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Eat My Quartz

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EAT MY QUARTZ

by

Neil Celani

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

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In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Under the Supervision of Professor Peter Pinnell

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Eat My Quartz

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University of Nebraska, 2020

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Pottery has a remarkable ability to tap into the human collective experience, so it is no surprise I express my own understanding of the world by working within the boundaries of “the pot”. With the capacity to communicate conceptual meaning and to serve as objects of utility, pottery not only dances in the notorious territory between art and craft, it embodies the human spirit.

My pots are totems of my existence and this work is an authentic representation of my creative journey. They are an homage to the key influences in my life which have informed and encouraged my creativity since childhood: skateboarding, punk music, the outdoors, and cartoons.

Cartoons satirize the state of society and characters within it and I explore this notion with my pottery, articulating my inspirations and experiences into layers of references using symbolism, cartoon aesthetics, humor, irony, and wit to spark conversations with the viewer. The work is a personal narrative and speaks of our time in the here and now but retains the understandable universality of the pot while giving a nod to what has come before.

I have a profound fascination with the kaleidoscopic histories of pottery and I use the pot as a foundation upon which to build my ideas and inspirations. Just as ancient makers deified and worshiped the natural world around them through abstraction and symbolism in objects, I translate my own reality using pottery

to reflect on my hodgepodge of experiences and creative influences. Adopting The Simpsons as symbols, I draw parallels between contemporary American culture and ancient civilizations: a playful mashup acknowledging the paradox of making transitory pop-culture idols from a permanent material historically used for celebratory utensils (Greek ceremonial vessels for wine mixing, serving, and drinking), fertility effigies (Moche erotic pottery), and chronicles of myth (Mayan codex as decoration). My work is a celebration of pottery and my compositions possess an elemental, classic sense of beauty. Proportion, curve, edge, texture, color, and surface are intuitively layered into a form, striking a delicate balance of aged and weathered refinement. The pots I make do have the capacity to contain, store, or serve food but also defy these functional purposes by prioritizing my personal inspirations, pop-culture references, millennial insight, form language, ancient symbolism/iconography, and good old fashioned puns over the pot's utilitarian service.

Curious evidence in the similarities of visual languages of cultures separated by geography and time makes a strong case that we are connected - to the present *and* the past. It is feasible that altered states of consciousness had a profound impact on the development of art and aesthetics throughout history. There are symbols, patterns, and methods of abstraction so ubiquitous they are evident everywhere a culture has developed. The zig-zag is a dynamic design element that perfectly exemplifies this idea. In cultures across the globe the zig-zag symbolically abstracts and translates mountains, rivers, snakes, etc into a graphic element used to decorate pottery, textiles, baskets, and architecture.

The zig-zag is used as a design element in countless animated characters- Peanuts, The Simpsons, Garfield - and I use this idea as an access point to explore ancient aesthetics and iconography with my work. Physical features found in Simpsons characters become stylized elements in my forms and/or decorations. Lisa Simpson's pointed starfish hair, for example, is interpreted as a rim of a bowl or a

handle over a basket while also suggesting references to an historical ceramic object or even the sun. The scalloped outline of Marge Simpson's hair is translated into a design element referencing water and clouds or a lidded form signifying her hair's hilarious capacity for storage. The arches on Homer's head are abstracted into a double stirrup spout referencing the long lineage of a ubiquitous Peruvian pottery form.

The skateboard is a means of transportation but also a vehicle of creative expression representing freedom and independence. As a teen, skateboarding set me apart from the mainstream while connecting me with like-minded rebels and weirdos. I discovered a community of creative peers advocating for iconoclasm, do-it-yourself ethos, and radical self expression. Skateboarding was my gateway into art and punk music, all of which gave me an outlet to express feelings I struggled to intellectually articulate and understand. I found alternatives to the status quo being spoon-fed to the masses through government, media, and religion and sought a path forward in life that could be built on my own terms. Though I have matured and grown as an individual these ideas still have a profound impact on my work as an artist and linger in my spirit, informing my attitude towards the world.

The idea of a cartoon pot has influenced how I approach making and pushed me to work outside my habitual instincts of compulsive refinement ingrained by my formalist training as a potter. I have sought to better define my own rules in the studio and understand my aesthetic upbringing by reflecting on the path that has brought me to this moment. The development of this work has relied on taking action on creative impulses before having a chance to talk myself out of them, oddly enough, a practice that has brought me full circle to the principals that led me here in the first place.