Ridged Pots: A Studio Investigation

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As an artist, I am engrossed in the visual aspects of our natural world, particularly mountains, rock formations, and other organic elements that can slowly be altered by time and weather. Weathering leaves specific marks and textures on nature and the objects left there. For me, these marks create a sense of beauty and a reflection of time. Perhaps this attraction is what led me to work with clay, a soft malleable material dug from the earth and molded into forms that harden to a rock-like material when heated (fired) to a high temperature in a kiln. I began this research by investigating how to create these natural textures left by nature. First, I added materials into my clay. In these experimentations I specifically selected organic materials that would burn away in the firing process, leaving absences where the material had once existed. I tested materials like wood chips, sawdust, leaves, rice, beans, and cotton. Prior to manipulating it into my desired forms, I kneaded the material into the clay. Once the clay objects were fired, the organic materials would burn out, leaving irregular textured crevices and markings on the interior and exterior surfaces of the forms. While these experiments held great potential, finding the correct balance of added materials presented a big challenge. Frequently the structural integrity of the objects was greatly compromised by the additions, or with too few additions the created textures didn’t visually balance with the hand-manipulated surfaces. I felt I was able to replicate and depict visual aspects of natural erosion and decay with this technique, but found the forms were just too structurally weak to withstand further manipulations or glaze firings.

I branched off from these investigations while attending a five-week international artistic residency program in Valluris, France supported by a CARS Faculty Librarian Research Grant. While there I attempted to create forms that merged attributes of Much of my scholarly research has focused on understanding Asian objects and the traditions that surround them. I have always been particularly drawn to Chanoyu (Japanese tea ceremony) and Gongshi (Chinese scholar rocks). The study of such pieces has lead me, in my studio investigations, to research and examine how aesthetic forms and objects can encourage a viewer to contemplate nature and the passage of time. My intention with this work was twofold: to consider the conceptual and symbolic ideas concerned with ceremonial presentations, and to embody a sense of age and history of use to encourage the viewer to reflect on the past. These pieces were inspired by antiquities, specifically ancient Japanese weaponry and ceremonial vessels.

Ridged Pot Series # 2, 16"h x 10"w x10"d

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(Photography by Clements Photography and Design)
our natural world with forms associated with ceremonial presentations. For this, I began with a small solid mass of clay and pressed it against found texture as a means of imprinting a natural surface onto it. Following that I would place the clay mass onto a potter’s wheel to form a hollow interior vessel within its center, carefully leaving the imprinted texture on the exterior untouched. This resulted in trompe l’oeil rock surfaces on the exteriors with smooth basin interiors that would allow glazes to pool. To me, it was a juxtaposition of the natural world (exterior) against man-made spaces (interior). I felt these forms were beginning to support my conceptual ideas and I was intrigued by the direction they had taken, but I still felt that the intimate pieces lacked the substantial ceremonial presence I had desired in the work.

While in France, my research also drew me to the work of French woodworker, Marc Ricourt. He created wooden carved, vessel-like pieces with ridge-like forms covering the exterior of his works. The pieces were similar to large-scale seed pods and seeing them made me reconsider my surface designs and the depth I could push my textures to. At the same time, I was also researching weapons of antiquity, specifically in Asian cultures. I found these objects mysterious; how were they used and why were they abandoned? I was also fascinated by the corroded and patina and pitted marks that cover the ancient metal surfaces. I studied how these carefully crafted and valued objects were encompassed by markings of use, time, and history.
Seeing these led me to more experimentation with the forms. I began producing larger sculptural forms that made distinct visual references to these ancient artifacts. I also utilized some of what I had learned from my earlier research by burning away the organic material. I found that by pushing sawdust and small wood chips only into the clay surface when it was wet and malleable (as opposed to kneading it fully into the clay), they left pitted marks resembling some of the deteriorating ancient bronze work when fired. However, after producing multiple pieces in this fashion, I realized they had just become more like reproductions of the weaponry and I had not captured the essence of mystery that I found so intriguing in them. In response, I began abstracting the visual reference to these artifacts, and I continued with this method to produce the final pieces exhibited.
This current body of work pays homage to these artifacts. My forms reference historic ceremonial vases, bowls, and plates, but I have applied large ridges to the forms, making visual reference to the historic weaponry I found so fascinating. At times the forms are carefully balanced on large

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blade-like ridges; other times the ridges are seen in multitude filling a shallow bowl. In both instances, the works become sculptural. During the working process the ridges grew in scale, beginning as small linear elements and growing to large blades that visually and physically overpower the form that houses them, in some instances creating fissures in the vessels as the ridges shrink while drying, and pull and crack at the vessel housing. These cracks and tears play an important conceptual element in the work as I see them representing our natural world and the uncontrollable natural forces within it. In addition to creating these forms, much of my research was dedicated to the surface treatment of the works. Fired ceramics are treated with glazes to imbue color and finish to the surfaces. Glazes are a formulated blend of minerals, colored oxides, and frits that are fired and melted at high temperatures.
to create glass finishes that adhere to the porous surface of the clay body. Glazes can be manipulated to produce numerous effects, including: shiny, matte, crackle, or textured surfaces. Initially I began testing gloss glazes that I hoped would pool in the basins of the vessels and in the rough edges of the ridges, but upon seeing the results of these tests I realized that the thicker glaze filled the textures and the shine of the glaze camouflaged the depth of the ridges. I needed the textural surfaces to be seen and not covered up. This led me to more research with colored oxides and matte glazes. After extensive experimentation, I concluded that the best method to archive the results and colors I desired in the work was to build subtle depth by spraying multiple thin layers of color oxides and colored matte glazes onto the forms to highlight their textural depth. To further enhance the colors, after the initial glaze firing,
I reloaded the work into a kiln and brought it up to 800 degrees. I removed each piece while hot and sprayed it with ferric chloride. The hot glazes reacted with the ferric to create subtle colors that varied depending on the elements in the glaze and the specific temperature of the piece. Each reaction was unique and would leave different flecks.

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of color variation. I was able to visually transform the ceramic surfaces to appear as tarnished, pitted, aged metal.

Over the span of this research I created over 70 pieces and 100 glaze tests. Some directions proved unsuccessful, either formally or conceptually, but without the extensive experimentation, my studio investigations would not have elicited the desired results. This body of work was exhibited at Bridgewater State University’s Wallace Anderson Gallery in March of 2018. The exhibition included over 20 works that were developed over a one-and-a-half-year period. The work is contemporary by nature, but embodies the enigmatic presence of the past.

R. Preston Saunders is Professor in the Department of Art and Art History.