

Re-searching Ambivalence and Female Potters

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"The relationships between ceramics and feminism are fruitful avenues for further investigation . . . because of the longevity, pervasiveness and complexity of women's engagement with this area of cultural activity."

- Cheryl Buckley (2001) in "Feminist Visual Culture"

As a researcher, I am compelled by Buckley's assertion of overlooked intersections in ceramics and feminism as well as Moira Vincentelli's (2000) comprehensive research and corresponding finding that histories of ceramics neglect gender issues. As a graduate student, I have been consistently intrigued by women's studies. As an artist, I have always been drawn to the clay medium. I am now faced with explaining my personal experience of the connections I propose between feminism and ceramics (a connection I have sensed and lived for a long time). Throughout my adult life, I have lamented the absence of female mentors. Encountering subtly gendered situations in art and teaching, I struggled with my own artistic ideas, my literary voice, and my teaching persona as a woman. I found myself wanting to connect with others who had the same struggles and joys about the constraints and uncertainties of being a female/ ceramic/ artist and educator. With a growing interest in feminism, I experienced a dual influence of art along with nourishing artistic/educative connections with other women artists that drove me professionally and personally.

In my experiences as well as my literature review, I have noticed and felt that women ceramicists (both potters and ceramic sculptors) are faced with a unique history and heritage. On the one hand, literature from archaeology, art history, and cultural/gender studies suggests that women were the first makers of clay objects and that females are often associated with nature, earth, and domesticity or the home (all features commonly linked with clay as a material). Simultaneously, there is also documentation of women's exclusion from glaze and kiln technologies, profit and credit for their own ceramic work, and acknowledgement as leaders of the field of studio ceramics. From my perspective, the nature of the exclusions along with the "femininity" and feminine quality of the clay medium and history of ceramics creates a unique

set of experiences for women ceramicists. This literature review has suggested that women ceramicists may experience tensions of opposites within associations of the body in pottery, concepts of gendered touch in the ceramics processes, and notions of heritability in ceramics learning. In my observations and my own experience, the range of cultural and historical associations that impact gender often create tensions in identity that women ceramicists reconcile through the practice and documentation of their craft.

To characterize these tensions, I am borrowing the concept of feminist ambivalence from Janet Miller and Mary Ellen Jacobs within their writings on Maxine Green. Feminist ambivalence stems from “A Light in Dark Times,” in which Janet Miller writes of constructed selves, while Mary-ellen Jacobs elaborates that female ambivalence is a multiplicity of perspectives and subversiveness to the cultural status quo (1997; p. 183). Jacobs locates ambivalence as a tension of opposites: “self and other, male and female, appearance and reality,” that allows a unique strength and duality (p. 186). Similar binaries (subject/object, self/other, and male/female) are challenged within writings of feminist ethnography (Cole and Phillips, 1996). Additional feminist scholars have located ambivalence and tensions within themselves as researchers (Behar, 1996), within the experience of female artists like Judy Chicago (Rabinovitz, 2001), and ultimately encouraged ambivalence in the practices of both (Lather, 1991). This research addresses ambivalence through sites of tension in the works and writings of selected female ceramicists. Within this research, ambivalence is located in the experience of gendered tensions themselves as well as the dualistic (or multiplistic) responses to these tensions artistically and through narrative. As a researcher, ambivalence provided a space for the questions, elaborations, and possibilities of gender in ceramics by restoring ambiguity to the interpretive process involved in looking at women’s work and words in the ceramic arts.

While the content of various types of stoneware and terracotta clay (or “clay bodies,” as they are often called) may imply feminist concepts in sculpture, symbolic gendered associations abound within the forms of pottery as well. As potters, we speak in physical references to the

body¹ and the pot (“lip”, “foot”, “belly”, and “shoulder” of the vessel). Clary Illian (1999) has noted the shared qualities between pots and people in that both have an axial symmetry and are types of vessels/containers while Marguerite Wildenhain (1962) has written that the potter “creates pots after [his/her] own image” (p. 140). It is also possible to compare clay to human skin (Mathieu, 2003), or to recognize the vessel symbolically and literally as relating to life-giving food, water, and the womb. Pueblo potters such as Stella Shutiva (1987) note relationships between the pot and the potter: “Men . . . make big pots, pots shaped the way their bodies are shaped, narrow at the base and wider at the top”, while “women make pots that are plumped” (qtd. in Trimble, 1987; p. 12). The connection between the clay and one’s body may also be subtler. For example, potter Jane Hamelyn writes

I am a woman, a mother and a potter, I am interested in feminism and though I do not feel oppressed by men, I am aware of difference. Our bodies for a start are not the same. If pots are about our bodies and women make pots, then I think there is something about that which communicates itself.

The corporeality within Jane Hamelyn’s words is particularly useful because it broadens our focus from women working in clay to the formal qualities of that work and its unique language(s). Her words reach towards that elusive “something” that I am trying to locate within experiences women have as ceramicists, educators, and feminists.

The shape and function of pottery can lead to ambivalence for potters like myself who embrace bodily connections of pottery and yet may avoid associations with conventions of stereotypical femininity, such as certain kinds of domesticity. One example of a potentially troubling characterization of women in pots is found in the musings of Arthur Danto (1996) concerning Betty Woodman’s ceramic vase forms:

the vase . . . [has been] filled, lifted, and emptied in the crucial patterns of interaction with water carriers and libation bearers, milk maids and barmaids, Elektras and Rebeccas. The bearer must conform, through her entire posture, to the vase’s heaviness and capricious form. Since the bearer is standardly a woman, the vase collaborates with her body to enable the latter to be graceful, as much as if woman and vase were partners in a dance.

I find this quote very interesting, not only because it was written about the vases of a female potter but also because it has many possible implications that may alienate female potters. Given

¹ I have found that archaeologists initially referred to pots as “genus,” as in living organisms such as humans. “Ware” was pioneered as a descriptive term by archaeologist Anna O Shepard.

that the woman in this narrative is a made to conform to the vase, with the vase granting her bodily grace, one may sense a certain objectification of the female body as part of the perceived function of the ceramic one. One may also wonder what possibilities are left for female artists if they choose to be vase bearers (and if they choose not to do so). Within the “partnership” Danto proposes, how can the female potter claim her own thought, autonomy, and creativity in the making and use of the vase, separating herself from the pottery she produces?

In contrast, Hodder (1991) has written critically of the calabash, an often-ignored ceramic container used by Kenyan women to hold milk and blood. While calabashes are domestic objects because they provide nourishment, the female maker may also decorate them with symbols of war or even refuse to decorate them at all; making choices with symbolic participatory meanings. In this, the object and its maker are intentionally ambivalent, with subversive potential to “negotiate a silent, covert, and practical control in a world where the dominant modes of discourse are denied to them” (p. 89). These vessels, while a part of potentially oppressive social structures, represent both an honoring of tradition as well as an upheaval.

Within her pottery, Magdalene Odundo addresses the female body. She draws influence from the female body in her work as she “sees vessels in the way women look or move” as pregnant bodies like the bulging belly of her pots, and with reference to Elizabethan “reshaping” of the bodies with tapering ceramic shapes (Berns, 1995; p. 15). Researchers of gender and art education have noted that “observer, spectator, supervisor are roles traditionally associated with men, while being observed is typically associated with women” (Sacca, 1996; p 57). Odundo not only adopts the ambivalently dualistic position of the female as well as the female observer, but arguably denies objectification of the female form, as her pots focus on female movement and not solely the woman as a stationary object. This perhaps redefines not only the pot, but also the potter, in a gendered sense. It may be important to note that the gaze of these ceramicists offers

a nuanced perspective in viewing ceramics. In this way, the pot is ambivalent because of a duality of conventional function and subversively meaningful form.

One belief about pottery-making is that the experience can be likened to creating life. For example, while part of a primarily female group of potters at Haystack Mountain School of Craft last summer, I sensed someone watching us create vessels from lumps of clay on our pottery wheels. I looked up to find visiting poet Ralph Caplan passing by, and he commented that seeing us make pottery was like “watching people give birth.” Caplan’s notion of pottery and birthing has implications for gender roles in ceramics. In the case of present day potters (where many women have the capacity to give birth to a human being and men universally do not), I wonder *how* the making of pots could be like birthing. Is the pot a partner to the female bearer as Danto writes; is the pot a symbolic child to the potter; or is this a yet misunderstood birth? How are we to understand Odundo’s vessels or Kenyan clabashes as births? Odundo’s vessels, Malone’s fruits, Wunderlich’s pregnant figures, and Barber’s child sculpture could perhaps be considered attempts at reconfiguring the simple binaries of mother/earth and father/creator. Again, works such as these could constitute examples of Hoagland’s subversive gaze, in that they revise accepted societal perceptions of birthing by raising additional questions and possibilities.

Becker (1996) asserts that while today’s men may be able to adopt a more motherly persona in our society, contemporary women often “cannot imagine themselves as father, and they know that to assume the role of mother . . . can only disempower them” (p 218.) This seems connected to the demands made by Openheim that women recover and claim their masculinity. Potter William Daley sands the surface of his wheel-thrown pottery to emulate the “cheek of a mother’s child,” while noting the social inappropriateness of a man actually touching an unfamiliar child if moved to do so in public settings. This touches on the contrasts of social expectations and personal inclinations male potters may experience. However, if male potters

can engage with symbolic mothering and reclaiming of family under certain conditions in ceramics, how can women be father-like through other interactions with clay?

If we characterize wheel-throwing processes as birthing and argue this allows male potters some symbolic motherhood; one might suggest that handbuilding (the alternative method of creating vessels) could contain possibilities for women potters to engage in symbolic fatherhood. Handbuilding in clay is quite literally using ones hands to build the “walls” of pottery or the structure of sculptures. Many current female ceramicists such as Magdalene Odundo have been trained in both handbuilding and wheel-throwing, and yet prefer the handbuilding method because of a wish to honor the female-intensive traditions of earlier times. Similarly, Trimble has quoted the teachings of San Idelfonso potter, Maria Martinez as she addresses women pottery-makers and male house-builders: “It was the woman's part of living to hold things together. Men could build up or tear down houses and ditch banks; but women put clay and sand together to make pottery. That was part of a woman's life, to make things whole.” (p. 12).

If we accept that building in clay is in some ways akin to building in other materials, we may consider Young's (2005) characterization of gender and building of homes. Young writes of building homes as something that men do in order to create physical structure for their daily lives and see the particularities of those lives reflected in the natural environment. She argues that building is essential to the emergence of subjectivity, for dwelling in the world asserts identity and history, thus making men the primary subjects of history, for women have not and still do not typically build houses.

This perception seems linked with Classen's findings that while both genders have had some Western associations with touch, there is feminine and masculine tactility in which the female is associated with sexual and generative touch, while the male is associated with more aggressive touch. If we take into account the history of home as involving men as home-builders and women as those that give birth to a home's inhabitants, I believe that wheel-throwing by

men and handbuilding by women may offer valuable alternative experiences for both genders. Given Young's connections of building and asserting identity and history, handbuilding with its female traditions and its direct relationship with the hands of ceramicist is quite empowering. I have also observed that handbuilding can be akin to traditionally female practices of weaving basketry, for the oft-used coiling method produces a vessel row-by-row as the coil builds a wall. Constructing clay walls by hand with coiling offers a powerful ambivalence with regards to social conventions, for handbuilding can be considered dually feminine (in its connection to traditionally domestic arts/crafts) and masculine (in its relationship with building/construction).

In consideration of notions of space and identity in ceramics, I am reminded that Kelso (1948) has written that clay was once been used in cartography (map-making.) This function works nicely with the metaphorical mapping of gender and identity proposed by contemporary writers such as Lucy Lippard. In my work, I attempt to map out roles of physicality and femininity and/or femaleness within the many relationships between gender and ceramics. By exploring ambivalence in gendered female identity, mapping seems applicable because there is a great deal of possible terrain to be considered. Jo Spence (1980) writes of her very identity as a "*site of contradiction . . . a dialectical self . . . in a constant process of change, of working and reworking the past* (p. 355). So too the potters I have addressed here have engaged nuance and contradiction in their work, proposing re-viewings of women through ceramics (their artistic voice). Sites of contradiction (including social conventions, preconceptions about women and art, and real and ideal traditions) are a part of ambivalence.

I believe that space and voice are key aspects in the ambivalence I am working to find. My research has touched on space in terms of domestic areas and workspaces as they impact, define, and are defined by women's artistic processes. Voice has been addressed as commentary on and revision of social concepts such as women and nature, female deities, women's bodies, and family. As a researcher, speaking with my own various voices that "converge" on ceramics,

I hope to illuminate the complexities of artistic voice and women, touching on subtleties beyond the binaries of free speech and bound silence.

As an authorial note: as I began this research, I was surprised by how often my feminist focus on the voices of my fellow female ceramicists has been suspiciously questioned by family, friends, peers, and advisors. I not only *feel* very strongly that an emphasis on women is currently important in my field, but I also have come to believe as Carol Bigwood (1993) does, that the shift from masculine to neutral subject bypasses the possibilities of woman as subject, excluding her just as masculine/feminine dichotomies once excluded her. As mentioned earlier, by examining the way in which women such as Magdalene Odundo adopt and yet adapt the female form in pottery, a focus on ambivalence allows critical shifts from object to subject.

As I hope to explore further in subsequent research, I believe that I am locating nuanced possibilities for understanding, relating, and emphasizing the experiences of women ceramicists as artistic subject(s) and context(s) through the lens of ambivalence. Beyond the literature review and my own personal and anecdotal experiences, I am in the process of a series of interviews and discussions with twenty contemporary female ceramic artists to learn more about their beliefs and experiences concerning gender and ceramics and to investigate instances of ambivalence within those beliefs and experiences. Some of these artists whose artwork can be seen here include Maureen Burns-Bowie, Ellen Day, Elizabeth DiCara, Joan Hardin, Beth Heit, Bonnie Hitchcock, Judy Musicant, and Elspeth Owen. These women discussed a variety of their own nuanced responses to and uses of conventions and perceptions of “femininity.” These preliminary responses offer nuanced depictions of female bodies in clay, assertions of oppositional success (or “proving” oneself) in ceramics, and commitment to membership in female ceramics communities.

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