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Illinois State University, gbarrec@ilstu.edu

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SUNDAY DINNER

George Dominic Barreca

18 Pages

Fascinated with the idea of providing a service, I make work that explores the connections between labor and lifestyle in the form of ceramic utilitarian objects. Inspired by my upbringing, in which the idea of work was both a necessity and highly valued, the forms are built with processes reminiscent of the repetition found in labor. Forms constructed with cut slabs of clay gives a sense of speed that loosely shapes the forms to generate an aesthetic of imperfection. This process reveals the structural limitations of the clay, requiring areas to be repaired by backfilling seams and cracks to ensure the vessel's function. This unconventional method of building develops an aesthetic reminiscent of house and road restoration through the overlapping seams and patches activating the surface. The construction becomes the decoration, a crude version of ornament.

The color of the work derives from elemental oxides: cobalt, copper, and iron that provided the glaze color in many historical low-fire pots. Paired with earthenware (a common clay), color develops further associations to the early industry of handmade potteries. The pots reveal active brush marks of white slip that masks the red clay body and accents the construction, placing emphasis on the handmade nature of the pots. Referencing the pottery made when it was more so a necessary trade, I utilize simple hump molds to generate bowl curves and a jig mold to draft plate rims. The use of these simple industrial tools helps maintain essential curves for the bowl and plate to function well. Emphasizing the hand, moments of manipulating the form are

contrasted with this repetition in production. A handmade rhythm is developed by the pinching and rolling of a bowl rim to articulate the transition from the inside curve of the form to the outer profile.

Formally suggesting the pots used during special occasions such as holiday and family gatherings, the pots are grounded in the familiar forms of domesticity. In this particular exhibition titled, "Crafting Service" the objects together imply a formal presentation where emphasis on scale and volume are used to signify a convivial, community gathering.

KEYWORDS: Community, Democratic, Pottery, Sunday Dinner, Working Class

SUNDAY DINNER

GEORGE DOMINIC BARRECA

A Thesis Supportive Statement Submitted in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

School of Art

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2017

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SUNDAY DINNER

GEORGE DOMINIC BARRECA

COMMITTEE MEMBERS:

Albion Stafford, Chair

Tyler Lotz

Michael Wille

Andreas Fischer

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to give a special thank you to my family and friends back home and a special thank you to my committee: Albion, Tyler, Andreas and Mike, and the entire ISU faculty and staff along with the friends I have made here: Dylan and Greg, Ryan and Felicia, Jeremy, Kale, Jake and Emily, Matt and Lisa at cometogetherspace and I want to gratefully express the support of my partner, Jenny Clay.

G. D. B.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

I am interested in the connections that objects can generate between people. As a maker, I build community and friendship through shared meals presented on my handmade pots. This is a form of labor as service. I want to activate society as a civil servant and for my work to provide a conduit for generosity to become a reciprocal act. Longing for family tradition provides the impetus for making utilitarian objects and forms a link between how pottery can create a sense of stability and comfort.

Like many, I was brought up in a working class environment. Through my experiences with work and friendship, community provided the know-how. To get by – one had to be resourceful. An example of this was a higher prevalence of a barter system for exchange. Trading labor and skill manifested in many ways and often led to someone becoming more experienced and sought after, therefore making them a more proactive participant in the community. Through my father, I saw this participation regularly but more so in the form of generosity. Out of kindness, he preferred to help others for free. This notion of community building would occasionally carry-over into social gatherings or potlucks where everyone arrived with a meal or drink to share.

The most significant form of this was celebrated with a slow cooked meal, usually on Sundays, the typical day of rest, and a day when labor is detached from capital. On occasion, the meal was shared around an extended table full of family and friends. It was through this gathering that I had my first experiences with a sense of community. The significance of this meal was acknowledged by the employment of the pots that were more typically displayed in the china cabinet. In my memory, these pots were thought of as more elegant and valuable. When

put to use, they exemplified the time and preparation needed for the meal, placing greater importance on the bounty being shared.

My pots intend to reference this shared experience by fulfilling the role of pottery as both a tool and a symbol for sustenance, and as a crafted object made to display the significance of an important meal. In this table presentation, in the context of the gallery, I have composed and curated objects for the table and countertop to create the feeling and mood of a convivial gathering.



Fig. 1. *Crafting Service*

CHAPTER II: THE DEVELOPMENT OF CULTURE

The cultural traditions I am most familiar with were provided to me by my Italian-American grandparents, who ventured to America to seek a better life around the outbreak of WWII. Due to the hardships faced with working long hours during the week, Sunday presented itself as a day to rejoice in familiar comforts, which often revolved around food. Simon Cinnotto, a history professor of food culture and communication, states in the chapter of his book, *Sunday Dinner? You had to be there! The Italian American Table: Food, Family and Community in New York City*:

The convivial consumption of food, for which Italians...spent...was ultimately a strategy of investment in family and community ties, aimed at maintaining group solidarity ...

The ideology of the family was functional and related to a developing urban working-class culture that would prepare individuals to the proletarian life that most of them were bound to live... Italian Americans...were made to feel that the family, even when poor, could always feed and take care of its members...They were told that enjoying familiar food and company was the down-to-earth, solid reward for the working-class life (19).¹

This effort provided a form of subsistence that seemed to solidify this working class culture. I suspect that this tradition, passed down through generations for me to experience, has always showcased the food in an elevated manner. Through immigration, trade, and assimilation, the incorporation of Eastern and European porcelain found its way into people's homes. Ultimately a form of mass production, these objects became heirloom collections for their exotic presence. As

¹ Simone Cinotto, *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, And Community in New York City*. (Urbana, ILL.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2013), 19.

I recall my grandmother's set of dishes, the rims of what was referred to as the "fine china", were highlighted in gold luster. On Holidays and Sunday dinners, these pots performed the precious role of framing the food in a celebratory way. The elegant stance of the pots with the provenance of the lustered-fine china slowed the performance of passing the dishes around the table, as well as the act of eating.

The current world, as we know it, is changing at a fast-pace. Our lives continue to become busier and over-extended with society's reliance to technology. Randy Kennedy, an art journalist for The New York Times, acknowledges this shift through art imagery in his piece, *Take a Labor Day Tour of Blue-Collar Art*. He states: "One thing that becomes apparent when you work to find work-related art in the city is that it begins to disappear the closer you get to the present... But perhaps it also happened because labor became less visually and imaginatively compelling as it moved toward automation and migrated to the cubicle."² This shift, as it relates to objects, reinforces mass production and slowly erodes the value of the handmade and its potential to generate sentiment.

The loss of time seems to be rectified with products operating on convenience. Like paper plates and Kurig' cups, have become societal habits to free up the amount of chores needed to maintain permanent objects. Human interaction also continues to be interrupted by virtual spaces. Through smartphones and instant messaging, we are faced with the option to replace physical interaction with digital community. With all of this, I can't help but think that, the more human avoidance we are tempted with, and the further we stray from interacting with people, the more we lose sight of gaining empathy. Reflecting on these special occasions of my

² Randy Kennedy, "Take a Labor Day Tour of Blue-Collar Art" *The New York Times*, September, 3 2015.

past, I respond to today's trends of the marketable, single use items by creating a diversion with the pots I build. Referencing the forms that shaped my own experience, I produce hand-made objects that hold a value that is intended to be recognized by the generosity of its material and volume, and an even greater value for the potential experience and memories that may be accumulated by them. I intend for the pots to both absorb and broadcast humanity.

By creating handmade pots for daily use, the activity of cooking and eating becomes more attuned to creating a connection with others rather than its current role as a potential inconvenience. Industrial standards for making dishes are routed in efficient design to rapidly create products with the lowest rate of loss, producing emotionally blank objects. Commercial production of this sort leads us toward capitalistic values. The time that we should have to invest in community is sacrificed for extended hours toward producing income. Human interaction becomes a void that is filled by impulse purchasing of cheapened products. If this disconnect with the objects we live with continues, we may potentially become passive in the human act of serving and eating. I feel that this direction could slowly breakdown one of the most congregative activities in the social fabric of a community.

CHAPTER III: WHAT I MAKE

Making pots that withstand daily use is my method of placing value back into the act of cooking and eating. I mine ceramic history to reference the handmade pots that were once produced as the primary tools for food preparation, service, and to be eaten off of daily. In my memory during Sunday dinners, I recall the more simple, daily use pots intermixing with the finer objects from the china cabinet. The common or everyday pots accounted for the majority of vessels around the table. In an attempt to elevate this celebration, the collection was employed for a formal setting by alternating the fine china within the everyday mix of plates, bowls, and service wares. Even though these meals required an immense amount of labor, the sentiment was based in family values and perhaps, a form of leisure.

Presented in my thesis exhibition, *Crafting Service*, I have produced all the pots necessary for conjuring an image of this occasion. This connection between labor and community is what I seek value in everyday and therefore, becoming the driving force behind the need to show people that image. “The laborer with a sense of craft becomes engaged in the work in and for itself; the satisfactions of working are their own reward; the details of daily labor are connected in the worker’s mind to the end product... family, community and politics are measured by the standards of inner satisfaction, coherence, and experiment in craft labor” (220-223).³ C. Wright Mills, a sociologist, implies that the use of handcraft as a form of labor and trade can be vital to relationship, community and self. This is why I carry such a passion for making in this manner.

³ C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1951), 220-223.

Experienced in making objects and working as a laborer, I gravitate towards pottery as a means to merge these two ideas into a synergetic lifestyle. Early on, I quickly associated making pots as a trade to affirm that what I was doing was purposeful. Drawing on the familiar forms of domesticity and utility has allowed me to engage in making objects that are based on the “moral imperative to do work for the sake of the community” (28) ⁴ Utility and service are the fundamental attributes of pottery. In its rudiment, a pot can achieve its function through simple form. I find that simplicity, along with with the repetition of making, provides an egalitarian form which makes my pots best suited to a community setting.

I am primarily interpreting the service forms through early ceramic traditions. Made out of a sense of necessity, these pots satisfy my associations with pottery and trade. The pots that perform in the act of making food provide the background and context for the section of work representing a countertop area within my thesis exhibition. Along with the formal dining table, I draw significant attention to the pots that were involved in the kitchen during the preparation of the meal. Personally, my favorite pots are the simple tools made in a robust manner to withstand the rigors of mixing and preparing the ingredients. These pots are stoutly made to handle the daily routines of the kitchen. Through continuous use, they develop the subtle residue of time and activity.

⁴ Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 28.



Fig. 2. *Service Forms*

The serving forms: the stockpot, the tureens and the casserole, reveal a generous volume that alludes to community dining. The tableware; consisting of: plate, bowl, cup and mug, accommodate this generosity and therefore reflects the size of the gathering. The quiet, humble pots in the form of crocks, larger casseroles and kitchenware continue to intrigue me for the ability to reside somberly yet, wait to be vigorously used and awakened. Perhaps modest in the essence of memory, but more important is the historical patina commensurate to the utilitarian nature of the forms, that casually reveal the potential for more use. This opens up collaboration; the user, through use, continually adds to its vitality.



Fig. 3. *Stockpot*

Incorporating the tureen, a serving vessel with a pedestal foot, I elevate the table presentation with great opulence. A centerpiece object typically manufactured in porcelain, my tureen references heirloom pots that were typically on display in the china cabinet. These pots, more commonly termed “fine china”, were partially for display but were on occasion brought out to the formal table for use. This enhanced the significance of the meal. Having the tureen as the centerpiece on the table in this exhibition, allows me to intermix the everyday pots with a few white lustered table settings. This eclectic arrangement represents the range of sets collected in the household and serves as analogous to the diversity of a community.



Fig. 4. *Tureen*

Through making, my hands' performance leaves a record of my presence that both decorates and heightens the function by pinching rims for effectiveness and pushing out volume for efficient use of material. The soft curve of a plate, provided by the jig-mold template, allows for the urgent drafting of the plate rim. This efficient move provides an opportunity to activate the profile of the form, punctuating its existence as a handmade object. I only employ molds to keep consistency in size for the purpose of a set. Christopher Benfey, a writer, quickly states: "bricks are human scale, made by hand to fit in the hand" (21).⁵ Similar to bricks, my pots are driven with a consistency that is then; only complete by the deftness of the hand that reveals the rhythm of work. I want the user to feel and discover the anomalies of the hand as they slowly present themselves with use.

⁵ Christopher E. G. Benfey, *Red Brick, Black Mountain, White Clay: Reflections On Art, Family, And Survival*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2013), 21.



Fig. 5. *Plate, Bowl, and Mug*

CHAPTER IV: MATERIAL USE

Archeologically speaking, ceramic objects define class and culture. They carry ethnographic attributes providing visual evidence of social class structure. Made of common surface clays, earthenware's such as, brick clay, and terra cotta, signify labor, work and construction. Common to any region, these surface clays used in earthenware are naturally manufactured through a sedimentary process, and carry all of the residual impurities and aggregate of the earth. Bricks, tiles and sewer pipes were all manufactured with this abundant material. Porcelain, on the other hand, is composed of the primary clay, kaolin, which is directly weathered from a mother rock. With its inherent purity, porcelain is associated with aristocracy as it took on the moniker of "white gold".

Through the use of earthenware, the inherent value of the everyday pot is subsidized by its robust and generous use of material to withstand continuous use. However, the value of my pots only increases with the chipping of edges through the exposure of glaze faults by showcasing the grit and fatigue of being used. Appropriate to its utility, the patina or texture of time implies the history that evokes nostalgia within us and develops the intrigue we desire in aged or used objects. Creating an effect similar to what we value in antiquities, the work mimics the evidence of time that connects us to tradition through the history of use. I purposefully discover ways to produce works in a manner of accessibility, with hopes that the potential users have no hesitation with utilizing my pots daily.

Revealing the imperfections of this clay through the process of making, I accept the limitations provided by the unrefined qualities and take advantage of the places where the clay tears and cracks, leaving moments of improvisation and repair. Pragmatic and direct, these areas resolve into visual complexities that frame and compose the piece with ornament.

Adding the Majolica surface to the tureen highlights my eclectic interest in the history of ceramics. First created by Iznik potteries to substitute porcelain, majolica forms were decorated with a blue and white surface that emulated the wares from China. Instead of accepting the demand of trade-porcelain, the European's set out to borrow this technique to mask their earthenware with an expensive imported material of tin, creating a white surface in place of the porcelain, making the ware available to the common people. Majolica wares were then infused with the eastern porcelain traditions made available through trade. This later grew into its own remarkable tradition that served a decorative need during the Renaissance period.



Fig. 6. *Majolica Dinner Set*

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Building a sense of community can enrich people through associative connections. By participating in the long history of ceramics, the value placed on handmade objects enables my ability to activate society with the pottery that I make. Jenni Sorkin, a craft critic, states: “This is one of the things craft is really good at: offering a sense of community. I might be less skilled than the person next to me, but the sense of competition and envy diminishes when the tenor of the room is focused toward learning a skill collectively. There is an unparalleled sense of satisfaction when one makes something tangible in the real world.” (248)⁶ This quote encompasses the overall mission of my work. I make pottery in reflection of the working class tradition of Sunday dinner to recall the comforts a community can offer. Through shared meals, my pots serve to act as a powerful form of homophily; the sociological study that shows the power of community through a relationship that forms communication and learning through shared common characteristics. This dynamic is particularly apparent within people of the working class. Embracing the Sunday dinner tradition provides an example of how a collective can make an impact necessary to reassert this valuable human interaction. Sorkin primarily speaks to craft as it relates to object making. Craft can also be the forming of cooperation and solidarity. Handmade objects hold the potential for developing memories and sentiment, and establish connections between people. As we progress and move forward in an age where technology dominates and convenience takes precedence, the mass production of objects delivers a disconnect between us and human touch. I wonder if the tendency to build community support

⁶ Jenni Sorkin, *Live Form: Women, Ceramics, And Community*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 248.

through human interaction will diminish if we are left to objects that purport reality through a screen? What might happen to the objects that have generated admiration through out generations, as heirlooms, if we continue to follow this path of creating ephemeral objects and realities? The handmade holds the ability to anchor our technology through the products of necessity. The permanence of ceramics has the potential to exist beyond or time, to be revealed as concrete evidence of community, and the spirit that drives community.

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APPENDIX A: IMAGES



Crafting Service, table set, detail



Crafting Service, countertop, detail



Crafting Service, table set, detail



Crafting Service, installation