which I hope will desensitize in users some of the negative emotion that surrounds them. Other animals--such as toads and skinks--are either out at night, or move so quickly that they may not readily recognized or appreciated. One benefit for me from this exercise has been that I have had to look closely at the subjects I draw. Pieces produced towards the end tended to have more accurate details as I became more skillful at adding distinguishing features to the drawings.
A recurring image is that of a toad like those that troll the patio at night. One of the dinner plates has a drawing of a toad sitting on magnolia leaves. Hunting toads at night sit up against the wall around the patio. There is a large magnolia tree at the edge of the patio, and trash from the tree in the form of petals, seed pods, and leaves is always there, so the toad looks at home in that scene.

For some, toads are symbolic of creativity and fertility, but for me their meaning is both broader and more concrete and specific. Toads are one of the animals who are threatened by climate change and human activity in general. They require water for breeding, and when there is drought, or when their habitat is drained and paved over, they cannot reproduce. Further, when the water they breed in is polluted, their young may either fail to mature, or end up with mutations that are fatal. I can remember a
time when during or after a rain, the road was filled with toads. Even as a child I was horrified that so many were run over by cars. Now I rarely see them.

Besides my concern for the environment at large, the linchpins of my thesis are my home environment and my memories of the people who reared me. The incident in which my brother was showing me the hog-nosed snake that vomited up three toads is one of those examples where memories of people and environment intersect. He was being very scholarly about the snake--but when the toads appeared, he initially was taken aback. Then his attention switched to the toads. They were good examples of the progressive effects of digestion: the first one out almost immediately hopped away, the second one was stunned, and the third one had already succumbed to digestive juices. I must confess that I was not horrified at all at the time. I can't see frogs in my yard without thinking of my oldest brother. The toad on that plate has both specific and general meaning for me: my family and home, and the world at large. The difficult task I've set for that toad is that it awaken in others the concern I have for an environment that's slipping away from us.
Other images from *Earthbound* illustrate the results of my efforts. Summer brings magnolia blossoms to the yard, and fast-moving reclusive five-lined skinks like the one on the cup in *Place setting #1* flash across the patio when disturbed. In late February and March, the peeps of male tree frogs like the one on the desert plate fill the night air.

Last summer, I was stung by one of the brown wasps that made its home in my front yard. I was surprised at how much it hurt, but I was comforted when my computer search for remedies uncovered the random information that, like bees, wasps pollinate, and do not lose their stingers as do bees. There were spiny orb weaver spiders in the front yard as well. One insisted on attaching its web to my car for a week, but relocated
after I took it down several times. They are tiny, but distinctive, resembling black and white skulls with red spikes. Magnified, they also call to mind fancy crabs.

I am certainly not immune to the conditions that affect all of our relationships to nature. When I was a child, the streets that run past my house were not paved, and not often used. Trucks did not have loud pipes; students lived on campus; the house was not air conditioned, and we heard nature all around us. Several years ago, we replaced the old single-paned windows with ones that are double-paned. The result is that my house is more energy efficient and quieter, but while I am very happy not to hear most of the traffic, I regret not hearing the sounds of birds and frogs unless I am outside.

Being in nature in South Georgia is just not an easy proposition. I know from gardening that I will suffer if I try to spend much time outside from late May until early September. Because birds begin nesting early in March, I have to get done any clearing and trimming before spring. One year we exposed a Brown Thrasher nest when we trimmed azaleas late. All the hatchlings died, and we mourned for days. With those weather and animal parameters, I am left with a window from September until late February to make any big changes.

When I moved back to Georgia, I inherited my father's yard. Unfortunately, he died in 1993, and very little work had been done on it since then. South Georgia being what it is, even a year of idleness gives vines and other invaders opportunity to spread. Ten years of rampant growth had left the yard looking somewhat like a jungle. When I
decided to stay in 2009, I was starting even farther behind. Some progress has been made, but there is still much to do. The positive side of this situation is that by being outside working, I get ideas for my work.
Chapter 3: Historical Review of Artistic Methods

Much as I am genetically the child of my parents, I am the potter-child of the those who have inspired me and my work. There is a group of contemporary potters whose work has shaped mine. Priscilla Mouritzen, with her drawings of spiders and insects, drew me towards drawing figures and away from making patterns with my carving. As I learned more about Korean and Japanese pottery of the 14th to 16th centuries, I saw the connection of those styles to that of Matthew Metz and Ayumi Horie, who employ sgraffito techniques similar to those of the Korean Buncheong potters, and Kitaoji Rosanjin, whose 20th century ceramics echo the Oribe style. I have long been drawn to Linda Arbuckle’s colorful painted botanicals, and Rosanjin’s and Horie’s animals scratched into the slip covering their hand built and thrown vessels. Each of these potters has shaped the potter I am becoming.

The Joseon dynasty extended from the late 14th to the early 20th century in Korea. In 2005, when I was at a conference in Korea, I saw vessels from the 15th century, and was smitten by their surface decorations. A Korean-American friend I was travelling with asked a shop keeper for her poster of a piece on display in a nearby gallery. We visited the gallery and looked at a number of extremely expensive pieces. Several years later, when I was taking ceramics classes, an exhibit of the period toured the US. Although I missed seeing it, I ordered a copy of the catalog. I hung the poster above my wheel in the studio.
Several characteristics of Buncheong ceramics appealed to me. I don't draw well, and the simplified figures seemed within reach of my skill. They were functional, and they were decorated with plants and animals the potters lived around. Carving into the surface of slip-covered clay was appealing to me both visually and tactiley. I discovered upon reading the catalog that the pieces that spoke to me were all from the second half of the 15th century. Those pieces represent a deviation from a previous more restrained style, and from the more refined porcelain pieces being made in the same period. The plants and animals depicted on them are large and coarse. The authors state that
"Buncheong design is characterized by its unconstrained, experimental spirit and minimalist look" 3 (Lee and Seung-Chang, 38)

Mundane decorations, such as the fish in Figure 8 and the peony in Figure 8, are drawn in quick strokes and are flat and almost abstract in their appearance. The fish may have been intended to carry symbolic associations of "fertility and harmonious familial relations." 4 (Ibid, 68). As they are drawn, their mouths are open as though they might be in conversation with each other.


4 Ibid, 68.
In addition, the authors point out that these potters used the iconography of previous periods in humorous ways.5 (Ibid, 67). The birds depicted on Figures 10 and 11 are quirky renditions of those used in traditional Asian art. The crane drawn on Figure 11 is obviously a crane, but not one of those soaring on celadon pieces. This one seems to be plummeting out of the sky.

Figure 10. Bird and willows. Korean, Joseon dynasty

5 IBID, 67
Furuta Oribe was tea advisor to a powerful general and statesman named Hideyoshi during the time the tea ceremony became important to the Samuri. The ware associated with his name is distinguished from earlier ceramics by its having been fired in new, more efficient kilns, by its deliberate imperfections, by its copper green glaze, by the use of textile motifs favored by the Samuri, and by its plant and animal iconography. The use of pattern and color on Oribe ware appealed to me. I was particularly taken by the copper green, and the drawings of local plants and animals. The use of pattern with these elements took me awhile to incorporate into my work.
It seems that the potters set up a test for themselves by dipping or pouring on the green glaze, and then using the white areas to set up the patterns. I say this because the pattern does not appear under the green glaze. Since the kilns and the fabric manufacturing shops were near each other, it is possible that the fabric workers painted the designs on the clay. Figure 12 has bamboo shoots and tortoise-shell designs on it. The tortoise-shell design appears on fabrics made in the vicinity. 7 (ibid, 101).

7 IBID, 101.
Figure 13. Green oribe ewer. Early 17th c.

The author states that the ewer in Figure 13 is decorated "with designs inspired by tie-dyeing textile motifs. 8 (Ibid, 87). The uneven oval made by the green glaze frames the stripes and flowers.

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8 IBID, 87.
Figure 14 is a bowl I purchased in Tokyo in May of 2013. It is obviously a more recent piece, but it has the same characteristics found in the older ones. The challenge I faced with my work was converting the method to earthenware. Since I was incising my work before it was fired instead of applying glaze and iron oxide after the first firing, I could not achieve the spontaneity found on the Oribe ware pieces. I therefore did not use this method on my thesis work. It is still on my mind, however.

Kitaoji Rosanjin was a Renaissance man. In the course of his life, he was an award-winning calligrapher, a maker of signs, a painter, a restaurateur, and a potter, but he proclaimed that his love of food was at the center of all his work. "I have engaged in and been interested in ceramics, painting, calligraphy, and the like, but these are mere garnishes to my epicurean endeavors" (Cardozo 9). Figures 14 and 15 are examples of the dinnerware Rosanjin made.

9 Cardozo
Because I want to make work which will be used, and because I consider dinnerware an important part of a meal, I am interested in the food-based concept that Rosanjin promoted. Having animals to be served at meals on the dishes makes for a cohesive dinner setting. Trees like the one on Figure 15 keep the food grounded in nature.

Figure 15. Kitaoji Rosanjin, *Crab plate*.

Figure 16. Kitaoji Rosanjin, *Bowl with tree*. 

28
Contemporary influences

Priscilla Mouritzen was born and educated in South Africa, and emigrated first to the UK and then to Denmark. She comments in her blog that she sometimes makes wheel-thrown vessels when she needs a lot of work fast, but it is her pinched tea bowls that I first encountered (Mouritzen). Every year at the NCECA conference (National Council on Education for the Ceramics Arts), there is a cup sale whose proceeds go to fund student scholarships. At the first cup sale I attended, I picked up a white porcelain
tea bowl with black mishima beetles on it. It was pinched, incredibly light, and fit my hands. The beetles on it were life-like even from a distance. I had never seen anything like it, and although it was the most expensive cup I’d ever seen, I bought it.

![Tea Bowls](image.jpg)

Figure 18. Mouritzen, *African Spiders*

There is very little online about Mouritzen. She has a strong connection to the Archie Bray Foundation, as do Metz and Horie. There are pictures of her work at various sites where she has held residencies or participated in firings, but no commentary by others. Her online blog is composed almost entirely of pictures of her travels, or kiln-building at the International Ceramics Research Center, where she serves on the board of directors. (Mouritzen)
Mouritzen's surface designs are the kind I am working to apply to my pieces. I don't hand build, and I haven't tried mishima, but if it's possible to get the kind of detail she does by incising on earthenware, I'd like to achieve that goal. I want to have more variety on my work, but I want it to have the kind of precision I see on hers.

Matthew Metz earned a B.F.A. in ceramics at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, and an M.F.A. in ceramics at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. He works in porcelain, to which he applies stained terra sigillata. Then he uses sgraffito or sprigs to create designs. The vessels with sgraffito are more detailed than those with sprigs. In his online artist's statement he lists his influences as "Asian pottery traditions, Greek and Roman pots, early American decorative arts, face jugs and other folk traditions" (Clay Art Center). The early American influence is most apparent in stylized birds and trees, while his faces are reminiscent of the style of face jugs.

Figure 19. Metz, Plate with Bird.
While I admire it greatly, I doubt that I will ever make the kind of work that he does. His stylized drawings are not what I’m trying to do. Still, I am trying to follow his lead in support of utilitarian pottery. Writing for the online Albuquerque Journal (ABQ), Kate McGraw interviewed Metz upon the occasion of a 100 cup show at Santa Fe Clay. He reacted strongly to the idea of a hierarchy in art. "The experience of art should not be separated from our daily experience....A cup has its own power. They really reside in people’s lives; they’re there in the cupboard and people reach for them every day. They become sacred” (McGraw). In the same article, he describes what drew him to pottery: both the connection to daily life and the independence of the potters. Working with clay made him feel grounded and useful (McGraw).

Figure 20. Metz, Covered Jar
The second half of his artist’s statement is another strong defense of utilitarian pottery as worthy of serious consideration by the art community: "The images on my pots are decorative. Our culture tends to look at decoration as embellishment without meaning – frosting on the cake. While I resist applying direct narrative and literal definition to my iconography, the patterns and images I choose come from my life and experience. Interest in the natural sciences (evolutionary biology, ethology) and history (archeology, physical culture) find their way, obliquely, into the work. A coffee cup has as much capacity to carry meaning as any other form of expression” (Fountain Valley School). I think of his cups as portable, useful art.

Figure 21. Horie, Plate with Monkey and Bird

Ayumi Horie's website contains a wealth of information about her and her pots. She grew up in rural Maine in the 1970's. Her family engaged in gardening, fishing, and cooking, and she credits this life of action with instilling in her the interest and skill to work with her hands. She earned a B.A. from Mt. Holyoke, a B.F.A. in ceramics from
Alfred University, and an M.F.A. from the University of Washington. She works as a
studio potter and has recently moved back to Maine from the Hudson Valley of New
York (Horie). She describes herself as a Japanese American potter inspired by Japanese
pop culture [Anime], Japanese folk craft [Mingei] and early American primitive art. Her
vessels are decorated with animals (often bats, apes, bears, and birds), and she says she
loves being engaged in their dramas. She uses red earthenware, covering it with white
slip before scratching her drawings into the surface. Her use of color is minimal, and
seems intended to indicate motion or excitement. Two characteristics of her work
stand out: its curves, and its imperfections. She wants a cup to feel comfortable in the
hand, and the imperfections (finger marks or dents) to show the hand of the potter.

Figure 22. Horie, *Mug with Goat*

Horie is the youngest of the potters I’m influenced by, and the most adept at
promoting her work. As a undergraduate at Alfred, she developed a unique dry
throwing technique. (There’s a video of her demonstrating on her website), and that
creative action led to widespread recognition of her innovative nature among the ceramics community. Her website contains other evidence of her creativity.

One link on her website is titled "Pots in Action" where hundreds of customers have submitted photographs of her pots in use. Another link leads to a page full of articles in which she is featured. She is very active politically and socially: in 2008, she organized Obamaware, a sale that raised more than $10,000 for the presidential campaign that year. After the 2011 earthquake in Japan, she co-founded Handmade for Japan, which has raised more than $100,000 for disaster relief there. In an interview with Sherman Hall posted by Ceramics Daily, she spoke about her activism: "Historically in ceramics, artists have tackled social justice issues through confrontational art that uses images of pain and violence...[Obamaware and Handmade for Japan] were very different in that they were calls for aid to immediate situations. Taking this more positive approach is a better fit for me..." (Hall).

On another occasion, in a feature by Ceramics Daily, the online arm of Ceramics Monthly, Horie discussed a subject related to her choice to show her hand in her work: "The burgeoning interest in a handmade aesthetic, relating to the quirkiness of individual, intuitive decision-making is a great opportunity for potters to bring their work into the consciousness of a new generation of buyers and collectors. The slow food movement’s emphasis on quality of experience, as well as food, is a model that could serve potters very well. I think potters could even take over the world if we cooked as well as we made plates and bowls (and many do!)" (Ceramics Daily).
Figure 23. Horie, *Teapot with Rabbit; Mug with Pig*.

Speaking to Molly Hatch, Horie emphasized again her commitment not just to handmade pottery, but to functional ware and the people who use it: "Unlike industry, which makes a commodity, a handmade pot coming out of an individual studio is made with a different intention. Profit is not unimportant, but the relationship created between object and maker, object and user, maker and user are key" (Hatch).

Horie's materials, imagery, and philosophy resonate with me. Her commitment to nature, to handmade work which is useful and cherished by its users, and her kind of activism for social and political causes are qualities I try to emulate.

Linda Arbuckle majored in zoology at Miami University of Ohio. She later earned a BFA in ceramics with a minor in photography at the Cleveland Institute of Art, and an MFA in ceramics at the Rhode Island School of Design. She taught at Louisiana State University, and since 1992 has taught at the University of Florida. I first heard of Arbuckle when in Ceramics II, we explored using earthenware clay. We had a number of Amaco Velvet underglazes in the glaze room, and there was a chart affixed to the cabinet door with the results of her tests with each of Amaco's glazes. It was only over time that I came to understand that she conducts workshops all over the world, and that her work is in collections everywhere. In spite of her prominence, she is very
approachable and kind to potters-in-training. At last year's NCECA in Seattle, my daughter insisted on introducing herself and thanking Arbuckle for her inspiration. I, of course, had to tag along.

Arbuckle works in majolica, and in her artist's statement on the Mudfire site she states that "the functional vessel as an art object provides personal experiences through use in one's daily life" (Mudfire). The colorful images she applies to these vessels are often plants that grow in her garden. In my searching, I came across an online class dealing with ceramic aesthetics. The instructor had used Arbuckle's pottery as one of his examples, and he had included another of Arbuckle's artist's statements: "Aesthetically, I want my work to balance control of form with spontaneous movement of surface" (McBeth). On her DVD, she takes time to elaborate on that statement and to demonstrate how she makes decisions about the colors she uses, and where to paint forms on her vessels (Linda Arbuckle). Her explanation was the most articulate one I had heard, and although she might not be able to see the result of it in my work, has affected my own decision making. Her notes on how to mix colors guide my testing, and my notebook has many pages of her handouts which I use as reference for my clay body and glazes. My debt to her is large.
Figure 24. Arbuckle, *Cup*, Majolica on terracotta.

Figure 25. Arbuckle, *bowl*, Majolica on terracotta.
Chapter 4: Conclusions and Implications

My influences are broad and deep. My love of nature is long-standing. I agree with Mark Dion that what is happening now is a test, and if we pass it, we get to keep the planet. (Art 21--needs to be in Works Cited) That being said, like Ayumi Horie, I don't want my work to preach to people or frighten them. I want it to remind them of what they've lost touch with; of what they overlook on their way to and from their cars.

In the past year, my oribe style has moved from the application of fabric-like patterns to using structures in my garden, to focusing on the pattern of chain link fence as background for my plants and animals. I apply engobes and slip to my green pieces as Ayumi Horie does, and try to use color in a combination of the ways she and Arbuckle do. Like Mouritzen and Arbuckle, the subjects I put on my pots are those that live in or visit in my yard. Like Matthew Metz, I use a combination of sgraffito and brushwork. I don't want to draw animals as cartoons or caricatures; I'm not skilled enough to draw them as Audubon did, but I want them to be recognizable and have some dignity.

A final aspect of utilitarian pottery is its use at meals. My family's life revolved around our meals together, and the dishes on the table made the meal a more complete experience. Other members of my larger family (my aunt Billie and cousin Cecil, to name two) take as great care in setting a table as they do preparing the menu and food for the meal. While the dishes we used were not as menu-specific as those Rosanjin made for his restaurant, they certainly served as a backdrop for the food we ate.
A number of artists have considered the communal experience of eating as a part of art. Gordon Matta-Clark, with his dancer girlfriend as owner and manager, opened a restaurant for artists in the 70's. Artists were cooks and managers, and meals were at times happenings, one example being bones taken from the meal and strung as necklaces for guests to wear home. One idea that resounded with me was the use of fresh local food. Because of our farmers' market, I was able to purchase many organic foods for my dinner.

Robin Lambert addressed the dream functional potters have that their work will play a role in people's lives. In two different galleries on three separate occasions, Robin Lambert brought together groups of strangers to eat off hand-crafted ceramics. Each brought his or her favorite pot luck dish. He was interested in engaging "the complex relationships between objects and social space and to make evident the evocative potential of handmade objects." (Nicole Burisch, Review. Ceramics as Evocative Object. Robin Lambert's Service: Dinner for Strangers". Ceramics: Art and Perception, No 86, 2011.). The author of the review points out that Lambert's project moved away from focus on "autonomous aesthetic objects" and towards audience participation. (26) Before and after pictures certainly suggest a positive outcome.

I particularly liked the idea of using my own pieces for the dinner. I wanted to know that people would be able to eat off a spider or a toad on a plate. However, I purchased the food and had it prepared by people I know. In addition, I knew the people I invited. However, they didn't necessarily know each other. Judging by the noise of conversation, they were engaged in the social aspect of the meal.
Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija followed in Matta-Clark's tradition by turning the office of a Soho gallery into a temporary kitchen and serving Thai food to those present. His emphasis seems to be the food itself, rather than the ceramics or the communal experience of eating. MoMA acquired the installation in 2013. Museum visitors can get a free vegetarian curry lunch every day from noon to 3 (except Fridays, when it will be served from 4 to 7). And because fire regulations prohibit cooking in the galleries, the curry, with the artist’s blessing, will be made in one of the museum’s kitchens and taken to the galleries.

At the end of three years of study, I can't say with certainty that I know where I'm going with my life. I can say that I'm a better potter now, and that I know a lot more about art than I did when I began. What's exciting to me is that I can still have moments of epiphany: realizations about keeping extra clay for the lip of a pitcher; finally getting it that I can throw forms to fit the decorations I want to use. I know that as long as I'm alive, I will get older, but I don't want to lose my will to learn and grow. I've always wanted to get everything I could out of a moment, and I think I'm better at it now than I've ever been.

Since I made my thesis body of work, I have spent two months at the Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina. Our class worked with mid-range and high-fire clays, and I am again working in those clays. The emphasis was on surface decoration as well as atmospheric firing with wood and salt. Thanks to the feedback of my teachers and others, my work is becoming still more refined. Even the process of editing the thesis has reminded me why I was intrigued by Korean and Japanese ceramics. I'm anxious to rethink my surfaces and make improvement. The challenge for me now is to
set up a studio so that I can continue making work. In the meantime, I will focus on my yard and its inhabitants.

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