



SCHOOL of  
GRADUATE STUDIES  
EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY

East Tennessee State University  
**Digital Commons @ East  
Tennessee State University**

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Student Works

---

5-2010

# Newfangled.

John Daniel Simmons  
*East Tennessee State University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd>



Part of the [Art Practice Commons](#), and the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Simmons, John Daniel, "Newfangled." (2010). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 1702. <https://dc.etsu.edu/etd/1702>

This Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Works at Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ East Tennessee State University. For more information, please contact [digilib@etsu.edu](mailto:digilib@etsu.edu).

Newfangled

---

A thesis  
presented to  
the faculty of the Department of Art and Design  
East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

---

by  
John Simmons  
May 2010

---

Don Davis, Chair  
Mike Smith  
Catherine Murray

Keywords: pottery, drawing, function

## ABSTRACT

Newfangled

by

John Simmons

This thesis paper supports the Master of Fine Arts exhibition at the B. Carroll Reece Museum, East Tennessee State University, from March 9th through April 22nd, 2010. The exhibit is comprised of 62 unique ceramic pieces, which are presented on pedestals and wall mounted shelves. The exhibition presents the artist's exploration of form and surface used to create functional pottery. Topics discussed are the influences, concepts, techniques, and methods used to create the work. Included are process images, detail images, and images of selected works from the exhibition.

## CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT.....	2
LIST OF FIGURES.....	4
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	5
2. FUNCTION.....	6
3. BEGINNINGS.....	7
4. THE JOY OF MAKING.....	9
5. SUBJECT AND OBJECT.....	10
6. INFLUENCES.....	13
7. TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES.....	16
8. SUMMARY.....	19
WORKS CITED.....	20
VITA.....	21

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1. The Ninefruit Bowls.....	11
2. Breakfast Milk Pitcher.....	12
3. Leather-hard teapots in the studio.....	16
4. Bone dry pots ready to be bisque-fired.....	17
5. Large Searching Native Bowl.....	19

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Newfangled is a curious word. It means attracted to novelty or something of the newest kind (Webster). I chose it because I like how it looks and sounds, and it is not a word commonly used in academia. The work I make has a novelty quality to it. I research historical and contemporary trends in the art, craft, and regular worlds and sift through all of the information in an effort to create work that is universal. I draw or paint representational imagery onto functional, wheel-thrown pottery and the finished work takes a narrative or conceptual stance as an object. Sometimes the subject of my imagery is simple like a landscape, a horse, or a person. Other times the subject is more complex or cryptic; it can be concealed with abstraction or changed with metaphor.

This thesis discusses the ideas and techniques I used in the studio to create the body of work I call Newfangled.

## CHAPTER 2

### FUNCTION

"Art for Art's Sake is a Philosophy of the Well-Fed" (Frank Lloyd Wright).

Working in the studio is complex because you can do whatever you want. My first instinct is to try and do everything. This merits mostly failure, as without a direction or a basis to start from I can get carried away very quickly. My research on both historical and contemporary ceramics has added depth to my understanding of the medium. Historically, a natural connection between clay and function exists. With this realization I find a starting point in my work.

The forms I make, my preferred firing techniques, and other technical aspects can become rather scientific. I have found that these elements of making are not always exciting. Nevertheless, they are necessary to achieve my goals; they provide enough possibilities to keep me interested, and they tend to give my work a foundation. More importantly, I have found that this functional foundation, although mundane at times, is very fulfilling.

Recently, there has been a trend in the art world to accept everything but function. Perhaps this is because of the parallel between function and industry. My interest in ceramics and my interest in art have led me to create. Similar to other art forms, my work in ceramics considers form, color, surface, and line quality. One difference from other traditional art forms is that functional pottery adds the element of touch. My work is to be touched and used. Eating or drinking from an object provides a level of intimacy that cannot be experienced with a painting. For this reason, I believe that function increases the meaning of my work instead of limiting it.

## CHAPTER 3

### BEGINNINGS

"...go back; far back...as far back as the dada from my childhood, the good old wooden horse" (Paul Gauguin).

In this statement Gauguin was talking about moving to Tahiti and living with the primitive indigenous people. He believed that making his artwork there would provide him with a fresh, renewed perspective. I think most people that try to make art can identify with Gauguin's sentiment here. When your artwork gets in a rut and you need a fresh start, you go back to the start, back to the foundations. Art students call it "foundations."

As an undergraduate student I took all the necessary foundation courses, but it wasn't until I started to teach foundations last year that I realized how valuable the basic principles are in my work. By simplifying some of the things I was doing I learned they could be more effective. In my earlier work my drawings would give the story away or just beat it into the ground. I learned I could leave something to be decided by the viewer/user by drawing a pig thinking about fried chicken instead of filling the side of a pitcher with drawings of pigs in fences, a .38 special, and a fresh plate of bacon. The former required fewer lines, made my drawings less busy, and, with some work, began to fit the forms I was making. This realization came when I gave my 2D design class their first project: four lines four times. They were asked to invent the best composition they could with only four lines. I figured if they could do it then so could I.

I draw in a sketchbook to practice, to jot down a good idea, or to remember a good story. However, the drawings I make on my pots exist because of the pot. I wouldn't show these drawings as framed finished compositions. My drawings aren't good enough to say that each

pottery form is a canvas; likewise, the forms do not stand alone - they need the drawings. They need each other, and what brings them together is a hybrid philosophy. How I arrange the lines, shapes, figures, glazes, and slips are determined by my study of the basic principles of design. When I plug basic design, improvisation, practiced skill, idiosyncrasy, and some good stories into my art calculator *Newfangled* comes out.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE JOY OF MAKING

"The continued production of utilities without delight in making and using is bound to produce only boredom and to end in sterility" (Bernard Leach).

This quote by Bernard Leach could not be more compelling. I believe Leach was referencing the difference between handmade and industrial pottery, warning that if we continue as a society to remove the individual maker's hands from the act of making we could become sterile. This may be an exaggeration, but I like the sentiment. Also throughout his book, Leach places importance on individualism instead of industrialism. It is quite fulfilling to use an object that has been handmade. Across the board, people feel detached from mass-produced objects. For example, I am not attached to my plastic desk chair from Wal-Mart as much as I am one of my Grandmother's handmade log cabin quilts. In the idiosyncrasies, style, time spent, design, and comfort I experience humanity - something *Fiestaware* can't give me.

Making is not always an easy endeavor; but at the end of the day there is a joy and a deep satisfaction in working with ones hands. Generationally speaking, some people don't understand this statement because it is not easily quantified, and there is little or no fiscal profit motive to what I do. Learning new processes and increasing my awareness of how my hands are interacting with the material is champion to me. The interplay in the studio between vision and technique is what allows me to take steps forward. This is the Joy of Making!

## CHAPTER 5

### SUBJECT AND OBJECT

"I start a picture and I finish it. I don't think about art while I work. I try to think about life" (Jean Michel Basquiat).

Because I draw or paint representational images onto the pottery there is always a subject. Sometimes the subject is simple like a landscape, a horse, or a person. Other times the subject is more complex or cryptic; it can be concealed with abstraction or changed with metaphor. In the early 20th century, Dada artists like Jean Arp, Man Ray, Max Ernst, and Grunwald proved great art can be found in complete meaninglessness. More than not, the subject of the imagery on my pottery can be identified. Somewhere between absolute representations (it is what it is), resemblance, abstraction, and meaninglessness is where I create the subject.

I draw a variety of animals including roosters, bears, rabbits, monkeys, gorillas, cattle, birds, frogs, and fish. It is an elusive task to capture the essence of an animal. I find there is a certain powerfulness embodied in animals; especially in exotic, wild, or fantastical animals. There is a certain form and elegance found in the shape of an animal that can simultaneously be unpredictable, fresh, mysterious, hilarious, and moving. Animals have become a main feature in my imagery, but not exclusively. I also draw adults, babies, fruit, trucks, fishing lures, bowling pins, battle tanks, boots, and various other objects. There is a universality that I try to capture in my work; everyone knows what a rabbit looks like and everyone knows what a bowl is for.

In a piece I call the Ninefruit Bowls I feel the subject is easily identified. On nine small fruit-sized bowls I drew nine unique fruits. The bowls are symbols of gifts that God has given to all people. In Scripture, Galatians 5:22 says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." This is an example of how

my drawings can be allegorical. A dietician would recommend a small bowl of fresh fruit every day for your body, and a minister would prescribe scripture to feed the soul. These small bowls are the simplest forms I make; they are also the most practical. They were made to serve.



*Figure 1: The Ninefruit Bowls*

On one side of a pitcher I drew a cow, on the other side a banana. I like banana in my cereal, and I prefer to pour milk over my cereal out of a ceramic pitcher, not a carton. The milk I drink comes from a cow, so I decided that the subject of this piece should directly be related to the object it is on: a breakfast milk pitcher.

There is a great tradition between ceramics and drawing. Early Native-American mimbres pottery was drawn on for several reasons, one of which was ritual, mostly pertaining to burial processions. Some of the drawings are just records of what was happening - a fishing trip, a successful hunt, or maybe an exciting birth in the village. They drew on their pots what was relevant to them at the time. This is what I am trying to do with my drawings: recording things

that are important to me - even though some of them may be fantasy.

I try to capture the connection between life and objects in my artwork. The pottery is the object and the images are life. The choice to make objects that serve a function fortifies my attempts to convey life.



*Figure 2: Breakfast Milk Pitcher*

## CHAPTER 6

### INFLUENCES

"I was a pretty good imitator of Roy Acuff, but then I found out they already had a Roy Acuff, so

I started singin' like myself" (Hank Williams Sr.).

Considering the scope of my artistic training and research, when I think about influences I immediately think of my former instructors. My main instructors have been Gary Hatcher and Don Davis. They both have similar backgrounds as they were both independent potters producing work to support their living before teaching. Both made mid-career shifts into academia. They have served as practical guides for me through the 'real' art world and the academic art world. As a beginning ceramic artist it is beneficial to have such good instructors to emulate. Their combined experience and influence on me as a person and as a maker have boldly changed my life perspective.

Professor Hatcher taught me that "art is all about awareness." A former apprentice of David Leach, son of English pottery legend Bernard Leach, Gary led his classes by example. His tight wheel-thrown functional pottery set a technical standard that I still adhere to. His style of work reflects his personality - reserved, measured, mature, and accurate. I admire the simplicity of line and color, the attention to detail, and excellence of form that Professor Hatcher's artwork exemplifies.

Professor Davis can always find potential in any circumstance and has a special ability to identify what can improve my work. I have never known someone to have such an acute eye for seeing art as he does. He has taught me to see, and I feel I have gained the ability to be more particular in my studio practice. Professor Davis has an uncanny way of getting the best out of his students and has always encouraged me to pursue the more eccentric side of my aesthetic; it

was under Professor Davis that I began drawing on my pottery. Like Professor Hatcher, his work is consistent with his person. The way he combines deliberation and improvisation in his work is a great talent. Professor Davis studied at The Rhode Island School of Design under Norm Schulman who is consequently another potter I greatly admire.

Both Professor Davis's and Professor Hatcher's work in ceramics are inextricable influences on my work. Besides my main instructors, there have been a handful of other artists whose work has had an impact on my aesthetic whether it be from workshops I have attended or otherwise. Those major influences include James R. Pace, Sally Campbell, Mark Shapiro, Jack Troy, Jake Allee, Daniel Marinelli, Norm Schulman, Jean Michael Basquiat, Hank Williams, Bernard Leach, Shoji Hamada, Early American Folk Pottery, ancient Mimbres pottery, and Daniel Smith.

“The influence of Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada, both in their own countries and abroad, is greater than can be measured. Whether today's potters know it or not, Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada almost single-handedly made us what we are today” (The Studio Potter). I believe that Bernard Leach's work is some of the most genuine and honest work ever made. The simple things about his work like a matte white dolomite glaze with simple abstract brushwork on a small bottle form evoke a sense of authenticity. Consistency, commitment, and simplicity are the best words to describe Leach's work. The legends of both Leach and Hamada are a direct result of their practice. They developed as artists through research and repetition, constantly developing their work and refining it with the ultimate goal of creating something beautiful.

Norm Schulman once said “You have a lump of clay, and there's a really good pot in there. It's just a matter of finding it” (Schulman). His artwork has gone through a lot of different phases throughout the course his life, but this quote sums up his basic philosophy. Some of my

goals in clay are similar to Schulman's. He always investigates everything he does and expands on every idea as he carries on. Schulman has tried almost every technique you could imagine in clay. The vastness of possibility in the material has led him to explore each one as a way to express himself.

I find myself somewhere in between these two schools of thought; Schulman's (and Davis's) experimentation and Leach's (and Hatcher's) consistency. Nothing fortifies my soul more than experimenting with a new technique or discovering a new material to use in a glaze. I also have a strong desire to slow down, investigate, and develop my work in a more cerebral, disciplined way. I think I make my best work when I am using both of these approaches. My studies in art have enabled me to transcend genre or medium and research both contemporary and historical trends.

## CHAPTER 7

### TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

"Bring me my bow of burning gold!

Bring me my arrows of desire!

Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!

Bring me my chariot of fire! (William Blake).



***Figure 3: Leather-hard teapots in the studio***

The tools I use are fairly simple and necessary. The techniques I employ are a culmination of instruction and experience in the studio. My work in the studio begins and revolves around clay selection. My clay is roughly 65% Cedar Heights Fireclay, 25% Tennessee #10 Ballclay, and 10% Soda Feldspar. Those measurements are dry materials, when mixing a new batch instead of water I add reclaimed slurry to make the clay more plastic. The clay I like to use is a responsive, general purpose stoneware clay.

I use an old lockerbie pottery kick-wheel to throw my pots. Once the pots are at the leather-hard stage I trim them and begin decorating. I decorate my pots at the leather-hard stage

because I don't like working with bisqueware. I use three slips for decoration - a simple white, black, and orange. I apply the slips by brushing, dipping, or pouring them onto the the pots. These slips provide an effective contrast to the color of my clay body in the final firing. Once the slip equalizes in dryness with my clay body, I paint on a wax resist. Once the wax is dry, I scratch into the wax and slips to create the line drawings. Then I brush a black slip into the line I created. Finally, I sponge off the excess black slip from the wax resist. This gives me a black inlay where I scratched my lines.

Once a batch of work is bone dry, I bisque fire everything to approximately 1650°F, which makes it easier to glaze and handle the work without breaking it for loading. After I unload the electric bisque, I apply a simple liner glaze to the interior of each pot to ensure a completely sealed and food-safe surface. Then the pots are individually wadded and loaded into the glaze kiln for the



**Figure 4: Bone dry pots ready to be bisque-fired**

final firing. This firing reaches temperatures that exceed 2300°F and I spray a solution into the kiln made up of two gallons of water and two pounds of light soda ash. The soda ash and water mixture vaporizes in the kiln creating an atmosphere where the sodium that is being sprayed reacts to silica in the clay. This reaction creates a unique variation on the surface of each piece and simultaneously glazes the exterior of all the forms. The kiln is then slowly cooled and is ready to unload the next day. The

following are the glaze and slip recipes I use:

**Mark's Temmoku**

Custer Feldspar	4500grams
Silica	2700grams
Whiting	1700grams
Kaolin	1100grams
Add: RIO	1000grams

**Penn State Shino**

Nepheline Syenite	1460grams
F-4 Feldspar	3400grams
Spodumene	2900grams
Kaolin	970grams
Ball Clay	490grams
Add: Soda Ash	780grams

**St. John's Black**

Albany Slip	6820grams
Nepheline Syenite	3180grams
Add: Cobalt Carb.	450grams

**6 Tile Slip**

Nepheline Syenite	1500grams
Kaolin (6 Tile)	8500grams
Add: Bentonite	200grams

(Britt).

## CHAPTER 8

### SUMMARY

In the end, I am trying to create objects that serve two things: the eyes and the hands. The creation of handmade pottery is not necessary to my culture. However, the act of making itself exemplifies ideals that are important to me and offers potential for artistic expression. Ideals like the Fruits of the Spirit lead to works that embody the essence of what I am trying to do. My approaches, ideas, techniques, and educational background have come about and filtered their way into every detail of this body of work. There is no formula to what I do just a few ideas and a lot of work. The opportunity to continue in the deep tradition of pottery making is a true blessing.



*Figure 5: Large Searching Native Bowl*

## WORKS CITED

Britt, John. The Complete Guide to High-Fire Glazes. New York: Sterling Publishing Co., 2004

Hatcher, Gary C. "Bernard Leach: Catalyst." *The Studio Potter*. June 1999: Pg. 4-5

Leach, Bernard. A Potter's Book. New York: Transatlantic Arts Inc., 1946

"newfangled." Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary. 2010. <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/newfangled>>

Norm Schulman: A Life In Clay. Asheville: The Asheville Art Museum, 2006.

Peterson, Susan. "Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada: Fifty Years of Memories." *The Studio Potter*. June 1999: Pg. 6-8

VITA

JOHN D. SIMMONS

- Education: Master of Fine Arts, Ceramics  
East Tennessee State University  
Johnson City, Tennessee, 2010
- Bachelor of Fine Arts  
The University of Texas at Tyler  
Tyler, Texas, 2007  
Dean's List
- Exhibitions: "Pour" (group/juried) Terra Incognito Gallery - La Grange, IL, 2010
- "Stimulus: A Graduate Student Exhibition" (group) Reece Museum,  
Johnson City, TN, 2010
- "Canked" (two person) Johnson City Area Arts Council - Johnson City,  
TN, 2010
- "Newfangled" (solo, MFA Thesis), Reece Museum - Johnson City, TN,  
2010
- "Casual Geometry" (solo), Reece Museum - Johnson City, TN, 2010
- "Jersey Shore Clay National" (group/juried) M.T. Burton Gallery – Surf  
City, NJ, 2010
- "Animal" (two person), Tipton Gallery - Johnson City, TN, 2009
- "Seize the Clay" (group) Nelson Fine Art – Johnson City, TN, 2009
- "Functor" (solo) Johnson City Area Arts Council – Johnson City, TN,  
2009
- Honors: Associate Kiln Builder  
Ancient Etruscan Style Kiln Build  
Spannocchia, Italy, 2010
- Studio Assistant, Penland School of Crafts  
Jack Troy Workshop (wood-firing)  
Penland, NC, 2009
- Studio Assistant, Penland School of Crafts  
Posey Bacopolous Workshop (majolica)

Penland, NC, 2009

Studio Assistant, Penland School of Crafts  
James Watkins Workshop (raku)  
Penland, NC, 2009

North Carolina Potter's Conference  
Instructor's Assistant for Phil Rogers, Allegheny Meadows, and  
Mark Pharis  
Guilford, NC, 2009

Steele-Reece Scholarship (full), Penland School of Crafts  
Mark Shapiro Workshop  
Penland, NC, 2008

Teaching: East Tennessee State University  
Instructor of Record  
Course: 2-D Design (Foundations)  
Spring 2010

East Tennessee State University  
Instructor of Record  
Course: 2-D Design (Foundations)  
Fall 2009

East Tennessee State University  
Adjunct Professor  
Course: Special Topics: Intro. To Wood-Firing (Ceramics)  
Summer 2009

East Tennessee State University  
Instructor of Record  
Course: Beginning Throwing (Ceramics)  
Spring 2009