

UNSEEMLY

by

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ABSTRACT

In Victorian England, having the proper goods in one's home indicated one's social status on a scale of vulgar to tasteful. Porcelain ware was an indicator of status and value in elite society, and people with aspirations of upward social mobility collected and displayed these status symbols as a means of elevating themselves socially. Likewise, unrefined stoneware was used to make the rustic utilitarian goods of the working class. This project, consisting of soda-fired functional tableware, takes the material symbol of fine porcelain goods, and rather than holding them up reverently, lets them visually disintegrate, ruining the very qualities Victorians would have most valued in these types of objects. It also elevates rough stoneware by forming it into the shapes usually reserved for fine porcelain. It moves away from conventional Victorian design elements while remaining attractive to the eye, referencing those ideals while simultaneously subverting them. It is a loose metaphor for a person's relationship to strict social expectations and the desire to break free from them. Through references to ceramic history and the Arts and Crafts movement, this work is aware of the preconceived notions that exist around certain ceramic objects and seeks to break them down. In essence, *Unseemly* is a show about belonging and acceptance.

INTRODUCTION

The soda-fired tableware created for this project aims to be politely irreverent and mildly disruptive. It is a way of pointing out that something that does not fit standard ideals can still have value: someone with scars can still be beautiful, someone who is crass and unrefined may in fact still be good and kind, etc. It aims to be beautiful while still being unusual, and perhaps even visually jarring. I have chosen to use wallpaper patterns and porcelain because both are symbols of polite society: What is more refined and socially “perfect”—or snobby—than the wallpaper and porcelain of a Victorian parlor? As a way of turning snobbery on its head, I use its very materials and tools to welcome in the outsider and show the outsider’s worth. If the clay body and wallpaper patterning symbolize taste or value, the unconventional usage of them represent how outsiders can take these trappings and make them their own, rather than having to conform and use them in the usual way in order to gain acceptance. The contrast also speaks to the vague sense of alienation that people experience when they almost, but don’t quite, fit.

I have approached the problem from two ends. The first is the “messing up” of fine, clean, white porcelain, and the second is the elevation, or “fancification,” of rough stoneware. If the porcelain pieces represent refined people breaking free from the bounds of propriety, then the stoneware ones represent people from rougher backgrounds, the classes who get dirty and work with their hands, dressing up in the symbols of the high-class goods, and showing that beauty and value can come from any background. I see the porcelain as society ladies slumming and the stoneware as laborers aspiring to a better life and position.

To get specific, I have chosen William Morris wallpaper designs to be applied to the surface of this tableware because not only was he a tastemaker in his day, but he is still much admired a century and a half later. Victorian home guides provided advice about which wallpaper was tasteful

and which would make the homeowner seem vulgar. As William Morris's work is often considered representative of tasteful Victorian interior design, it seemed a good choice to represent the era. He also has the distinction of being a contradictory character, a revolutionary in his day who tried to subvert the very consumer culture he later came to symbolize. I see what I have done with ceramics in a similar light: I am not denying the beauty or value of traditional porcelain tableware, but I am instead finding non-traditional aspects of it beautiful and valuable.

I have purposely chosen two things, porcelain and Morris wallpaper patterns, that generally were considered "tasteful" (rather than rough stoneware or other materials and patterns that would not have been) in order to give the impression that these pieces are of high society but "fallen" from it (rather than having been a separate thing altogether.) I have chosen to finish and present them in an unseemly way that would not necessarily have been met with Victorian approval, but which is nevertheless appealing, in order to give the impression that social "ruin" is not in fact actual ruin. Soda firing creates beautiful, somewhat uncontrolled results that may smudge the patterns or completely obscure them in places, and yet is also beautiful in its wildness (not to mention being opposite aesthetically to what Victorian ceramic factories aspired to have come out of their kilns.) These pots ask the question, what would happen if Victorian ladies came disheveled to dinner, hair tousled and petticoats askew?

Contemporary context

While I know of no one currently working in soda-fired screen-printed porcelain transfer ware, there are quite a few contemporary studio potters whose work contextualize mine. During my research, I looked to these artists as sources of information and inspiration.

Justin Rothshank's work combining digital decals with atmospheric firing is a source of inspiration to anyone seeking a combination of two seemingly opposite decorative processes. Rothshank delivers work made in a similar visual language to mine—a combination of the wildness of soda atmosphere with the precision of digitally produced graphic decals—and he does so, in his own words, because he believes “artwork and creativity are a catalyst for social change and economic improvement” and “is an inclusive form of communication reaching across class, education, and ethnic boundaries.”¹ While we both show concern for issues of class inequality using similar visual tools, we approach the subject in different ways. Rothshank's work addresses contemporary events in an up-to-the minute fashion: at the time of this writing, Russia's invasion of Ukraine has been underway for about a week, and in that time Justin Rothshank produced and sold out of a batch of mugs decorated with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's image. My work, on the other hand, is commenting on social mores from a century and a half in the past, albeit in a way that I hope translates to the present.

Rothshank's approach is more overt than mine. He uses the images of the social and political figures whose lives and work he would like to promote (and in so doing, he amplifies those figures' messages, rather than creating his own message), gaining an instant reaction from the viewer, while my tactics are more subtle. That instant reaction the viewer has to his work makes it very accessible, and therefore the work does exactly what he says: reaches across social

¹ Justin Rothshank, “About Us,” Rothshank Artworks, accessed April 3, 2022, rothshank.com/pages/shop.

boundaries. My work is more difficult to read than his: it breaks the rules of class distinctions by its shape, materials, and process, rather than by an immediately recognized image of a person. Rothshank seems to want to *communicate to* everyone across social lines, whereas my work *communicates about* crossing those lines.

Another contemporary influence is the work of Mike Stumbras. Stumbras's highly ornate soda-fired porcelain shares several qualities with mine. His precisely detailed and decorated forms are fired in a soda kiln where they trap carbon in the glaze surface and otherwise contrast the chaos of the marks left by the kiln's atmosphere with the carefully constructed elegant forms. About this contrast, Stumbras says, "It is the strong connection I feel to the chaotic and imperfect nature of soda firing and handcraft that, to me, highlights the absurdity of the endeavor of the handmade: the seemingly futile and never-ending quest for perfection and objective meaning."² Like me, Stumbras is choosing to make historically inspired forms and embracing the imperfections of the kiln in creating the surfaces. He further states that while historically the forms would have been slip cast, making them by hand allows him to embrace the imperfections added by the handmaking process. But unlike in my work, to him, these contrasts are not meant to disrupt social norms, but instead to explore ideas of permanence, impermanence, and existential dread. They certainly have a sense of timelessness about them with their modern firing method applied to antique forms.

Next, Forrest Middleton's screen-printed transfer ware captures several of the elements I am aiming for as well: historic pattern that is applied and distorted through the making process. Of his work, Middleton says, "I make work that explores history through the effects global influences have on the craft traditions of various cultures, and I use this as a way to reflect current

² Mike Stumbras, "Artist Statement," MikeStumbras.com, accessed April 3, 2022, www.mikestumbras.com/blog/2018/3/12/artist-statement-1.

global themes.”³ His work directly inspired mine, not only because I learned the screen-printed transfer method from his workshop, but also because he has chosen to take his patterns from historical Middle Eastern designs. While I have instead used William Morris and Victorian England as my historical reference points, the idea of choosing a pattern from a specific culture to use in my work comes directly from Forrest Middleton.

In terms of concept and approach to making, my work comes closer to Middleton’s than to any of the other contemporary artists discussed here. Middleton began his body of a work in response to current events, as a way to bridge the divide of misunderstanding and distrust between America and the Middle East. He uses a visual language that immediately evokes the Middle East, with not only his surface decoration patterns, but also the minaret-shaped knobs and turrets of his taller lidded vessels. He uses that language to communicate his desire for understanding between the two cultures, and as an American maker he sets an example for his viewers as they see him appreciating and studying that other part of the world. In his work, as in mine, the social message is communicated through the cultural origins of the shapes and patterns used.

Another influence is the work of Steven Young Lee. In his artist statement, Lee expresses a passion for historical ceramics, and his work clearly shows the influence. One of his most recognizable forms is clearly derived from Korean storage jars of the Joseon dynasty, with their wide, high shoulders and narrower, reverse-curved bases. Lee decorates these porcelain jars in cobalt and then explodes the side or collapses the pot. About this process he says, “Deconstructing and imploding the forms creates a visceral reaction that defies the human desire for perfection and confronts the perception of value.” In this way, Lee uses the form itself to express his concept, both

³Forrest Lesch-Middleton, “Artist Statement,” FlowerCityArts.org, accessed April 3, 2022, flowercityarts.org/special-events/artist/forrest-lesch-middleton/#:~:text=Artist%20Statement,to%20reflect%20current%20global%20themes.

the historical form and the way the shape changes upon “ruining” that form. The pots bear the markers of fine, high-value goods, while simultaneously showing signs of destruction and therefore devaluation.

Questioning the perceived value of these objects through distorting them allows Lee to address ideas of expectation and place. He writes, “I have experienced being an outsider in the country of my heritage to being one of a minority of Asians in Montana. My work allows me to re-interpret and confront questions of place and belonging.”⁴ As a member of an immigrant family, Lee himself crosses cultural divides, and yet finds himself an outsider on either side of that divide. As such, it makes sense that he would find a traditional Korean form and reinvent it and reinterpret it, so that it is no longer fully that traditional thing, but is not entirely something else either. Lee writes, “It is in this act that I hope to challenge and redefine what is beautiful.”⁵ We can see the pot as representing the artist himself, asking for his Korean-American experience to be seen as equal in beauty and value as the traditional Korean experience.

Lee’s words strike a chord with me, and in reading them, I hear the echoes of my own thoughts as I conceived of my project and struggled to put its concepts into words. In its essence, *Unseemly* is about finding a sense of belonging for the outsider, for the person who does not quite know the cultural rules, the person who could perhaps benefit socially from code switching,⁶ but either chooses not to do so or does not know how. Both Lee and I have taken objects that a culture may hold up as valuable, and then done something to them that would signal a sort of ruin within that cultural context, and we have done so with the desire to create a new kind of beauty outside of traditional bounds. While the

⁴ Steven Young Lee, “Artist’s Statement,” StevenYoungLee.com, accessed April 3, 2022, stevenyounglee.com/about/artist-statement/.

⁵ Lee, “Artist’s Statement.”

⁶ Code switching is the act of adjusting one’s speech, behavior, and appearance in order to put others at ease and receive fair treatment. For example, it is often used by people of color in a predominantly white workplace in order to fit coworkers’ cultural expectations of professional behavior.

language of how we “ruin” things is different—Lee smashes pots while I soda fire them—much of the concept is the same. We each use a vocabulary of historical shape and imagery in order to question and reinvent a sense of cultural belonging.

Each of these contemporary ceramic artists has contributed to my aesthetic and my conceptual growth as I created this project. Rothshank and Stumbras share the soda firing method of production; Middleton and Rothshank each use digitally produced imagery whose preciseness contrasts with other aspects of the work (Middleton stretches his images and distorts them, while Rothshank applies digitally produced decals over atmospherically fired pots); and Stumbras, Middleton, and Lee all reference historical designs but create something entirely new with them in order to cross the boundaries of culture and time. Each creates a body of work entirely his own and instantly recognizable, so any similarities in concept or production method do not blur any lines between their unique bodies of work. My work on this project also has a distinct look all its own, so while these artists have informed, inspired, and contextualized my work, they have not gained a copycat in me.

Further contemporary context: a note about *Filthy Lucre*

Darren Waterston's *Filthy Lucre*, a 2020 revisitation of James McNeill Whistler's *Harmony in Blue and Gold: The Peacock Room*, is a touchstone for the body of work presented in *Unseemly*. While not a work solely in ceramics, *Filthy Lucre* contains hundreds of ceramic vessels. More importantly, it is a work very much about the ostentatious display of those vessels. To summarize: London shipping magnate Frederick Leyland hired Whistler to consult on the color scheme of the shutters and doors in a room being created by a separate architect, Thomas Jeckyll,⁷ for the display of his collection of ceramics. Instead, Whistler surprised the collector and his architect by painting the entire room, creating his famous golden peacocks on top of the expensive leather wall panels. Angry, Leyland refused to pay the bill, resulting in ugliness and friction between the two men.⁸ Tellingly, Leyland nevertheless kept the room intact, despite his anger and refusal to pay for it!⁹

Waterston's reimagining of the space takes the story of its creation into account. His version is sumptuous and beautiful, like the original, but upon a closer look, plays with ideas of decadence and decay, and with the relationship between art and money. The ceramics and the shelving that holds them are bent and broken, and sometimes appear to melt off the wall and down towards the floor. The room contains stalactites of melting art. The artist himself describes the new peacock painting as follows:

The representation of the peacocks is they're dismembering each other. The peacocks are literally ripping out each other's guts, but it's all done in this way that's very sumptuous and still under this decorative realm. I didn't want to just paint something that felt in-your-face grotesque; I wanted it to be still incredibly seductive and beautiful, but then as you sort of settle in, you see that there's all these other forces at play.¹⁰

⁷ Smithsonian Institution, "The Peacock Room," National Museum of Asian Art, accessed April 3, 2022, asia.si.edu/peacock-room/.

⁸ Darren Waterston, "Filthy Lucre," DarrenWaterston.com, accessed April 3, 2022, www.darrenwaterston.com/paintings/filthy-lucre.

⁹ Smithsonian Institution, "The Peacock Room."

¹⁰ Amanda Kolson Hurley, "Inside Darren Waterston's Filthy Lucre," Architect Magazine, December 2, 2015, www.architectmagazine.com/design/inside-darren-waterstons-filthy-lucre_o.

The allure of *Filthy Lucre* for me is that extra layer of information not present in Whistler's original. *Filthy Lucre* is art *about* art. Despite the decay it portrays, it is an attractive creation that draws the viewer into it to examine every rich detail. In portraying the ugly undercurrents to the story of the creation of Whistler's original work, Waterston created something of which Leyland and his Victorian contemporaries most certainly would not have approved. Given his anger over Whistler's presumptuousness in painting the whole room, can we imagine for a moment what his reaction would have been had he come home to find Waterston's version?¹¹

Imagining Leyland's reaction to the modern piece brings me to the reason this installation is a touchstone for my body of work in *Unseemly*. I too filled a room with Victorian-inspired ceramic art, none of which would have inspired actual Victorians very much. While Waterston's piece "raises questions about patronage and the relationships between artists, collectors, and institutions,"¹² mine explores the relationship between collecting and perceived social status. We both explore an ugly side of collecting: Waterston focuses on greed and ruined relationships, and I focus on social climbing and claiming status through ownership of objects. Waterston claims, "The installation hints at parallels between the excesses and inequities of the Gilded Age and the social and economic disparities of our own time."¹³ Those very excesses, the ostentatious collection of ceramic objects to display in the attempt to raise one's social status, are phenomena explored in *Unseemly* as well.

¹¹ Apoplectic, I assume.

¹² Waterston, "Filthy Lucre."

¹³ Waterston, "Filthy Lucre."

Significance of porcelain and transferware in the West and in Victorian England

While most of us raised in twenty-first century Western society have no trouble making the connection between patterned porcelain transferware and bourgeois society, not everyone can explain why we have this mental association. Some, like me, may have grown up in a middle-class house where the dainty floral porcelain teacups, creamers, sugar bowls, and teapots were kept on display behind the glass doors of a china cabinet. These goods, though technically utilitarian, were too good to be used, but were instead only to be admired. My mother's china cabinet contains quite a few dainty teacups (none of which match any of the others), and while she insists that the cups that she has collected piecemeal from various relatives' gifts or inheritance (never from a matching set in those ancestors' houses either) were in the past brought out by their owners to serve tea to guests, I have never in my lifetime seen my mother use a single one of these treasures.

As a maker of utilitarian ceramics, I am fascinated by this cultural phenomenon. Why treat useful, everyday domestic objects solely as fine art for display? Why let domestic goods take up so much three-dimensional space in the house if those goods will never be used, and then double the amount of space needed for dinnerware by having a second, cheaper, everyday set? Particularly as a child being warned away from touching such precious goods, I have learned the lesson that these things are not for the likes of me. I imagine many other such middle-class children growing up in similar houses to mine learning the same lesson. As adults, we realize that our parents either didn't consider themselves worthy of using their own porcelain teacups—as those cups remain locked behind glass, unused—or it never occurred to our parents *to* use such things in the first place, as that is not what they are *for* in our segment of society. Our parents had enough expendable income to buy display items and enough extra space to keep such things in a prominent position, but their treatment of these items elevated the objects' status beyond the everyday. They, too, had

somehow learned that these were high-value, high-status objects that needed to be treated as such. The point was to have them, and for visitors to see that you had them. Using them was not the point.

Where, then, does the idea of collecting and displaying fine china come from? Much of porcelain's status in the West can be directly traced to the tea trade with China. From the time tea was introduced to Britain in 1658 to when the Commutation Act of 1784 removed the exorbitant tax on tea and made it affordable to the general public, tea was a luxury good only consumed by the wealthy. Part of its appeal to the lower classes was its association with the trappings of wealth, and part of its appeal to the upper classes was the way in which it allowed them to show off their wealth by buying the associated trappings of fine Chinese porcelain, which, since it was heavy and could survive being soaked in sea water, was used as ballast for trade ships and came to Europe along with the tea. The cost of tea in England in 1658 was astoundingly high at £26 per pound, compared to the typical income of a lawyer of £20 per year.¹⁴ Having a fine tea set from China was another way to show off one's wealth. As lower and middle-class people began drinking tea a century later, they imitated the bourgeois habits of buying the associated fine china, or the English imitations the Staffordshire potteries were rushing to produce. Since the rich began the practice of collecting porcelain, anyone with aspirations of becoming upwardly mobile in society might try doing the same, buying what pieces they could afford. "Tea drinking provided an opportunity for people to show off their wealth and taste with glamorous imported porcelain."¹⁵

When William Pitt's Commutation Act of 1784 removed the exorbitantly high tea tax (of Boston Tea Party fame) and replaced it with a flat 12.5% tax, tea sales skyrocketed and spread

¹⁴ Jane Pettigrew, *A Social History of Tea*, 1st ed. (United Kingdom: The National Trust, 2001), 17.

¹⁵ Robin Emmerson, *British Teapots & Tea Drinking* (London: HMSO, 1992), 2.

consumption to all walks of life. In the ten years before the act, Twinings tea company¹⁶ averaged sales of six million pounds per year, whereas the first year after the act they sold over sixteen million pounds of tea. In ten years, tea imports to Britain nearly tripled.¹⁷ In 1791, the East India Company stopped importing Chinese porcelain due to 50% duties on the products, and this made an opening in the British market for English potters to fill.¹⁸ By the mid-nineteenth century, the height of the Victorian era, tea was drunk by nearly everyone in England, and the Staffordshire potteries had advanced their technology enough to competently imitate the styles of the previously imported Chinese porcelain. With the invention of newer, finer, printing technology around 1800 and the lack of regulation on child labor until 1832, the early nineteenth-century market was flooded with fine English China. By the time of Victoria's reign, the market had settled down a bit, and regulations such as design copyrights allowed factories to specialize in their own signature wares.¹⁹ Notably, the "flow blue" style of slightly blurry cobalt patterns was quite popular with American buyers. In Britain, however, it was considered inferior quality, and thus the "rejected or out-of-fashion items and patterns were exported."²⁰ One can't help but wonder what that meant the English thought about the American purchasers' taste!

The fact that the blurrier "flow blue" patterns were considered by Victorian English consumers to be inferior to the more precisely printed and glazed designs leads me to believe that those consumers would also have looked down upon the printed transfers I put into the soda kiln, allowing the atmosphere of the firing to scar, fade, and mar them. The finely and precisely

¹⁶ Twinings is a major English tea company, in operation from the eighteenth century to today.

¹⁷ Emmerson, *British Teapots & Tea Drinking*, 10–11.

¹⁸ Emmerson, *British Teapots & Tea Drinking*, 17–18.

¹⁹ Gillian Neale, *Encyclopedia of British Transfer-Printed Pottery Patterns 1790–1930* (London: Miller's, 2005), 16–17.

²⁰ Neale, *Encyclopedia of British Transfer-Printed Pottery*, 174.

transferred wares purchased by the rising English middle class in the nineteenth century was not for the likes of me or the American market (much like the untouchable porcelain in my mother's china cabinet), but the blurry "flow blue" or my own work may suit us just fine in America!

Even to this day, Victorian transferware holds a special place on the collectors' market, indicating its value in our culture even across the centuries. Collectors' guides about British transferware abound. Leafing through one of these tomes, it becomes immensely evident just how popular these goods were and are. A market existed to justify not only the original production of so many different variations on a theme, but also the writing of guidebooks to help identify, purchase, and collect these objects more than a century after they were made. It is because of their enduring popularity and familiar aesthetic that I chose to reference Victorian transfer-printed production ware in my body of work.

I am certainly not imitating this work—it is clear to any viewer that my work is not factory produced slip cast chinoiserie—but I am giving it a nod. It deserves recognition as a driving force behind the concept of my show. I am far more interested in the social phenomena behind the production and collection of these goods than in the actual items themselves, and I don't own a single ceramic object of that style. However, if we revisit my mother's china cabinet, we are reminded of the reverence with which middle-class people have treated these objects, and it's clear to see that they make an excellent touchstone for a discussion of social class and the definition (or redefinition) of what makes a tasteful, high-value object.

Significance of William Morris and wallpaper patterns

In late nineteenth century England, William Morris was a tastemaker, perhaps in spite of himself. Victorian home guides provided advice about which wallpaper was tasteful and which would make the homeowner seem vulgar, and Morris's designs were regularly approved. He has the distinction of being a contradictory character, a revolutionary in his day who tried to subvert the very consumer culture he later came to symbolize.

Mrs. Haweis's *The Art of Housekeeping* made only one wallpaper recommendation, and that was to buy from William Morris. The purchase of his work separated the upper middle class from lower middle class or tradespeople, in that it seems to have cost a bit more and was approved by such luminaries as Henry Cole (founding director of the Victoria and Albert Museum), Mrs. Haweis, and Mrs. Panton (another author of tasteful household guides who often recommended Morris papers).

Though the much-lauded designer himself was not fond of the physical segregation of neighborhoods by economic class, lamenting the lack of "common people" in an outlying suburb of London,²¹ his opinions certainly did not stop our lady authors of household guides from recommending his designs as part of their mission to signify social status. Morris himself could be seen as a contradiction in many ways: not only did his products serve to help cement class status in the eyes of many, but he came from a well-off family whose wealth came from arsenic mines not known to have particularly healthy working conditions.²² While he was known to be an ardent socialist whose own design workshop embraced arts-and-crafts-movement ideals of hand-making

²¹ Judith Flanders, *Inside the Victorian Home: A Portrait of Domestic Life in Victorian England* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 24.

²² Lucinda Hawksley, *Bitten by Witch Fever: Wallpaper and Arsenic in the Victorian Home* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2016), 59–61.

and respect for the conditions of each worker, he was probably in a position to open this business because of the health abuses in his family's mines.

While this oversight, or hypocrisy, does not entirely negate the socialist and arts-and-crafts values of his block-printing workshop, it does show Morris as a part of the society in which he lived. Even as ardent a socialist as William Morris was not free from the tsunami of consumer capitalism that washed over England in the Victorian age. So strong was the wave of production and associated advertising and mass consumption, that Morris was swept into it, perhaps in spite of himself. He wanted to fight against mass production by making hand-printed goods, but those goods themselves were so popular that they became widespread in the consumer market. He did not support the social separation of socio-economic classes of people, yet purveyors of snobbery like Mrs. Panton repeatedly recommended his goods as ways of cementing one's social class and good taste.

As the father of the Arts and Crafts Movement, William Morris can be given significant credit for the existence of the field of studio pottery today. If not for Morris's work promoting the value of traditionally handmade quality goods over factory-made mass-produced goods, handmade ceramics may well have completely lost value in Western society. As this body of work references "good taste" in material objects, while simultaneously subverting the snobbery of bourgeois taste by adding an element of the low brow, it speaks to Morris's egalitarian ideals, as well as to his contributions to the field of handmade craft.

Significance of bricks

In 2015, I visited Stoke-upon-Trent, what is known in England as The Potteries, and the center of English Victorian ceramic production in Staffordshire. Touring historic Middleport Pottery, the building where Burleigh Pottery is produced, I watched as modern-day workers created transferware using largely the same tools and procedures as had been used in the Victorian era. The most striking change that had happened since the factory's origin was replacing the bottle kilns with much more efficient and less polluting train kilns. In its heyday, Stoke had many hundreds of coal-fired bottle kilns, choking the air with smoke and soot, so much so that it was often said in that "It's a fine day if you can see the other side of the road."²³

Today, while not in use, quite a few of those bottle kilns remain standing. In the mid-twentieth century, the Clean Air Act put an end to their use,²⁴ but nearly 50 kilns are said to still be standing in the area. It's objectively a good thing that the bottle kilns were retired: the area had a very high rate of death for diseases of the lungs,²⁵ an apt reminder that the production of the coveted dishware came at a high human cost. In order for middle class and upwardly mobile households to be able to buy and display fashionable dishes to impress friends with their good taste, the people of Stoke breathed foul air every day, and the workers in the factories faced even more harrowing conditions. When a factory owner required ware to be finished quickly, men were reported to enter the kilns while it was still red-hot inside, wearing five overcoats to protect them

²³ The Potteries, "How the Bottle Kiln Works," ThePotteries.org, accessed April 3, 2022, www.thepotteries.org/bottle_kiln/bottle_kiln_two.htm#:~:text=It%20is%20a%20round%20structure,and%20contrac%20during%20the%20firing.

²⁴ The Potteries, "Last Firing of a Bottle Kiln in Stoke-on-Trent," ThePotteries.org, accessed April 3, 2022, www.thepotteries.org/potworks_wk/080.htm.

²⁵ The Potteries, "Last Firing of a Bottle Kiln in Stoke-on-Trent."

from the heat, and carry out the saggars filled with pots using the layers of fabric as protection.²⁶ The different classes of Victorian society had entirely separate experiences with these ceramics.

The firing process itself was designed to hide the ugliness involved in creating the work. The defunct bottle kiln I visited at Middleport had displayed near it stacks of saggars, lidded boxes made of refractory material that were used to protect the ware from the soot of the kiln. During each firing, whether bisque or glost,²⁷ the ware was placed inside these protective cases, which were then stacked up to fill the center chamber of the kiln. Every single piece was kept isolated from the atmosphere of the kiln, protected from ever showing the marks of its origin. The mistress of a fine home in far-off London would never see a mark on her prized china that would remind her of the heat and chokingly thick air that its makers had to face as part of daily life.

If a brick represents a worker, then the bricks I have made for this project represent the factory workers who made the pottery. Bottle kilns were themselves made of bricks, and just like the workers who made the kilns, and the workers who then used the kilns to make Victorian china, they were unseen by most of the people who would show off their products for their own social ambitions. While the Victorians would have found the mixing of the classes unseemly and would not dream of bringing fine ladies together with factory workers in the same social gathering, *Unseemly* embraces the idea of mixing classes. The bricks can dress up in fine William Morris wallpaper patterns and be a beautiful addition to an afternoon tea table. The marks left by the atmosphere of the soda kiln make no attempt to hide the process that created them. These bricks can be proud of their working-class origins, and by embracing the atmosphere of the kiln instead of avoiding it, and by wearing that atmosphere to a fancy party where the table is set in fine

²⁶ The Potteries, “How the Bottle Kiln Works.”

²⁷ *Glost firing* is a very English way of saying *glaze firing*.

porcelain, they show us that their origins are worthy and beautiful, not something to be hidden away from society.

History of soda firing

Gail Nichols, noted soda-firing expert, writes, “As a newcomer in ceramic history, soda glaze is unencumbered by tradition except for that of its cousin, salt glaze.”²⁸ She notes that while its aesthetic is most likely influenced by that of salt firing, soda-fired work does not have to look like salt-fired. It has the potential for much brighter colors, softer edges, and gentler dimpling where the orange peel effect is concerned. When Nichols began her research into soda firing in 1989, she had no guidance in the new technique. Unable to find teachers or books, and finding very few articles on the subject, she was unencumbered by traditions or expectations and was able to cut her own path.

The history of soda firing, such as it is, began in the 1970s when environmental concerns led potters to try an alternative to the chloride-releasing traditional salt-firing technique. Soda carbonates, such as soda ash or baking soda, introduced into a hot kiln react to create sodium oxide vapor, which is an active flux that creates bright colors in glazes. Contacting bare clay, in the absence of added glazes, the soda produces a simple glaze of soda, alumina, and silica. While Egyptian paste was a form of soda glaze created over 7000 years ago, today’s soda firing looks a good deal different from the self-glazing wares of the ancients.

The traditional salt glazing from which soda glazing emerges began in 12th century Germany and remained popular through the twentieth century. Traditional salt-fired ware took on a grayish tinge, had orange-peel texture effects, and was often decorated with cobalt designs. Soda-firing aesthetics have developed rapidly since the 1970’s, first through the work of pioneers like Gail Nichols, and now fairly popular with contemporary ceramicists whose work in the soda kiln

²⁸ Gail Nichols, *Soda, Clay and Fire* (Westerville, Ohio: The American Ceramic Society, 2006), 118.

spans a wide variety of styles. To compare the uses of the technique, let's look at a few images, beginning with traditional salt-fired pottery and moving to contemporary soda-fired ceramics:



Figure 1: Flagon, Westerwald, Germany late 18th century, Salt-glazed stoneware and pewter, 7.5,"

New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Public domain image, accessed March 9, 2022.

www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/194584.



Figure 2: Tara Wilson, soda-fired bowl, 9"x 8"x 4."

Image ©2022 The Rosenfield Collection, accessed March 9, 2022. www.rosenfieldcollection.com/b725/.



Figure 3: Brenda Lichman, soda-fired porcelain teapot, 8"x 6"x 7."

Image ©2022 The Rosenfield Collection, accessed March 9, 2022. www.rosenfieldcollection.com/t68/.



Figure 4: Mike Stumbras, soda-fired porcelain mug with gold luster, 5"x3"x5."

Image ©2022 The Rosenfield Collection, accessed March 9, 2022. www.rosenfieldcollection.com/c1175/.

While each work shown in figures 1 through 4 shows the directional, and sometimes erratic, effects of the kiln's atmosphere on the surface of ceramic vessels, we can see that the use of these effects varies in several ways, depending on the artist's own techniques and aesthetics. While Brenda Lichman and Tara Wilson seem to embrace the appeal of directional flame through using loose, organic forms, Mike Stumbras uses classic, precisely etched forms and allows the flames to add a contrasting element to the precision of his hands. These contemporary works do not much resemble the traditional 18th century salt-fired flagon! Even though soda-firing is a relatively new technique in ceramics, the aesthetics it produces are as varied as the artists producing the work. Some, like Stumbras, reference traditional forms while firing those forms in this contemporary fashion. Others, like Lichman, create new aesthetics for their forms, creating shapes that take advantage of the firing method by catching the atmosphere on surface textures as the flame makes its way around the kiln.

Many more makers embrace the wood-fired aesthetic, creating robust forms to survive the stress of the kiln and rough surfaces to catch the ash and atmosphere. That is a practical approach for many, because often soda-fired work comes from a back chamber of a wood-fired kiln into which is thrown a bit of soda, and the potters can make one kind of work that would be appropriate to load into either chamber. It certainly saves a lot of fuss to approach making work in such a way, however, doing so is adding the visual layer of soda onto wood-fired pots, rather than treating the soda kiln as an entirely different beast.

Creating an entirely new aesthetic for the soda kiln allows the artist to take full advantage of a relatively new technology, free from centuries of tradition. The question of what a soda-fired pot is supposed to look like is still up in the air, allowing room for artists like Stumbras (or me) to reinterpret old forms with new surfaces, or for artists like Lichman to take advantage of how the kiln atmosphere works by creating forms specifically designed to catch it. Thus, because of its newness as a method and its yet uncreated traditions, soda firing is very well suited to a body of work like *Unseemly* that seeks to break traditions and redefine what is seen as beautiful.

MATERIALS, METHODS, and RESULTS

In order to achieve the technical and aesthetic goals of this body of work, I fired Hood College's cross draft, propane-fueled soda kiln a total of 12 times. The work produced for the show came out of firings 6 through 12, with the bulk of it fired in the last 4 firings. By firing the kiln so many times before producing the work for the gallery, I was able to test and troubleshoot firing technique, clay bodies, slips, and glazes.

Technically, I sought to accomplish the following goals:

- 1) Identify one or two recipes for printed patterns that successfully appeared faded/aged on a soda-fired porcelain and stoneware surfaces without completely disappearing.
- 2) Identify coordinating glazes to cover the non-printed sections of work.
- 3) Select one stoneware clay body to provide the desired contrast in surface texture with Standard 257 porcelain (the porcelain I had already decided to use), while still allowing printed surface to show effectively.
- 4) Determine how to best achieve carbon trapping and orange-peel effects.
- 5) Solve the problems of warping for forms such as trays and bricks that have a large, flat surface area.

Testing screen-printed flashing slip transfer patterns in the soda kiln

The Morris wallpaper patterns in this project were transferred to the clay from paper that had been screen printed with various materials. I tested seven recipes for screening mediums, first on test tiles, and then those with potential on whole pieces. The recipes tested were Hawthorne flashing slip, Gail Nichols flashing slip, Johnson flashing slip, Standard 182 slip, Lou Roess Blue Green glaze, Brenda Lichman's butter slip, and AMACO black Velvet Underglaze mixed with Standard 257 porcelain slip. The recipes are included below.

Hawthorne flashing slip:

nepheline syenite	20
Hawthorne Bond fireclay	80

Gail Nichols flashing slip:

grolleg kaolin	80
silica	10
nepheline syenite	10
bentonite	3

Johnson flashing slip:

nepheline syenite	56.77
grolleg kaolin	35.26
Newman red clay	7.97

Lou Roess Blue Green glaze:

gerstley borate	22
strontium carbonate	4
whiting	11
custer feldspar	38
silica	25
cobalt carbonate	0.5
chrome oxide	1
bentonite	2

Brenda Lichman Titanium Butter slip:

borax	4.63
Ferro frit 3124	9.26
nepheline syenite	24.07
EPK	15.74
OM4 ball clay	23.15
silica	23.15
titanium dioxide	9.26
bentonite	1.85

Two recipes were not listed above because they were essentially commercial products. I made Standard 182 clay body into a slip for one of the tests, and the black slip made from AMACO underglaze was simply plain underglaze with enough porcelain slip mixed into it to thicken it to a screening consistency. Each screening medium was prepared by adding enough water to the dry ingredients until it reached the consistency of heavy cream. Wallpaper paste was then added to the mix at a proportion of 1 part paste to 4 parts slip. The paste does two things: first, it acts as a flocculant, thickening the mixture up to a mayonnaise-like consistency (which is appropriate for screen printing); and second, it allows the powdered minerals that make up the slip and glaze materials to adhere to the paper and not crumble off when dry.

Once prepared, each medium was screened onto 24lb tabloid size printer paper. The dry papers were sprayed with water, placed face down onto the clay, and rubbed with a red rubber rib to transfer the materials to the clay. Multiple tests were made of each recipe in order to see if the results would vary with the atmosphere in different sections of the kiln. They were fired using a heavy body reduction and a moderate to heavy load of soda ash.

	on Standard 257	like the color?	continue using for project?
Hawthorne flashing slip	shows up, very dark	no	no
Gail Nichols flashing slip	flashes orange or stays white	yes, but not enough shows up in soda	no
Johnson flashing slip	bright orange, vanishes in soda	too bright	no
Standard 182 slip	flashes orange or stays white	yes, but not enough shows up in soda	no
Lou Roess Blue Green glaze	greens and blues, does not disappear in soda, but sometimes is obscured where soda is heavy, porcelain flashes orange between glazed pattern, so gets atmospheric effect	yes	yes
Brenda Lichman Butter slip	nice yellow, doesn't show up where soda is heavy	yes	yes
Black underglaze mixed with Standard 257 slip	black	yes	yes

Table 1: printed slip test fire results.

Testing glazes and coordinating glazes with prints

I used three glazes in this project: Rutile blue 1, Coleman Celadon, and Kuttel's Crystalline Caramel. I tested Rutile Blue 1 on Standard 257 porcelain and on Highwater Craggy Crunch to determine its viability as a glaze for this project. I tested the Caramel and the Celadon on just Standard 257 because they are both transparent glazes whose colors I expected to be lost on a dark stoneware body, and I therefore only considered them for use on porcelain where their colors would show. The recipes are included below:

Rutile Blue 1:

silica	31.6
Custer feldspar	28.9
whiting	20.6
EPK	18.9
rutile	7

Coleman celadon:

silica	23
Custer feldspar	43
Whiting	13
EPK	9
barium carbonate	9
talc	3
bentonite	2
yellow ochre	2.3

Kuttel's Crystalline Caramel:

silica	15.6
nepheline syenite	46.9
whiting	15.6
EPK	6.3
barium carbonate	10.4
gerstley borate	5.2
titanium dioxide	5
tin oxide	1

After initial findings with the recipes for the printed patterns, I tested two glazes in combination with the printed patterns: Coleman Celadon and Kuttel's Crystalline Caramel. Coleman Celadon's pale green is of a similar and coordinating color with the pattern printed in Roess Blue Green (RBG) glaze, so I tried the celadon on the same pots as the RBG glaze. Brenda

Lichman's Titanium Butter slip is nearly an exact match in color to Kuttel's Crystalline Caramel glaze, so I used the two of those together as well.

These initial hunches resulted in pots that did not achieve the desired effect. I needed a fairly heavy soda load for running and dripping effects, and that amount of soda was too much for the printed patterns made in the above recipes. The RGB blurred so much that the pattern was sometimes indecipherable (*Figure 5*), and the soda seemed to cause the blue and green colorants to separate from each other (*Figure 6*)—interesting, but not what I wanted (*Figure 7*).



Figure 5: printed RGB glaze pattern completely obscured by soda.



Figure 6: printed RGB glaze separating into blue and green.



Figure 7: printed RGB with Coleman celadon, pattern disappearing and colors separating.

The prints made with Lichman Butter slip mostly disappeared under the soda, leaving only about 10% of the original pattern intact. However, if these kinds of pieces were put in the back part of the kiln (where they would not be hit with as much soda), the glaze went matte with crystals (*Figure 8*). I wanted the Crystalline Caramel glaze to be glossy and runny with crystals showing

up as accents, an effect that required exposure to more soda. Despite their matching color, the Lichman Butter and Crystalline Caramel did not seem to be working out as a combination (*Figure 9*).

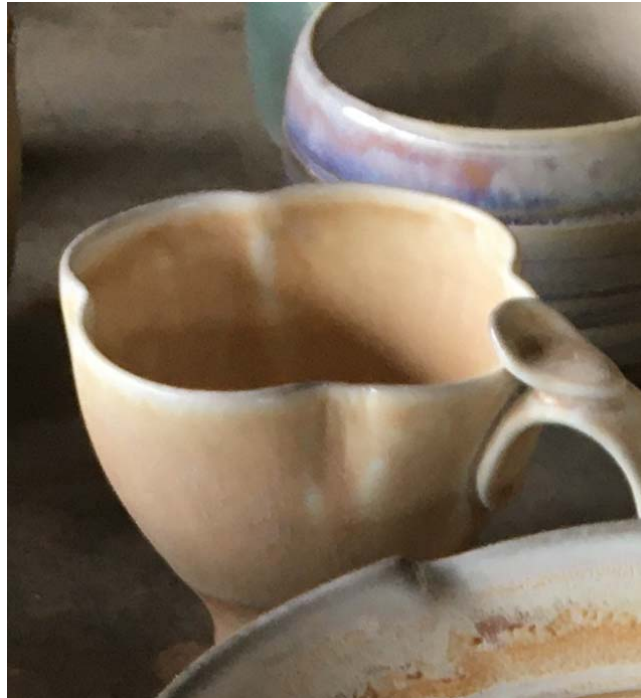


Figure 8: teacup with Kuttel's Crystalline Caramel, matte from less soda melt.



Figure 9: butter print on middle section obscured by soda, glossy Caramel glaze from more contact with soda.

I had tested flashing slips in the printing medium because I wanted my patterns to fade in and out with the atmosphere of the kiln, but I was losing too much of the pattern in the process. Needing a pattern that would not be affected by the soda, but would still flash, I tested bricks printed in the black underglaze and porcelain medium, and then sprayed with a thin coat of Butter slip. The pattern showed through the slip, and the Butter slip took on colors from orange to gray to blue. It had the desired effect, showing the atmosphere, but not obscuring the pattern (*Figure 10*).



Figure 10: brick with black underglaze pattern and butter slip sprayed over.

When the black underglaze proved itself viable under the Butter slip, I then moved to testing that same slip combination in patterns applied to multi-part vases and other pieces, testing the slips alone on unglazed clay, as well as in combination with Kuttel's Crystalline Caramel glaze, the glaze I determined to be the most visually complimentary to the flashing effects on the printed pattern.

While many of the test bricks of every glaze and slip went into the gallery show, the vessels with printed patterns in *Unseemly* were made of the black printed pattern with Butter slip sprayed on top of it. The porcelain vessels used Kuttel's Crystalline Caramel on the unprinted segments of clay, while the printed stoneware vessels were left unglazed.

Clay body selection

Prior to beginning the research for this project, I had already determined that Standard 257 porcelain performs well in the soda kiln, showing minimal warping and bright orange flashing. I had worked with it extensively and liked its workability on the wheel, so the decision was already made to keep using this porcelain clay body. However, this project required a contrasting stoneware clay body. I slab built several bricks out of Laguna B-Mix, but the texture of those bricks was too close to the porcelain to provide a contrast. I then tested Highwater Craggy Crunch, a stoneware body with an extremely gritty texture, with Rutile Blue 1 glaze and with the printed slips.

The Craggy Crunch turned a shiny dark textured brown when left bare in the soda kiln (*Figure 11*), but the clay body itself had such a dark color that most of the printed transfers, other than RBG and black, did not show up on it. The color combination with RBG was unattractive, but the black both showed up and looked good. When sprayed with a layer of Butter slip, the black still showed through, but the overall color lightened to a yellow-orange (*Figure 12*).



Figure 11: Craggy Crunch soda-fired bare.



Figure 12: Craggy Crunch soda fired with Butter slip sprayed over it.

Craggy Crunch had a strange relationship with the rutile glaze, blistering on nearly every piece, whether that piece was matte and slightly underfired at cone 9, or a glossy cone 10 or cone

11. This could have resulted in a search for a different clay body, one that didn't blister with my glaze. However, I liked the way the clay looked bare, enjoyed its working qualities, and found its texture and color the exact sort of contrast with the porcelain that I was seeking. I determined to keep it and to aim my research towards finding ways to make it work for me.

Blisters in a glaze are usually considered a flaw, but since the concept of the show involves upturning conceptions of taste quality, I looked for a way to make the blisters a feature rather than a bug. In the case of small blisters, refiring the work to cone 10 in an electric kiln melted them away, but refiring made the large blisters larger. I applied gold luster to the rims of several of the Craggy Crunch pieces and filled in the blisters with luster, emphasizing them (*Figure 13*).



Figure 13: Craggy Crunch teacup with rutile glaze and luster (both on rim and in blister).

While lustering blisters worked for the concept of the show, it was not something I would choose to pursue further. Therefore, the golden blisters appear on work made in firings 6–8, and the Craggy Crunch work in later firings is left unglazed.

Soda effects: carbon trapping and orange peel

Firings 1–6 were used to troubleshoot the soda kiln’s carbon trapping effects by varying the body reduction through start temperature and oxygen control. Firings 1 and 2 began when cone 012 was down, had the dampers open 2” and 1” respectively, and showed very little carbon trapping. Firings 3–6 began body reduction when cone 012 was soft, had the dampers open 0.75”, closed down the air feed on the burners more than firings 1–2, and had extensive carbon trapping. The hazier flames of firings 3–6 indicated greater reduction, as did the amount of carbon trapped in the surface of the pots. Because I was satisfied with the level of carbon trapping in firings 3–6, I made no further adjustments to my body reduction process and continued firing the same way for firings 7–12 (*Table 2*).

	temperature at start of body reduction	damper during body reduction	amount of carbon trapping
Firing 1: 8/2020	1361°F or cone 012 tip down	2”	very little
Firing 2: 9/2020	1362°F or cone 012 tip down	1”	very little
Firing 3: 10/2020	1260°F or cone 012 starting to melt	0.75”	extensive
Firing 4: 11/2020	1309°F or cone 012 starting to melt	0.75”	extensive
Firing 5: 2/2021	1261°F or cone 012 starting to melt in back pack, cone 011 down in front pack	0.75”	significant
Firing 6: 3/2021	1277°F or cone 012 starting to melt	0.75”	extensive

Table 2: carbon trapping and body reduction.

These same firings 1–6 were also used to troubleshoot the soda kiln’s orange peel texture effect. The first four firings showed very little orange peel, while the next two showed a significant amount. The deciding factor appears to be adding the soda to the kiln later in the cycle. A solution of 3.25 pounds of soda ash in water was sprayed into each firing: the amount did not vary, and significantly different effects were achieved by varying the timing rather than the amount of soda ash. After beginning spraying when the front of the kiln reached cone 9 and achieving little in the way of orange peel, in firing 5 I waited until the front of the kiln was at cone 10 before spraying.

This put my final spray closer in time to when the kiln would reach its final temperature. I also took care to stretch out the charges so that the last batch of soda was added only when I knew the kiln was very close to its final temperature.

Both firing 2 and firing 5 ended 50 minutes after the last soda spray, yet the former showed very little orange-peel texture, and the latter showed a lot of it. The determining factor seems to be not simply the amount of time between the last charge and the kiln shutdown but getting most of the soda ash into the kiln closer to shutdown. The difference between firings 2 and 5 was not the time between the last spray and shutdown, but rather the time remaining between the first spray and shutdown. In firing 2 it was 3 hours and 20 minutes, while in firing 5 it was 2 hours and 20 minutes. That hour made a significant difference in the results (*Table 3*).

	first soda spray temperature	first soda spray time	last soda spray time	amount of orange peel
Firing 1: 8/2020	cone 9 in front, cone 6 in back	3h50m before shutdown	95 minutes before shutdown	minimal
Firing 2: 9/2020	cone 9 in front, cone 6 in back	3h20m before shutdown	50 minutes before shutdown	minimal
Firing 3: 10/2020	cone 9 in front, cone 6 just tipping in back	2h55min before shutdown	70 minutes before shutdown	minimal
Firing 4: 11/2020	cone 9 in front, cone 6 still strong in back	4h25min before shutdown	130 minutes before shutdown	minimal
Firing 5: 2/2021	cone 10 in front, cone 6 in back	2h20min before shutdown	50 minutes before shutdown	significant
Firing 6: 3/2021	cone 10 moving in front, cone 6 in back	2h30min before shutdown	30 minutes before shutdown	significant

Table 3: orange peel and final shutdown timing.

Since I had determined a later start to spraying soda ash and a 30 to 50-minute gap between the last spray and shutdown gave me the texture effect I was looking for, I continued this pattern for firings 7–12, beginning spraying around cone 10 and ending around 40 minutes before I would shut off the kiln.

Eliminating warping

The turbulent conditions of the soda kiln and the low kaolin content of porcelain combine into a world of trouble in attempting to soda-fire porcelain forms, especially forms intended to be flat. The first several attempts at creating tall multi-part vases out of porcelain resulted in saggy handles and warped feet where the hot porcelain was not strong enough to support its own weight at the highest temperatures of the firing. The pedestal vases sank into the wadding that supported them in the kiln, leaving indentations in the foot where the wads had been and where the porcelain had sunk down around the wads. The elaborate handles sank beneath their own weight as well.

To prevent such warping, the later batches of the 18" + tall vases had new handles, ones that attached to the body of the form in three or more places rather than just at the top or the bottom. This approach solved the problem of sinking handles. To prevent sinking at the foot, I approached the problem from multiple angles: thicker feet, feet fired separately and epoxied later, and wadding in coils along the entire bottom of the foot rather than in three separate places. The separate pedestal feet solved a space problem in the kiln, creating more options for arranging the stack, and they allowed for a mix-and-match approach to assembling the vases as well.

The cake stands were also fired in two pieces. The pedestal bases were unproblematic, but the plate part of the stands required some troubleshooting. Because I had had trouble in the past with porcelain plates warping in the soda kiln, I approached the cake stands carefully. Thankfully, by the time I began the cake stands, I had already decided to fire them in two pieces and to throw them thick. I used what I had learned about sagging from the tall vases, and I wadded the plate stands in a coil around the entire rim as well as a large wad to support the middle of the flat section. If you look carefully, you can see some very slight bowing in the flat surfaces of the cake stands, but for the most part they remained flat.

The first slab-built bricks warped slightly in the kiln, so I then slip cast them instead. The slip cast bricks tended to warp, sinking into themselves. However, I discovered that if I positioned them with their narrower edge up, there was less of a flat expanse that could sink, and the larger sides stayed straight if they were placed vertically.

DISCUSSION

I intended my conceptual goals to be illustrated by surface treatment, choice of forms, and mode of display. The technical aspects of finding the surface treatments I would use are described above. As for forms, the goal was to choose forms that resembled the shapes of ceramic objects the Victorians would collect as status symbols. Some aspects of the forms would belie the perceived value or refinement of prized porcelain. Thus, I created brick-like bases to the elaborate, multi-part vases, and actual bricks to go along with the delicate tea sets, the form of the lowly brick belying the status of the elaborately handled, curvy vase or teapot. Displaying the bricks together with the other forms allowed the teapot to be more than just a teapot and the bricks to be more than just bricks.

For the non-brick forms, I chose a fleur-de-lis shape, a high pedestal foot, and curved multi-part handles as the uniting features between the pieces. Each of those things were prominent in Victorian collectible ceramics, though the exact forms are mine and not replicated from past styles. The types of objects made with these features were in most cases representative of a high-status social activity, from the collecting of fancy vases showing one's wealth and taste, to the serving of high tea to impress one's guests with a fine tea set and decorative cake stand.

The finishing of the porcelain objects in runny, carbon-trapped glazes gives the visual effect of formal, elegant society falling to ruin. Making these objects from gritty stoneware gives the visual effect of working-class society climbing the social ladder. Putting all of them together, the porcelain, the stoneware, and the decorated bricks, allows the classes not only to mingle in the same space, but to wear each other's clothes.

For the gallery show, I wanted to display the objects mixing together and wearing each other's clothes, as it were, and to give a sense of historical and social context for that mixing. Each

end of the gallery had a quotation on the wall. On one end, we had Mrs. Haweis' advice to gentry about avoiding tradespeople:

*A word about tradespeople whom it is well to avoid...These people should not be expected to supply gentry, they have neither the assortment nor the manners; they are apt to make mistakes in ignorance, and then resent inquiries that tax their time.*²⁹

And on the other side advice to tradespeople about avoiding the gentry from Charles William Day:

*Shopkeepers and retailers of various goods will do well to remember that people are respectable in their own sphere only, and when they attempt to step out of it they cease to be so...therefore, do not attempt to claim the acquaintance of those above you, lest you meet a mortifying repulse.*³⁰

Putting these two quotations on opposite ends of the gallery made it clear that *nobody* was doing what they were supposed to do when the classes mixed. Both the gentry and the tradespeople were advised against it. One might make the mistake of thinking there is no harm in such rules, and that keeping people amongst their peers simply makes everyone more comfortable. One might take Charles William Day's quotation at face value, an argument of separate but equal social respectability. But tellingly, he advises tradespeople not to reach above their station to avoid meeting "a mortifying repulse." Not only does he use the language of high and low stations (rather than lateral ones of equal value), giving away his feelings on the matter, but he also claims that the tradespeople would be rejected by the gentry, and not vice versa. This implies that the gentry's position is one to be sought, and the aspiring tradespeople have reason to desire it.

²⁹ Mary Eliza Haweis, *The Art of Housekeeping: A Bridal Garland* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1889), 152, accessed November 22, 2020, archive.org/details/b28114887/page/n5/mode/2up.

³⁰ Charles William Day, *Hints on Etiquette: a Shield Against the Vulgar* (London: Pushkin Press, 2016), 60.

Similarly, Mrs. Haweis' advice to the gentry about tradespeople does not suggest the reverse of Mr. Day's, that the gentry should protect their own feelings by avoiding rejection from the tradespeople! No, she criticizes the tradespeople's manners and intelligence and tells us how annoying they would be for the gentry to employ (never mind about socializing with them!) These two quotations set the mood in the gallery: mixing of classes is not seemly, but the rules themselves are not kind to those of lower means. Something unseemly is going on as the ceramic pieces intentionally break the rules written on the walls, and that unseemliness is what breaks the snobbery of these rules. Here, unseemliness is a good thing.

Around the gallery, mixing in with the pieces of ceramics, are small cards held up by coils of rusty wire. The neat place cards with their small caps Garamond text have the look of a proper Victorian society event, belied by the rusty, somewhat messy coils of wire: decorum and vulgarity coupled together. On the cards are phrases lifted from two Victorian etiquette books, Mr. Day's *Hints on Etiquette: a Shield Against the Vulgar* and Harper's *The Bazar Book of Decorum*. The phrases were chosen to illustrate dramatic snobbery or seemingly arbitrary silly rules in order to get the viewer thinking. Does the viewer think it is shockingly taboo to ask twice for soup? Or does he wonder and laugh at the things the Victorians got so worked up about? If he sees my tea set labeled as "the characteristic of folly" (*Figure 14*) and thinks the label does not fit the teapot, which looks pretty, not foolish, he realizes one culture's rules and assumptions are not the objective truth. He looks at his assumptions and starts asking if other people really share them.



Figure 14: The characteristic of folly.

If the Victorians could be strange and wrong, what do we do in our modern lives that would be considered strange and wrong by people from a different background? It is easier for us to recognize absurdities from the outside of other cultures than it is from within our own. And it is especially hard to recognize when there are differences that exist not between entire cultures, but between subcultures, as between the different social classes or even different families.

In its essence, *Unseemly* is a show about belonging and acceptance. Beneath all the trappings of historical references and relevance is the motivation behind the body of work: to find the visual language to express the desire for a society which values and includes the outsider or the underdog. The stratified society of Victorian England, represented by the domestic goods of the time, is a symbol of rigid social rules easily recognized by modern eyes. The Victorians are a lens through which we can view ourselves. If they were absolutely convinced of their rules of taste and etiquette, what rules of propriety do we insist upon in our daily lives that will one day seem absurd to those looking back at us? Do the things we think give us status truly do so? Which social

rules must we follow, and which ones is it okay to break? Does a brick belong on the table at high tea? Can society ladies mingle socially with tradespeople without falling into ruin?

In *Unseemly*, through making the work and placing it in the gallery, I proposed that bricks belong on pedestals, delicate teacups belong on half-built brick walls, and the types of people represented by the materials and forms, from bricks to vases, from gritty stoneware to smooth porcelain, can and should mix in any way they please.

The question of who, precisely, the work represents can be answered differently by each viewer, according to his or her own perspective. The Victorian era is a convenient lens through which to look at the idea of exclusion and snobbery because none of us alive today can claim that culture as our own. While I do have some opinions on what would have made Victorian society a better and more welcoming place to all people, criticizing a historical era is not immediately relevant to modern life. However, our distance from the referenced time period allows us to make connections to our own lives.

There is an analogy here for anyone looking for it: immigrants, racial or religious minorities, LGBTQ folks, or any number of other people not immediately a member of a recognizable group who have experienced snobbery and exclusion nonetheless. Unfortunately, most of us can find a touchstone in this work if we look for it. The very fact that we can relate our own very different experiences all back to the same body of work indicates an underlying desire across all social boundaries to be accepted by others for who and what we are.

It's a lot of meaning to pile onto pottery. Functional ceramic vessels are often relegated to the world of craft, rather than art, and not necessarily packed with meaning. In referencing both ceramic history and the Arts and Crafts movement, *Unseemly* is a body of functional ceramic work that is aware of the prejudices that exist about pottery and seeks to break them down. The Arts and

Crafts movement sought to elevate both the artisan and the goods he made. As a maker, I am not particularly interested in the old and tired debate over whether pottery is art or craft. The need to pick a category implies ranking, art over craft, like gentry over tradespeople. I see no need to pick a category at all: bricks, generally not considered art and barely even considered craft, can be highly decorative, hollow, and functionless, displayed in a gallery right alongside a porcelain vase. Boundaries broken.

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APPENDIX A
Items Created for Gallery Show



Item 1: Porcelain pedestal bowl.



Item 2: Porcelain pedestal soup bowl 1.



Item 3: Porcelain pedestal soup bowl 2.



Item 4: Porcelain pedestal soup bowl 3.



Item 5: Porcelain pedestal soup bowl 4.



Item 6: Porcelain pedestal soup bowl 5.



Item 7: Porcelain pedestal soup bowl 6.



Item 8: Stoneware pedestal soup bowl 1.



Item 9: Stoneware pedestal soup bowl 2.



Item 10: Stoneware pedestal soup bowl 3.



Item 11: Stoneware pedestal soup bowl 4.



Item 12: Stoneware pedestal soup bowl 5.



Item 13: Stoneware pedestal soup bowl 6.



Item 14: Large pedestal stoneware serving bowl.



Item 15: Medium pedestal stoneware serving bowl.



Item 16: Brick 1.



Item 17: Brick 2.



Item 18: Brick 3.



Item 19: Brick 4.



Item 20: Brick 5.



Item 21: Brick 6.



Item 22: Brick 7.



Item 23: Brick 8.



Item 24: Brick 9.



Item 25: Brick 10.



Item 26: Brick 11.



Item 27: Brick 12.



Item 28: Brick 13.



Item 29: Brick 14.



Item 30: Brick 15.



Item 31: Brick 16.



Item 32: Brick 17.



Item 33: Pedestal with brick 1.



Item 34: Pedestal with brick 2.



Item 35: Brick pile



Item 36: Wall brick 1.



Item 37: Wall brick 2.



Item 38: Wall brick 3.



Item 39: Wall brick 4.



Item 40: Wall brick 5.



Item 41: Wall brick 6



Item 42: Wall brick 7.



Item 43: Wall brick 8.



Item 44: Wall brick 9.



Item 45: Wall brick 10.



Item 46: Wall brick 11.



Item 47: Wall brick 12.



Item 48: Wall brick 13.



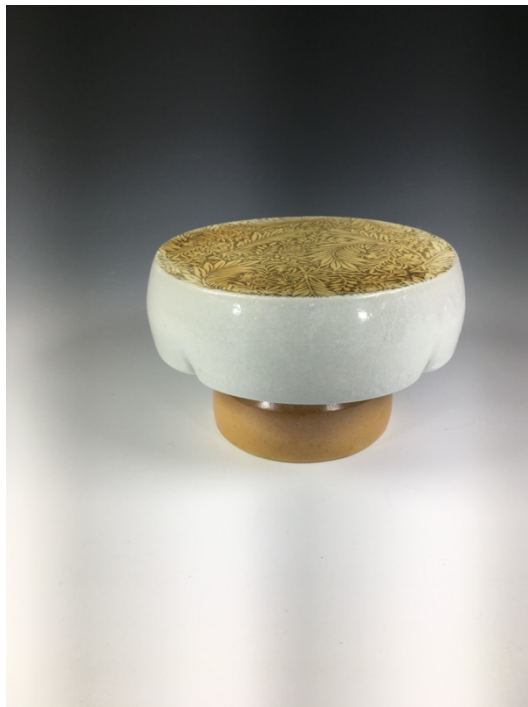
Item 49: Wall brick 14.



Item 50: Wall brick 15.



Item 51: Wall brick 16.



Item 52: Porcelain cake stand 1.



Item 53: Porcelain cake stand 2.



Item 54: Porcelain cake stand 3.



Item 55: Stoneware cake stand 1.



Item 56: Stoneware cake stand 2.



Item 57: Stoneware cake stands 1 and 2 with framed Morris patterned fabric.



Item 58: Porcelain creamer 1.



Item 59: Porcelain creamer 2.



Item 60: Porcelain creamer 3.



Item 61: Stoneware creamer 1.



Item 62: Stoneware creamer 2.



Item 63: Stoneware creamer 3.



Item 64: Porcelain sugar bowl 1.



Item 65: Porcelain sugar bowl 2.



Item 66: Stoneware sugar bowl 1.



Item 67: Stoneware sugar bowl 2.



Item 68: Porcelain finger bowl 1.



Item 69: Porcelain finger bowl 2.



Item 70: Porcelain handled vase 1.



Item 71: Porcelain handled vase 2.



Item 72: Stoneware handled vase.



Item 73: Stoneware pedestal tray.



Item 74: Porcelain pedestal vase 1.



Item 75: Porcelain pedestal vase 2.



Item 76: Porcelain pedestal vase 3.



Item 77: Porcelain pedestal vase 4.



Item 78: Stoneware pedestal vase 1.



Item 79: Stoneware pedestal vase 2.



Item 80: Stoneware pedestal vase 3.



Item 81: Stoneware pedestal vase 4.



Item 82: Stoneware pedestal vase 5.



Item 83: Stoneware pedestal vase 6.



Item 84: Porcelain teacup and saucer on brick.



Item 85: Amber porcelain teacup and saucer 2.



Item 86: Amber porcelain teacup and saucer 3.



Item 87: Amber porcelain teacup and saucer 4.



Item 88: Amber porcelain teacup and saucer 5.



Item 89: Amber porcelain teacup and saucer 6 with stand.



Item 90: Amber porcelain teacup and saucer 7 with stand.



Item 91: Amber porcelain teacup and saucer 8 with stand.



Item 92: Amber porcelain teacup and saucer 9 with stand.



Item 93: Amber porcelain teacup and saucer 10 with stand.



Item 94: Celadon porcelain teacup and saucer 1.



Item 95: Celadon porcelain teacup and saucer 2.



Item 96: Celadon porcelain teacup and saucer 3.



Item 97: Celadon porcelain teacup and saucer 4.



Item 98: Celadon porcelain teacup and saucer 5.



Item 99: Celadon porcelain teacup 6.



Item 100: Celadon porcelain teacup 7.



Item 101: Celadon porcelain teacup 8.



Item 102: Stoneware teacup and saucer 1.



Item 103: Stoneware teacups 1 & 2 with saucers.



Item 104: Stoneware teacup 2 with saucer.



Item 105: Stoneware teacup 3 with saucer.



Item 106: Stoneware teacups 3 & 4 with saucers.



Item 107: Stoneware teacup 4 with saucer.



Item 108: Stoneware teacup 5 with saucer.



Item 109: Stoneware teacup 6 with saucer.



Item 110: Stoneware teacups with unglazed exteriors..



Item 111: Stoneware teacup 8 on brick.



Item 112: Stoneware teacup arrangement with brick.



Item 113: Celadon porcelain teapot.



Item 114: Amber porcelain teapot.



Item 115: Stoneware teapot 1.



Item 116: Stoneware teapot 2.



Item 117: Stoneware teapot 3.



Item 118: Stoneware teapot 4.



Item 119: Porcelain lidded tureen.



Item 120: Stoneware lidded tureen.