



“The body characterizes everything it touches. What it makes it traces over with the marks of its pulses and breathings, its excitements, hesitations, flaws, and mistakes. On its good work, it leaves the marks of skill, care, and love persisting through hesitations, flaws, and mistakes. And to those of us who love and honor the life of the body in this world, these marks are precious things, necessities of life”

– Wendell Berry from “Feminism, the Body, and the Machine”

The Body:

INTIMACY

AND

INTUITION

Some years ago, walking in the desert of southeastern Utah, I picked up a small shard of corrugated pottery on a bench overlooking the San Juan River. As I turned it over in my hand I recognized on some of the crimps the thumbprints of the Indian who made the pot. This little bit of data, specific to her body, was clearly transmitted to me over a thousand years of time. I felt a sense of wonder at this communication, unintended but given from her hand to mine. This encounter set me to thinking about the physicality and the communicative potential of making and using pottery.

I love the feel of clay as I am kneading it or the smooth slide of clay through my hands as I throw. I feel the material pushing back as I cup my hands around it. Later, with the same hands around a cup, I feel a different flow of energy as I receive the vessel's contents through my lips and into my belly. My hands feel the heft, curve, and texture of the vessel. The articulation of lip, shoulder, belly, and foot speak in a way that words don't. If what is being communicated in that tactile and spatial encounter could be said in words, then perhaps there would be less need for pottery-making in this world.

Before the development of ceramics, I imagine that our first drinking bowl was our two hands cupped together, raising water from a

stream or pool to our mouths. Before that, the first vessel we knew was the womb that gave us forth. In some primary cultures, ceramic vessels are made only by women. I suspect it was that way with the Puebloan culture that produced the shard I had picked up on the banks of the San Juan River. Before the overlay of Anglo culture on Native culture, women were the potters of the American Southwest.

In Western culture there has been a split between mind and body, heaven and earth, male and female, and the arts and mundane life. Unfortunately there is a hierarchy in these divisions. Physical, especially domestic, work is generally considered less important than office and administrative work. The life of the body and feminine power get short shrift in competition with intellectual and masculine endeavor. Our separation of art from everyday life has greatly reduced the quality of that life. In my generation, store-bought appeared preferable to homemade. In the arena of ceramic art, at least as I experienced it in graduate school, utilitarian pottery, especially production work, was secondary to the more cerebral “one-off” work intended for exhibition rather than use.

One day in graduate school, I was working on a run of about a dozen baking dishes. I had them laid out on a table and was deciding how

BY JOSEPH BENNION

Joseph Bennion was educated at Tuscarora Pottery School and Brigham Young University. Since 1977, he has operated Horseshoe Mountain Pottery with his wife, Lee Udall Bennion. He also works seasonally as a Grand Canyon river guide.

*Joseph Bennion
Horseshoe Mountain Pottery
Mom's Stuff Healing Salve
PO Box 186
Spring City, Utah 84662
435-462-2708
www.horseshoemountainpottery.com*

Photograph by Paul Allred.

to glaze them when a professor passed through the room. He asked in a slightly irritated voice, “What is all this production work?” I mumbled something about Zen aesthetics and the *Unknown Craftsman* and kept on with my work. Later, when I was inspecting the finished pieces with my wife, she picked out one she wanted for our kitchen. The one she selected grew on me, and at her urging I photographed it and entered it in the 1985 NCECA Members’ Juried Exhibition. My piece was selected for the show. Word spread quickly in our ceramics department that I had gotten a piece into the NCECA show. Soon the same professor was in my studio, wanting to “talk about my work.” I asked him if he remembered that run of “production work” that he had complained about. I then explained that he and I work differently to get to the same point. His approach involves a series of thumbnail sketches and maquettes, from which one is chosen to be executed full scale. I work by making a lot of pieces in series (read: production work), without a lot of conscious thought given to each individual piece. After the firing I will select the one or two that have that “thing” that I can’t articulate but recognize when I pick them up and examine them with my eyes and my hands.

When I was in San Antonio for the conference, a friend and I were visiting with a young woman who had a piece in the show. Her piece was an intellectually-driven sculptural vessel that addressed how women are often tied to domestic drudgery in their traditional roles. It was a very smart and well-executed piece and I enjoyed looking at it. She was not aware that I had a piece in the show when she said to us, “Did you see that “pot” in the show – you know, the casserole?” Her tone and diction didn’t speak of admiration, but of disdain. I wouldn’t have said anything, but my friend piped up, “Oh yeah, that is Joe’s piece.” She was embarrassed and I was amused. It was clear to me that my mundane pot, with its intentionally understated aesthetic and requiring touch and use for communication, was fighting an uphill battle for appreciation in that academic arena.

I have always been more haptic than visual in my approach to the world. I understand a thing better if I can get my hands on it; reading

or hearing instructions often leaves me confused, while a hands-on approach will usually teach me how a thing is done. It is a learning disability, if you will. Learning, for me, is centered in the body.

In teaching wheel-thrown pottery, I will start with a short demonstration. I don’t expect the students to remember much until they have tried it for a while, and then they come back to watch me with new eyes. Once, watching a student become increasingly frustrated by her failed attempts to center a lump of clay, I recognized that her electric wheel was wired backwards and turning clockwise. Because she employed the same hand position that I had demonstrated on my counter-clockwise wheel, her fingers kept digging into the clay as it turned into them. I suggested that she simply switch the inside and outside hands and to make my point I sat down to demonstrate, but to my dismay my hands wouldn’t cooperate at all. I realized in that moment that the right hand literally did not know what the left hand was doing. The knowledge of all of those complex sequences of moves, coordinated between the right and left hands, was based in the body, not the mind as I had thought. I now explain to students that learning to throw on the wheel is like learning to pat your head and rub your belly at the same time; it sounds and looks simple but it is not.

I use a Leach-style treadle wheel. I enjoy the physical involvement of powering the wheel with my body; it requires focus to treadle constantly while remaining stable enough to be firm with the clay. This wheel asks me to give up some of the control I might have over the process. Visitors to my workspace sometimes ask why I prefer this less technological tool. I can often point to their children, who are competing to see who gets to sit on the wheel and work the treadle bar. It is simply more fun, and isn’t that why we do this?

In 1987 I traveled to Japan with a group of American potters. One day we had lunch at the Bankai Zen Monastery in Hemeji with the master of that monastery. As we sat eating, he talked with us about how art is made, emphasizing the importance of mastering technique. He said one must learn it so well that it be-

comes second nature. Only when the craft is that well mastered can the “unborn self” be free to flow from the soul through the hands, bypassing the conscious mind, and be revealed in the artifact. I am reminded of a story I heard about Shoji Hamada. When asked how he made really great tea bowls, he said that he would ask a friend to visit while he was throwing, so his mind would be distracted from what his hands were doing.

I have recognized that often when I am doing production work I go into a trance. I will throw for long periods, deep in thought, and later realize that I have no conscious memory of the pots I was making. Later, as I inspect the individual pots, I am struck by qualities I did not have in mind as I made them. These pots may serve as a jumping-off point for changes in my work that are more conscious. I think of this sort of development in my work as haptic or intuitive evolution.

There is a kind of beauty that lives only in items made by hand and intended for mundane use.¹ It is an aesthetic rooted in intimacy. The touch of the potter’s hand as he forms the wet clay into a vessel is paralleled and repeated as the user holds the same vessel, now transformed by fire, and takes it to her mouth to drink its contents. The two actions complete one another.

The marks left by the maker’s hand bear witness to the life he has experienced. I remember hearing Tom Marsh refer to these little marks that cannot be duplicated by a machine as “points of grace.” They carry intimate information to the user, prompting the inarticulate speech of the heart known as intuition.

I love using pottery from a variety of makers. I realize things about each maker, but more importantly about myself, in the pots I handle and observe in use. Whether I am eating from a pot or washing and putting it away, it is the touching that transmits information or sparks my introspection. I am reminded of Leach’s recounting of Kanjiro Kawai’s response to the question of how people are to recognize good pottery. He said “With their bodies.”² This doesn’t mean that the brain is turned off; it is also part of the body, and the subconscious mind is always at work. It is the conscious

mind that sometimes needs to be distracted, so that the greater part of the brain can work through other parts of the body.

I make pots to serve the needs of body and mind through the eyes, hands, and mouth. We all need to eat, but we also need beauty, sociability, and pleasure. I want these wares to play in the background of eating and connection around the table. The food and the people are central, but although it is subordinate, I want the pottery to ask certain things of the user: to pay attention, to be present, or simply to notice and perhaps marvel at some small detail. I place a high premium on pleasure in my life, and I hope that pleasure is inherent in the use of my wares. Art encountered with the body has a greater intimacy than paint or sculpture, and thus a greater potential for affecting people. I value all art forms, but I rejoice in the making and using of pottery, involving equally the mind and the body.

NOTES

1. Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1972), 197-198.
2. Bernard Leach, *A Potter’s Book* (London: Trans-Atlantic Arts, Inc., 1940), 17.