

INDIVIDUAL ENGAGEMENTS AND EPIDERMAL SURFACES IN SAM MORGAN'S ART

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Although the necessity for a division between the fine and decorative arts has been under assault for decades, the ghost of this separation continues to haunt discussions of contemporary craft. When considering ceramics, for example, the fine/decorative divide is often breached by emphasizing the sculptural qualities of ceramics, both in terms of the objects' three-dimensional form and also by assuming that the work is best contemplated from a distance. Sam Morgan's art resists this conflation of ceramic as sculpture. If forced into a fine art template, Morgan's work aligns itself more naturally with comparisons to painting than with more overtly three-dimensional forms. By choosing to work with porcelain, the very white body of which offers a perfect blank canvas for experimentations with texture, color and glaze, Morgan aims to create an epidermal surface. His work engages tactility, both in its making and in its viewing. Morgan then manipulates his "canvas," coaxing the clay into textured sheets that will be sutured into three dimensional forms – into objects that must be used to be understood.

Morgan's ceramics are small, easily handled and depend for their interpretation upon the interaction of touch and sight, of considering function as content. He works with a limited vocabulary of forms – lobed teapots, teacups, and vases. The shapes of these vessels change little from type to type, object to object. Instead, it is on the vessels' surfaces that Morgan experiments with subtle manipulations of texture and color, creating layers of depth through impressed pattern and washes of glaze. Because Morgan's vessels are meant to be used, their surfaces imply the accumulated effects of living with an object, of allowing visceral responses to emerge slowly over time, rather than the more instantaneous viewing required by a gallery or museum display.

Morgan's art reminds us to be aware not only of the viewer's hand interacting with the vessel's surfaces but also of the maker's hand in creating the object. Organic shapes are formed in clay through a process that requires the precision of metalwork. Thin pieces of clay are suspended over frames and coaxed and massaged into molds by repeatedly wiping the back of the clay slab with a damp sponge, softly pushing the clay skin outward. Each gently curving molded piece is then sutured to another. Rather than smoothing over the seam that joins them, Morgan allows this mark to remain as a sign of the process through which the objects were formed, as something produced in molded parts rather than emerging "whole" from the wheel. The seam is not only a residue of a specific act of creation but also an innuendo, a scar, an implication of the bodily qualities of the porcelain clay. In tracing this scar, we are reminded of the maker's hand at work

in the fabrication process, of one body emerging from the movements of another to be placed, ultimately, in the hands of a third, the viewer. Morgan speaks of his vessels in terms of chubby newborns, fruit, even the *Venus of Willendorf*, and describes color shifts across the surface as a “blush over the skin,” the drips of glaze as streaks of tears or blood.¹ His art elicits emotion by both *being* a body in its own form and *engaging* individual bodies in the daily experience of drinking and making tea.

Unconsciously perhaps, Morgan’s use of metalwork processes to create porcelain vessels echoes earlier artistic exchanges between Central Asia and China, historical moments in which the Chinese used ceramic to emulate the shapes of Sassanian silverwork, pushing clay to its molded, metal-imitating limits. One thinks, for example, of Tang Dynasty proto-porcelain bowls, which imitate the low foot ring, knife-like edge and lobed partitions of Sassanian silver bowls made decades before and traded across the Silk Road. Morgan may not intend to reference this precise moment in the history of porcelain’s cross-cultural development, but the longer history of porcelain as a commodity that traveled across continents and carried forms and decorative patterns between cultures, clearly motivates his practice. Morgan is aware of the historical importance of porcelain as both a valuable material, one of the finest and most precious clays known (at certain moments thought to have magical properties), and as a commodity, “China,” referring not only to its country of origin but to the porcelain objects themselves. As the Chinese had imitated Sassanian silverwork, so the Europeans imitated East Asian porcelain, building into their craft the flexibility to create objects that appear to be something that they are not. Think, for example, of Delftware pots camouflaging their earthenware bodies with slip and blue and white paint, imitating the surface appearance if not the material qualities of Chinese porcelain.

As an art historian, the very fact that Delftware was content to imitate the decorative *surface* rather the porcelain *body* of Chinese blue and white wares is part of what enables us to comprehend the uses and meaning of these vessels in historically specific periods. As one example, consider an eighteenth-century tea set created in China for export to Europe that is decorated with anatomical diagrams, including a fetus, complete with an umbilical cord, and a dissection of a human skull, flaps of skin realistically pulled back with tweezers. What was one supposed to be thinking of when drinking from a cup decorated with a depiction of fetus or a femur? In answering this question we need to consider not only rituals of beverage consumption and displays of porcelain in eighteenth-century Europe but also of the personal aspirations of the tea set’s owner. And it is here that my professional practice, of placing ceramics in their historically determined social and cultural contexts, is diverted by Morgan’s artistic aims. Morgan eschews figural or narrative decoration because, for him, this would distance his viewers from a more meaningful and personal interaction with the work. He aims instead to create a visceral response to his vessels’ textured surfaces and organic forms. Although Morgan speaks in general terms of tea drinking practices, his aim is not to create works that would suit the rigors of a four-hour Japanese tea ceremony or even the structured performance of a British cream tea. Instead, his vessels are meant to be “lived with” in idiosyncratic and personal ways. They are destined for essentially private engagements, engagements antithetical to the historical structures of social tea drinking.

If Morgan’s language is that of a painter, an expressionist or color theorist, as opposed to that of a sculptor or a functional potter, then mine is that of narrator. I wish to know and then to tell, how and when and why, and I find my

1. Author interview with artist, April 10, 2009.

way blocked by Morgan's work. This is perhaps because Morgan aims to elicit from his viewers intuitive and visceral rather than intellectual responses. His vessels are most successful precisely when their effect can be least articulated. Employing abstract and expressive colors and textures, Morgan's ceramics are formed of skins rather than of spaces, one touches rather than interprets them. If his works tell stories at all, it is in the subtle ways they acknowledge a larger history of porcelain as a commodity and a precious material, but the histories of individual engagements with the work are intensely focused on almost spiritual responses that resist codified social practices, especially those of the art historian.