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Salon Familiar

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SALON FAMILIAR

by

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Salon Familiar

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Kimberly Dickey

As a viewer, I find that I rarely consider the gallery or museum as the final home for artwork. I always imagine the home to which the pieces might belong. What role does the artwork play in the daily life of the owner? Understanding this tendency to see artwork as related to the domestic environment has allowed me to better understand my motivation to make functional ceramics. I have designed this exhibition to be viewed in a gallery, but ultimately envision it to be used, viewed and enjoyed in the home. It is designed to hang on the wall as one might hang a painting but is then removed, used and returned to the wall. My appropriation of baroque and chinoiserie patterns on the surface of my work as well as my use of traditional methods to make my forms results in objects that simultaneously embrace the history of ceramics and the decorative arts.

"We find it familiar to consider objects as useful or aesthetic, as necessities or vain indulgences. We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. The notion of evocative objects brings together these two less familiar ideas, underscoring the inseparability of thought and feeling in our relationship to things. We think with the objects we love; we love the objects we think with." ~Sherry Turkle[1]

Salon Familiar

As a viewer, I find that I rarely consider the gallery or museum as the final home for artwork. I always imagine the home to which the pieces might belong. What role does the artwork play in the daily life of the owner? Understanding this tendency to see artwork as related to the domestic environment has allowed me to better understand my motivation to make functional ceramics. I have designed this exhibition to be viewed in a gallery, but ultimately envision it to be used, viewed and enjoyed in the home. It is designed to hang on the wall as one might hang a painting but is then removed, used and returned to the wall. My appropriation of baroque and chinoiserie patterns on the surface of my work as well as my use of traditional methods to make my forms results in objects that simultaneously embrace the history of ceramics and the decorative arts.

Concept: Desires, Needs and DIY

I grew up doing. My childhood was spent on a small organic dairy farm in Vermont. This meant long summer days putting away hay, driving a tractor and doing chores. Learning the value of hard work and understanding task-oriented labor lay the foundation for a life of making things. I learned early to trust my own capability make things for others and myself.

Growing up, it was clear to me that the process of painting and art making was a meaningful process to the women in my family. In my childhood visits to my maternal grandmother's house, I was encouraged to pass my time by drawing and painting. My great grandmother and grandmother were painters. In addition to being a farmer, my mother is also a painter. My own exploration of art has directly stemmed from this familial connection to art making and instilled a desire to understand my family history and to participate in it.

My love of ceramics comes from this family history of using our hands to make objects for use and for contemplation. In my ceramic work, I aim to keep the family tradition of making the things we need and things we desire. When I was first drawn to ceramics as an undergraduate, there was a real satisfaction in making something that was clearly useful. A cup or a bowl is almost universally accessible and navigable as most people use them in their daily lives. For me, the blank cup is anonymous in a manner similar to a blank piece of paper. The three dimensional surface of functional ceramics is rich with potential as a place for drawings and paintings.

In the preparation for making *Salon Familiar,* I asked myself to make work that could become part of my daily life. I began with a relatively simple question: How can I make utilitarian objects hang on the wall as objects to both contemplate and use? How can cups and plates be easily used and stored in a way that they are also viewed as art objects?

Do-It-Yourself (often referred to by its acronym DIY) is a term used to describe a process of creating things for oneself. This idea stems from life in an

industrial society and relates to the ideals rooted in the Arts and Crafts movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The current DIY movement arguably takes the Arts and Crafts rebellion against mass production and its perceived lack of soul to the next level. Today's DIY movement is plain in its critique of modern consumerism by encouraging people to take technologies into their own hands to fulfill their needs.[ii]

My personal understanding of DIY stems from my childhood experiences of making my own things to fulfill desires for what I couldn't otherwise afford. In the case of *Salon Familiar,* I worked to create alternative storage devices for plates, platters and cups that question our traditional use of cabinets and shelving for storage. In altering the more accepted modes of storage of functional objects in the home I am questioning the traditional perception of the role of ceramics and craft in relationship to art, decoration and function.

Making the work for this show was a process of creating things to fulfill desires and needs. I want to be able to literally use the plates I hang on the wall as paintings. In response to this I created ceramic tiles that mimic baroque frames with rounded cleats that the foot of a plate hangs on. The plate can then be easily removed and replaced after use. I also created ceramic hooks for cups that are mounted on a ceramic tile or on the wall directly allowing for the same ease of use, storage and viewing.

DIY results in objects that are often close to the commercial equivalent, but often hover in an odd existence between the commercial ideal and the handmade representation. In most commercial products evidence of the process in which things are manufactured has often been removed. It seems the industrial product often is

devoid of human touch. In the making of the work for *Salon Familiar* I have intentionally left marks of the hand, revealing the process by which each object was made. The mark of the hand makes for a visual and tactile connection with the maker, a connection that is lost in industry. In the case of this work, the mark of the hand is a construction. The mark of the maker acts as a signifier of authenticity. The objects I am most often attracted to offer me a connection to the maker through use, surface as well as through looking at the object. Choosing to make things by hand and to subscribe to the ideals of the DIY movement fuels much of my motivation to continue making work. These ideals are best described in the following statement by artist Faith Gillespie:

> There is clearly another imperative at work now in our exercise of the old crafts. It has to do with reclamation, with reparation. The world seems not to need us any more to make 'the things of life.' Machines make more and cheap. The system needs us to do the maintenance jobs and to run the machines that produce the so-called 'goods,' to be machines in the consumer societies which consume and consume and are empty. Our turning to craftwork is a refusal. We may not all see ourselves this way, but we are working from a position of dissent. And that is a political position.[iii]

To be able to make a useful and beautiful object from a handful of clay feels powerful. To fully understand the skill, energy and time that it takes to make that piece of clay into a cup makes me more aware of my own habits of consumption. This awareness helps me to value objects beyond their monetary worth.

The Work: Form

The work in this show consists of several forms—cups, saucers, plates and frames. My approach to making each form was similar. I wanted to highlight the work of the hand by leaving visible fingerprints from pinching the pots. The

imperfections in the drawing and painting were purposefully left and the marks in the clay from building the forms by hand, casting and wheel-throwing were intentionally not erased. I chose to use porcelain for all of the work in the show for its durability, ability to show color, and its historical significance as a rare and precious material.

The wheel-thrown forms I chose for the plates are not specifically derived from one historical source. This archetypal plate form allowed the plates to work with the frames behind them in a way that one might begin to see the two separate objects as a cohesive image. When the plates are removed from their counterparts, there is an empty frame left behind, pointing to the functional plate as the framed art object. In the case of the composition of *Salon Familiar*, one would see that it is a plate or a cup that belongs in the empty frame. This sense of a void hopefully leads the viewer to conclude that the plate (or cup) is the artwork housed by the frame which itself is an artwork.

The forms of the cups are directly derived from the production and pattern books from the French porcelain factories of the 18th and 19th centuries. The three large scale paintings titled *Pattern I, II and III,* are also specifically and directly influenced by these traditional factory forms. Rather than keeping with the style of the pre-industrial revolution production patterns that are almost mathematical in their precision in painting the production patterns for my cups I intentionally made the painting style more sketch-like. Each cup form in the painting refers specifically to a corresponding historical form. In thinking about the historical cup forms and their use for formal tea and the aristocracy, I decided to reconsider the original designs for a more contemporary lifestyle. My designs increased the volume of most of the forms

and made them more mug-like. I also removed the saucer from all but four cups because it seems saucers are rarely used today, and I, myself rarely use saucers.

I chose to handbuild the cups in an effort to slow down my process, to pay close attention to the nuances of the historical forms and to create a general mindfulness around the process of making an object by hand. The cups were then cast in porcelain and altered again by hand after being pulled from the mold. This action of returning to the cast piece to alter the existing form made each piece unique and directly comments on the lack of uniqueness found in industry.

The specificity of the cup forms from the French porcelain factories of Sevres and Vincennes reference an aristocratic class and imply formality. The aspects of the cups and plates that make them more contemporary—the enlarged and cropped pattern, non-traditional color choices and the imperfections in the forms—are meant to make the work more accessible, useful and more functional for a contemporary lifestyle than their historical counterparts.

My appropriation of the French rococo floral and foliage decoration implies a similar formality and richness that the historically referenced forms possess. My faux frames are renderings of 18th century French rococo wooden and silver repoussé frames. The overly ornate quality of the baroque aesthetic exaggerates the importance of the artwork the frames hold and itself as a piece of art. The frames function to contextualize the cups, saucers and plates as art objects to be looked at and admired in the same way they might contextualize paintings in a traditional salon. The small hexagonal jewel forms on the frames are used to conceal the screws that mount the

frames on the wall directly reference the historical method used in repoussé frames to conceal screws with gemstones set in silver.

The Surface: Drawing

As a result of coming to ceramics via drawing and printmaking, I am very interested in engaging the two-dimensional with the three-dimensional. I have, in my own way, created objects that have been drawn as a representation of a traditional salon-style hanging of paintings. Each piece in *Salon Familiar* contains a drawn element. The surface of all of the work is treated similarly in an effort to unify the overall composition of the wall. I chose to use the Japanese mishima slip inlay technique as a way to create a flowing line quality that allows a great deal of detail. The graphic quality of the mishima line is advantageous in my effort to have the work talk to drawing and painting as representation on a three-dimensional form. I think of this drawing as both physically on the surface of the forms and as a way to delineate each change in plane. As I drew the lines defining each plane change, I felt almost as though I was drawing a representation of a cup on each cup, a representation of a plate on a plate and so on. It was in this way that the cups and plates were similar to a blank sheet of paper to be drawn on.

The use of the drawn line as an illusion or representation becomes instrumental in understanding the composition of the work as reference to a traditional salon. *Salon Familiar* is not a traditional salon-style hanging in that it has repeating forms in the frames and the patterns on the surfaces of the hanging forms. This repetition is subtle, allowing the viewer to see an overall diversity of the objects

on the wall as a unified whole. The repetition differentiates *Salon Familiar* from a traditional salon that would have no repetition in the frames or in the paintings.

Salon Familiar was made for the specific dimensions of the wall in the gallery in which it was exhibited. Originally, I was going to show the work individually, each piece working on its own. All of my forms and their surfaces were treated with this in mind. It was not until I got to the gallery with the work that it became clear to me that this was a single piece of work. I feel that the individual pieces require the strength of the density of the overall composition to complete their relationship to the broader idea of the salon. This density of the work creates a unified composition of multiples. The density of the composition also acts to encourage the viewer to come closer to the work to view the details in the density of the surface decoration. The act of moving closer to the work creates a more intimate experience with the individual pieces. This intimacy is similar and approachable to the familiarity most people have with functional ceramics. The fact that the hanging pieces are functional encourages the viewer to understand the work as simultaneously an image for using and viewing.

The Surface: Pattern and Appropriation

I. Cups, Saucers, Platters and Plates

On the cups, saucers and plates and there are several patterns used repeatedly, which are all chinoiserie patterns made for the European market in the 18th and 19th centuries. I am drawn to these patterns as early examples of appropriated imagery used to placate a desire similar to my own desire to attain something otherwise financially (and culturally) unattainable. My appropriation of Chinese imagery on my

ceramics is similar to this historical precedent; it is related to a long history of these same patterns being interpreted and reinterpreted from one culture to another.

The desire that the Europeans had for the Chinese export porcelains lead the Europeans to mimic the aesthetics of the Chinese florals and narrative scenes. Even well after the Germans discovered their own local kaolins, Europeans were creating replicas of Chinese porcelains because of their beauty, symbolic wealth and preciousness. These odd copies and renderings by the Europeans of the Chinese aesthetic were made out of a desire to have what was otherwise unattainable. In a sense this was an early form of DIY. My own appropriation of this aesthetic becomes my interpretation of another culture through my use of color, altered form, evidence of the hand in the form and stylized drawings. These modifications are made for my culture. This process of appropriation relates to my employment of DIY as aspiration--I can't afford the real thing, so I am going to make my own version.

My desire to appropriate and have access to objects that are out of reach is more than personal. Duchamp's "readymades" act as a precursor to the postmodern use of appropriation as a resistance of ownership. In my work I am creating a pastiche of work that employs historical art practices and reworks the role of authenticity in relationship to the decorative. Out of desire for these objects, I have created my own collage of historical form and imagery. I am altering the patterns by reacting to the visual information available, editing out parts of the original pattern and inserting aspects of different patterns from the same time period. By employing the same chinoiserie aesthetic to remix and modify imagery and pattern, the work is

functioning within another historical framework. Through the use of scale shift, repetition and cropping I am creating contemporary views of historical patterns.

I am attracted to the late 18th and early 19th centuries' obsession with florals and birds that were borrowed from the Chinese export porcelains and fabrics. In my rendering of the birds, which are compiled from various chinoiserie wall hangings, I have inserted character and expression. The birds are stuck, almost lost in a stasis of branches in constant spring bloom. I hope to evoke empathy with the bird characters, rarely in flight, often looking as though they have been caught, trapped by the cup.

The most specific and perhaps meaningful appropriation of imagery was that of the *Blue Willow Pattern*. My ancestors were merchants. Much of the inherited china that I grew up using is left over from mercantile shipments. The pattern I was most enamored with as a child was the *Blue Willow Pattern* that were on the plates and cups we had. By rendering the *Blue Willow Pattern* in red and editing out much of the original pattern I am making my own remix of the original. The cups and plates then become renditions of a product that I desire, need and have a great affection for. Rather than purchasing the originals, I have taken advantage of my familial history and history at large to make these objects.

II. Frames

The frames are directly appropriated patterns from silver and wooden frames of the European baroque and rococo periods. The frames are directly drawn from an existing pattern. Rather than reworking the imagery for the frames, I drew two-dimensional representations of the original three-dimensional frames on flat ceramic

tiles that are mounted to the wall. The scale of the rendered frames is close to the scale of the original frames. This similarity in scale points to the rendered frame as actual frame, yet it is still an illusion or removed from reality by being alternately drawn. The flatness of the tiles is instrumental in the viewer understanding them as illusions or representations of the real.

The Surface: Color

The color palette I used for *Salon Familiar* is brighter and more contemporary than in the historical patterns I am referencing. I have looked to contemporary interior and industrial design for the palette in keeping with my interest in modifying the historical. In the case of the *Blue Willow Pattern*, I was particularly interested in matching it to my own kitchen--red being the dominant color. The change of color from a historical to a more contemporary palette allows for the viewer to understand the origin of the pattern and see that it differs from the original.

The diversity of color in the composition was also used to create variation as well as to help balance the overall composition of the wall as a whole. In my planning of the work, I wanted a diversity of color to allude to the idea and act of collecting a diversity of objects over time. As the work developed, it became clear that repetition in form and surface and color was unifying the whole piece and talking about a different kind of collection, one based in appropriation and form rather than accumulated over time. A collection of artwork is being alluded to, but the work could never operate as a diverse collection as one might find in a real salon. It can only exist as a grouping of work assembled by one artist.

Conclusion: Decorative Function

In my time in graduate school, I have been exploring different ways in which I understand decoration as meaningful. I have often asked myself what the function of decoration is. I agree with Valerie Jaudon, a member of the Pattern and Decoration group in her statement: " The decorative is both a reflection and an essential part of the world around it."[iv] The decoration can lead the viewer to understand the function of the pot it is housed by. In making this work, I thought about the hanging pots as being useful beyond their place in the larger composition within the home. I decorated the surfaces of the pots to be viewed both when in use and when hanging and it is the combination of these two elements (decoration and use) that intrigue me. When the cups are being used there are drawings revealed that are hidden by being hung against the wall. Whether on the wall or in use, the decoration function functions as an investigatory element.

I chose to create a grouping of pots to display on the frames for *Salon Familiar* to imply the variation of a traditional salon hanging of paintings and the variation of my sources for imagery. The diversity of color on the surfaces of the work add emphasis to the importance of individual pieces within the larger composition of the wall. There is no overall repeating pattern in the piece; there are no sets of dishes. This differs from the traditional way one acquires china in sets, but is similar in how most collectors acquire paintings. The choice of varied colors and forms is indicative of my own aesthetic choices and how I acquire things in my own home. In the same way that I appropriated and altered pattern for the surfaces of my

individual pieces, I wanted to alter the salon to fulfill my own desire to see a ceramic salon, as I would have it for myself.

In my own home, I collect objects slowly and over time. I find joy in knowing the story of each pot. This exhibition is my way of celebrating the potential of these objects to be evocative as individuals as well as in a group, no matter how inconsequential they may seem. Each pot in this piece offers a particular kind of experience when in use. I hope that this experience provides an opportunity for the role of a cup or a plate in the everyday to become more contemplative and useful.

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[i] Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Massachusetts: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2007), 5.

[ii] Teal Triggs, "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," *Oxford Journal of Design History*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

[iii] Elinor Gillian and others, eds., *The Masterless Way: Weaving an Active Resistance; Women and Craft* (London: Virago Press, 1987), 178.
[iv]

[iv] Glen Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Glen Adamson and the Board of Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, 2007), 30.

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