

TYING IT ALL Together

by Margaret Bohls



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I am often torn between the need to be excited and engaged, which happens when I am working on something new, and the pressure (from my conscience) to force myself to stick with a particular body of work in order to give it more depth and resolution. I try to find a balance between following inspiration, and doing the mental labor necessary to fully develop my work.

Perhaps because I am an educator, and I live in an environment of constant change and growth, I consider my work to be a process, rather than a series of finished products. Although I am often not entirely comfortable with my work, and some of it never really gets fully resolved, I usually just put it out into the

world, and try not to worry about potential judgments. That is simply part of the process.

Several things tie all of my work together.

- An interest in exploring and reinterpreting historical forms. I am interested in understanding the vernacular of certain functional forms and the way each object communicates its function. I am also interested in the ways in which this vernacular has morphed over time.

- A fascination with the expressive potential of process. The sculptural possibilities of each different means of forming an object are endless. I love to learn new ways of making and



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glazing things, and finding out how each new process can contribute essential visual information to the piece.

- **An obsession with creating and resolving formal problems.** I am interested in creating objects or arrangements that act both as images and as objects. I am also interested in creating patterns, in both form and surface, that can also act as an image. The idea of drawing objects in space plays out in different ways in much of my work. I use repetition, line, proportion, and negative space to compose a dimensional image.

- **A need to learn new things.** I easily become bored with making the same object over and over again, and I have difficulty growing slowly within known parameters. My way of staying interested is by teaching myself something new with each new body of work.

A Series of Connections

To me, there are clear relationships between each of the bodies of work I have made. The larger set of content is essentially the same, but each distinct body of work also has its own specific set of aesthetic concerns and parameters within this larger arena. This larger set of concerns has grown over time and I will often later return to an older way of working with a clearer idea about what I was trying to express.

1 *Flower Arrangement*, 28 in. (71 cm) in height, porcelain, stoneware, metal rod, paint, 2014. 2 *Condiment Set Drawing #2*, 18 in. in height, earthenware, 1999. 3 White condiment set, 14½ in. (37 cm), stoneware, 1997. 4 Soft-slab whiteware place setting, to 8 in. (20 cm) in height, porcelain, 1997. 5 Celadon cruet set, 8½ in. (22 cm) in height, porcelain, 2000.



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For instance, *Cage* inspired the *Gridware* (2002–06) which inspired the *Diagonal Gridware* (2006–present). Each deals with the relationship between the object and the tray or holder, and each is based on the way the gridded surface defines and shapes the form.

Here is another example: In the set, *Drawing*, I wanted to create a drawing that required one to explore the entire surface of each object in order to get a complete picture. The drawing itself is composed not only of the images on the surfaces of each piece, but also of the lines created by the construction of each pot, as well as by the profiles of the pots themselves. This idea of creating a spatial drawing came directly from looking at the *Celadon* series and the *Whiteware* series. The edges of each slab used to build the forms create either hard and crisp or soft and flowing lines in space that essentially define each

object so that it is both a form and a drawing. Another iteration of that idea is the gridded network of lines that draws each form in the *Diagonal Gridware /Bumpyware* (2002–07) series.

In graduate school, I resisted the pressure to narrow my work down, to focus. Rather, I deliberately spread out, attempting to make a chosen set of forms in as many ways as I could imagine. I then brought these disparate pieces back together into arranged groupings or *Mixed Sets* (1994–98). In part, I was trying to broaden my own aesthetic sensibilities. Later, after I started teaching, first at Sam Houston State University (SHSU), and then at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities (UMN), I began developing each of these individual types of work, to flush them out into *Homogenous Sets*. Several of my subsequent bodies of work developed from this experimentation including the *Celadon Ware* (1998–2002), the *White and Black Ware* (1996–2002 and 2007–present), and the *Earthenware* sets series (1998–2002).

Several years after I moved to Minnesota, I began selling my work through the Northern Clay Center. This was my first long-term relationship with a sales gallery. I made an attempt to stick with a coherent body of functional work, partly because this created a clear identity for the work for those who bought it, and partly because I wanted to find out what would happen if I forced myself to stick with something, to see whether the work would become richer with continued repetition and focus on detail. The *Gridware* series, and then the *Diagonal Gridware/Bumpyware*, came out of this. I also wanted to develop my understanding of function, and of the way pots work in people’s homes. I wanted to allow people to develop a relationship with my work that went beyond a single

Timeline



Mixed Sets
graduate work at LSU
teaching at SHSU

1994–1998



Celadon
teaching at UMN

1998–2002



Porcelain Grid Ware
teaching at UMN

2002–2006

1993–1999

Homogenous Sets
teaching at UNL



1996–2002

Soft-Slab Whiteware
teaching at SHSU and UMN



1998–2002

Earthenware Sets
teaching at UMN



unique object. I needed to tinker with my process to create more consistency. This interest in utility eventually led me to return to the white, soft-slab ware, which was quieter, simpler, and potentially more versatile in terms of function. When I began that work, it was more about expression than utility, and it was an exercise in making quickly and gesturally without fussing over the details. When I returned to that work, I wanted to keep the fresh quality of the pots, but I also wanted it to function well. When I left Minnesota three years ago, I was making both of these bodies of work, the *Bumpyware* and the *White and Black Ware*. In my studio practice, each acted as a counterpoint to the other; one being time consuming and detail oriented, while the other is quickly made and simple. Each requires a very different kind of focus. For some time, I have made and sold both of these kinds of work and usually each gallery likes to have only one of these types of ware, rather than both. Some galleries have initially tried to sell both bodies of work, and have eventually chosen the one that sells better in their region.

In 2011, I moved to Lincoln, Nebraska, to begin teaching at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL). I dearly love my new job at UNL, but it rarely affords me long periods of uninterrupted time in the studio. This is really what is required to make functional pots. My studio practice has changed, and frankly my interest in making strictly functional pottery has waned a little after ten or so years of focusing on that. So I have been looking for ways to make larger more sculptural pieces that I can work on in and around all of my other duties. The result so far has been the *Modernist* series, which goes back in some ways to my earlier work (i.e. *White Condiment Set* and *Crackle Condiment Set* from 1997), but is based on new historical inspirations. I have also begun a new series with the working title *Floral* series. The *Modernist* sets are oversized, sculptural versions of European Early-, and Mid-Century Modernist tea and coffee sets from Britain and Europe. *Flower Arrangement* is, in part, about the use of pattern in the decorative object. I am layering repeated imagery that creates two- and three-dimensional patterns.



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6 *Daisy* condiment set, earthenware, 1998–2002.
7 Porcelain *Gridware*, *Pink Cruet Set*, 7 in. (18 cm), porcelain, 2002–2006. 8 *Diagonal Gridware/Bumpyware*, *Blue Leaf Vase*, 11½ in. (29 cm) in height, porcelain and earthenware, 2010.



White and Black Ware
(continuation of Soft-Slab Whiteware)
teaching at UMN and UNL

2007–present



Modernist Sets
teaching at UNL

2013–present

2006–present

Diagonal Gridware/Bumpyware
teaching at UMN and UNL



2014–present

Flower Arrangement,
teaching at UNL





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9 *Bumpyware* green leaf place setting, to 12 in. (30 cm) in height, porcelain, 2009. 10 *White and Black* ware black espresso set, 7½ in. (19 cm) in height, porcelain, 2007–present. 11 *Modernist* bronze tea and coffee set, 22 in. (56 cm) in diameter, porcelain, stoneware, 2013.

Perhaps this way of working is unusual, especially for a potter, but it seems to work for me. It allows me to play, to experiment, and to teach myself new things. This is what keeps me interested and engaged in my work.

(Con)Current Series

Diagonal Gridware / Bumpyware: This is a body of decorative yet functional pottery that I began making in 2006 and continue to develop. These pieces are handbuilt using porcelain slabs that are highly textured, creating a structured surface from which the form language evolves. These pieces have complex glaze surfaces that are designed to respond to and enhance their exaggerated surface texture. Many of these pieces are placed in and on earthenware (and sometimes stoneware), trays, trivets and caddies. The visual repetition of surface and form in this work reflects my interest in European porcelain of the 17th and 18th centuries, most of which was made in large, elaborate sets of ware for specific domestic rituals, like the serving of tea or dinner, or the arrangement and display of flowers.

White and Black Ware: This is a body of simple utilitarian pottery that I started working on from 1996–2002 and returned to in 2007 as a deliberate counterpoint to the above mentioned, much more elaborate, *Bumpyware*. This work is simply made using smooth porcelain slabs. The edges of these slabs are left visible and create a simple network of lines that draw the forms in space. The glaze palette is deliberately monochromatic and satin or matte in texture in order to allow the simple forms and edges, and the shadows they create, to be clearly seen and read.

Modernist Sets: This new body of work started in 2013 and consists of sculptural representations of utilitarian forms arranged on, and framed by, large stoneware trays. The forms are largely based on European, Modernist-era silver tea, coffee, and chocolate sets. My work, like its Modern inspirations, is quite formalist and the actual function of this ware is vestigial. My interest is in the abstraction and repetition of forms and visual motifs, and in the still-life-like arrangement of these forms. Unlike my historical inspirations, in my *Modernist* pieces I place a deliberate emphasis on process and material. The forms are pinched up from moist clay and the glazes are chosen and applied to emphasize their substance and character.

Floral Series: This is continuing investigation of more sculptural arrangements of ceramic forms and series of dimensional tile pieces. This work is based in part on an interest in botanical illustration, and on the historical use of floral abstraction as both pattern and image on ceramic forms from both Europe and Asia. This work is largely still in progress. I hope to complete several more pieces in 2014.

For more images of Margaret's work in addition to the clay body and glazes recipes on page 68, visit www.ceramicsmonthly.org.



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