

Sets in Situations

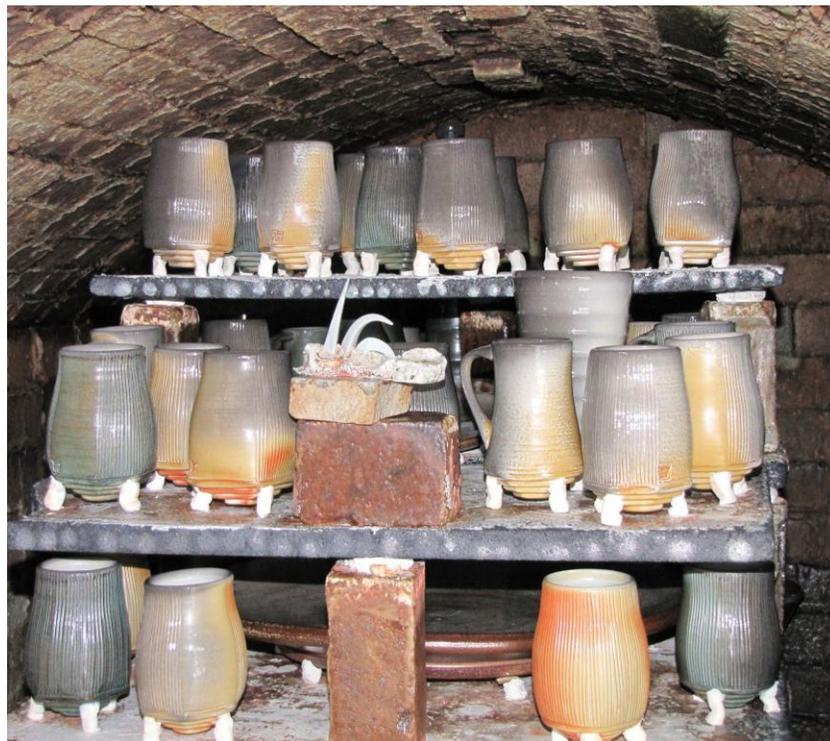
A Supporting Paper
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University of Minnesota

By Terry Hildebrand

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Master of Fine Arts Degree in Art

2014

Sets in Situations is a body of work of playful drinking vessels that explores relational ceramics. This paper will describe the various drinking vessels I create and their carefully considered design. My ceramic cups are formed with tapered bottoms fitted into CNC routed wooden trays that become playful objects which influence the way people move in a social situation. The underlying idea for this body of work is based on research about relational aesthetics described by French philosopher Nicolas Bourriaud, supported by several examples of ceramic artists' work that explores similar concepts. Aside from influencing a social situation, my work invites the user of a drinking vessel to slow down and consciously experience the drink with all senses. Through careful design and skilled craftsmanship my work manipulates the movement, the behaviour, and the conversation of the people that use the trays and vessels. I make ceramic work out of



(Fig. 1 Terry Hildebrand. Cups in a Kiln. 2014)

porcelain, with a focus on drinking vessels. fire the pieces in a soda or a wood kiln to give them a delicate flashing of reds, oranges, blues and greens. The earthy tones reflect the earthen qualities of the clay. I present my work in groupings, mostly on wooden trays, inspired by game boards and puzzles. Like playing pieces, the cups fit into specific places on the tray and encourage the users to interact with each other. I let the wood and the clay, both natural materials that I have formed and cut, interact with each other and the user. Together they become one harmonious piece.

Good craftsmanship, ergonomics, and visual balance are important in my work. Craftsmanship and skillful manipulation of the materials I use are a necessity for me to create an object of high quality. Howard Risatti, author of the book *Theory of Craft*, supports the view that “this special relationship between craft objects, the hand, and body also has implications for function. To be functional, a pot or a pitcher must be of impermeable material so it can contain, and it must be convenient, suitable, appropriate, proper, fitting, etc.” (111). There lies beauty in a well-made piece that is both technically well crafted and aesthetically well shaped. The forms I work with change slowly over the years. I take shapes of drinking vessels I enjoy, alter them slightly, and improve them over time. Sometimes I create the vessels by imagining a social situation, and the user or drink will come to mind afterwards, which are then translated into the tray. Other times I envision a tray and an overall composition first based on a piece of wood I find. The kind of beverage, the situation and the potential users come to mind later.

I carefully choose the materials I work with. I throw mostly with porcelain, which is a clean and white, translucent and finicky clay body. I take this delicate material and fire it in rough and rugged atmospheric kilns. The rigors porcelain undergoes in a sixty hour

wood-firing at over 2400 degrees Fahrenheit are a lot more strenuous than almost any other kind of firing process. Flames whip around in a vortex pushing wood-ash against the pieces, where the ash melts and forms a glaze. The visual effects are organic and somewhat unpredictable. Sometimes the melting ash drips down the side of the vessel creating thick streaks of glaze. Usually the side of the piece turned towards the wood chamber will be glazed and shiny, while the side that is turned away flashes in a matte, but bright colour. I enjoy the contrast created by the tightly controlled thrown piece with the organic and unpredictable results of the glaze. This combination of control and unpredictability in the making of the clay object mirrors the social situations that arise when one of my sets is in use. Chance and randomness are pushed in a direction to influence a somewhat controlled situation.

I use wood for my trays. Wood and ceramic both enhance each other with their warm tones and their natural feel. They are both organic materials shaped and manipulated by my hands or by a machine. The softness of the wood in the tray complements my ceramic work, creating hard and soft layers. Each material lends its characteristics to my sets to form a unified whole. The clay offers its malleability to provide the form; the wood offers warmth and softness to the sound when a vessel is placed on the tray, unlike the sound of ceramic against ceramic that clinks or creates a shattering sound. I carefully select, mill, dry and work the wood such as oak, red cedar, maple, ash, walnut, and pine grown locally in Minnesota. The different types of wood each have their own colour that I combine thoughtfully with complementing colours in the ceramic pieces. For some colour compositions I aim for light and dark contrasts, in others I try to find tones that enhance each other. The light yellow tone of the ash I used

in the long, narrow, horizontal piece contrasts with the green, blue, and grey water tumblers it holds. The deep red of the red cedar I combine with other warm tones in the ceramic such as oranges and yellows. The dark brown of the walnut sets off the lighter coloured porcelain cups.



(Fig. 2 Terry Hildebrand. *Wine Set on Red Cedar*. 2014)

Clay and wood are natural raw materials that have millennia old traditions of manipulation. While working very traditionally with the clay, I use the newest technology in the design and the cutting of the wooden trays. It is a challenge to cut the wood to fit

the unique shapes of the shaped bottoms of the ceramic pieces, since the porcelain shrinks in the kiln. First, I create a wooden press mould for the bottom of the clay vessels which I attach carefully by hand after the piece is thrown. I use CAD (Computer Aided Design) software to design the three-dimensional shapes. To cut the tray later, I take the original shape and shrink the pattern at the same shrinkage rate as the clay I use (approximately 15%). I then use the CNC (Computer Numerical Control) router to cut a perfectly fitting place for the ceramic vessel into the wooden tray.

My sets are built to influence the way people move in a situation. I shape the cups, teapots, and bottles, with rounded or pointed bottoms that do not allow the user to place them on a flat surface. Instead, they have to be returned to their place on the wooden tray, be it on a table, mounted on the wall, or free standing. One set, for example, will have four cups and a teapot; the teapot has a stepped square base that ends in a point allowing it to fit in the corresponding hole in the tray. Likewise, each of the cups has a unique shape that fits only in one designated spot. I think extensively about the places in which all the pieces go: will these positions bring the users closer together or farther apart? The size of the cup also influences how many times the user must go back to the tray for a refill. Someone with a large cup may walk away and not come back for a while, but since the inability to place the cup down on a flat surface tethers the user to the tray, she eventually must return the cup to the corresponding hole in the tray. Some cups that are part of vertical wall pieces must be drained completely before being returned to their holding place. In some situations I offer the user of a cup more freedom by providing a portable wooden coaster that can be removed from the set. At the end of its use, the coaster must be returned to complete the set once more.

As the creator of the pieces I become a puppeteer who influences the movement and social interactions of the users. “The goal of most relational aesthetics art is to create a social circumstance; the viewer's experience of the constructed social environment becomes the art. The task of the artist is to become a conduit for this social experience” (Chayka 1). An example of this kind of relational aesthetic is Rirkrit Tiravanija's exhibition in New York in which he cooks

“Thai food for visitors within the gallery. The food is the art (...): it is not what you see that is important, but what takes place between people. (...) The communal experience of cooking and eating the food becomes the object on display, under the direction of the artist, who acts as a sort of experience 'curator', or maybe 'ringmaster' would be a better term.” (1)

The experiences I try to create differ from Tiravanija's in that the art is not solely relational, but also physical and aesthetic. The art object, namely the wood and the ceramic pieces, are the primary art form; they are central in their materiality and beauty to form part of a situation and a social experience. The social situation they create is part of the intent of the piece, but ultimately secondary. Therefore, while my work leans on the concept of relational aesthetics, I am more than the creator of a situation. I am the creator of art objects that influence a situation.

Despite the careful assembling of a set for a situation, free will, chance, and randomness also play a part in how the work is used. In his book *Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud writes that “a work may operate like a relational device containing a certain degree of randomness, or a machine provoking and managing individual and group encounters” (30), which supports my idea of influencing social situations through

my sets of drinking vessels. The tea set is no longer merely a tray with cups and a pot, but it becomes the instrument or the machine that influences social interaction. Different people respond uniquely to each set, assuring that no two encounters unfold in the same way.

I do not make sets simply to play with people and control social situations, but also to provide vessels for the needed liquids. I always have a container with water, coffee, juice, or tea within reach. Most of our body is water, and we all must replenish those liquids multiple times a day. Beverages are one of my passions. I create my ceramic vessels depending on the kinds of liquids they are to hold. Water cups can be washed and rinsed with little scrubbing. I therefore create tall and slender shapes that are more difficult to clean, making water cups a different aesthetic to most other drinking vessels. The tall and slender shape fits the hand easily; it resembles a deep well that the user can look into and see the dark and cool bottom. Because of their slender profile, many water cups fit on one tray and serve to hydrate a larger group of people.



(Fig. 3 Terry Hildebrand. *Water Tumblers on Wood Tray*. 2014)

My coffee cups are generally small with a well designed handle. Coffee should never be cold or become tepid. Small, repeated servings are the solution to the problem of cold coffee. I design my cups in a slightly tapered shape, starting with a wider base and narrowing towards the top to retain the heat of the liquid. For me, to get the full coffee experience I need to be sitting or in a relaxing position. I make the handles small, since the weight of the little cup is light. Depending on the user, fitting one, two, or three fingers through the handle is the most comfortable hold for this hot beverage. The coffee press should only hold one or two servings of coffee; more than this and the coffee becomes bitter and lukewarm quickly. I like to compare the ideal situation to drink coffee to a game of solitaire or rummy with two players. The users are within reach of the

coffee press and sit across from one another. Small cups are used that are set near the edge of the table so the aromas can be enjoyed while the freshly poured coffee cools to optimum drinking temperature. The cup can be removed from its holding place in the tray, but it must be returned to its place since it does not stand alone with its uniquely shaped bottom. The design of the cup and its tray does not only take into consideration the beverage it is to hold and its temperature, but also the situation in which both cup and tray might be used in.



(Fig. 4 Terry Hildebrand. Coffee Cups onTray. 2014)

Similar to coffee cups, the tea cup needs to be small enough to keep the liquid hot before the tea becomes bitter and lukewarm. Letting the tea brew for too long brings out the bitter tannins. I make small teapots for one or two servings so the hot water does not sit on the leaves too long and over-infuses the tea. Though tea sets will often have a tray and/or saucer to catch dripping, it is great when the teapot pours without dribbling all over the table and strains the leaves out.



(Fig. 5 Terry Hildebrand. Tea Set onTray. 2014)

Tea has a long tradition in both China and Japan, manifested in ceremonies that require people to become involved. The Gongfu tea ceremony, in which tiny cups and a small beautifully crafted teapot on a tray are used to serve a fine tea, has greatly influenced my work. The tea is served with multiple infusions to get the unique subtleties

from the first infusion to the seventh. The users sit around the tray and wait for the tea master to finish the infusion, to pour the liquid, to pass the drink and then to repeat the process. The participants are stationary, intently focused on the experience of the moment. The Japanese tea ceremony also requires the participants to consider not only the tea, but the vessels that are used, the room in which it is being served, the objects within the room, the situation set up by the host. My tea sets create different situations, such as tea for two, tea for four, etc. Each set has a motive behind the making which influences the users. On a set with four cups placed in the corners of the tray with uniquely shaped bottoms, for example, the user can only place the cup down in his or her own spot; the teapot set in the middle of the tray within reach of all allows users to be informal in pouring a cup, but does not allow the user to leave the tray for too long without placing the cup back into its designated spot. In a more formal set, the teapot's placement is near the host's position on the tray with a cup for him/her and a second for the partaker. The server can control the infusions and the amount of tea given.

I also create sets for alcoholic beverages. Whiskey is a social drink best to be shared in a small group of three to five people. A great scotch should be enjoyed in good company. Like the setting for the card game hearts, to perfectly enjoy the scotch is to sit comfortably around a small table. The setting allows for communication about the nuances of the taste. Large crowds ruin this experience. I control this situation by having sets that limit the number of users. Small cups are a good way to limit the consumption and they give the drink and the situation a sense of rarity, occasion, and speciality. Whiskey is not an everyday dram, but a treat that one looks forward to. My sets for whiskey encourage conversation through the placement of the cups, the size of the

cups, and the number of bottles on the tray. The smaller the glass, the more bottles on the tray for a tasting. Naturally the conversations are going to be about nuances of the flavours, the process of the making of the whiskey, and the price of the bottle. For the purpose of my whiskey sets, the whiskey needs to be decanted into a ceramic serving bottle. The smokey and peaty scents and flavours of a good Islay Scotch work well with the earthy cups.



(Fig. 6 Terry Hildebrand. *Whiskey Set on Pine Tray*. 2014)



(Fig. 7 Terry Hildebrand. Beer Mugs on Ash wall piece. 2014)

Beer has changed its early purpose of grain preservation as liquid bread and is now enjoyed like a fine wine. Unlike wine, however, beer has a lower alcohol content and it is safer to consume in larger quantities. As a result, the cups are bigger. The beer cups that I make either have the traditional shape of the beer stein, or a rounder shape like a brandy glass. The stein is large enough to fit 700ml bottles and the rounder shapes fit a 350ml bottle. Drinking beer needs one or more companions; it is a social lubricant and encourages conversation. Sets for beer have many variations; the type of beer is the deciding factor in the shape of the glasses. A smaller cup is for stronger beers like triples and barley wines, a tall and skinny cup for the wheat beers. Cups

arranged in a circle or placed along a linear tray change how the drink and the people all relate to each other. A circular formation encourages a group conversation, whereas a linear arrangement is intended for picking up the cups and mingling in a standing party situation. Five small cups on a pentagon tray with spaces for a variety of bottles is an example for tasting craft beer. The purpose in the arrangement is to have small quantities with a quick turnover to the next drink. While assembling my trays, I am aware that “what drives purpose in craft is as important to an understanding of craft as is applied function. Together they illuminate the larger significance of craft as an expression of human culture” (Risatti 55).

Aside from being passionate about beverages, I integrate other activities I enjoy into the decorations of my pieces. As an avid bike commuter in any weather, I see a lot of tread-marks in dust, dirt, mud, snow, and grass. When I bike through a water puddle, my tires create dark, wet tracks.



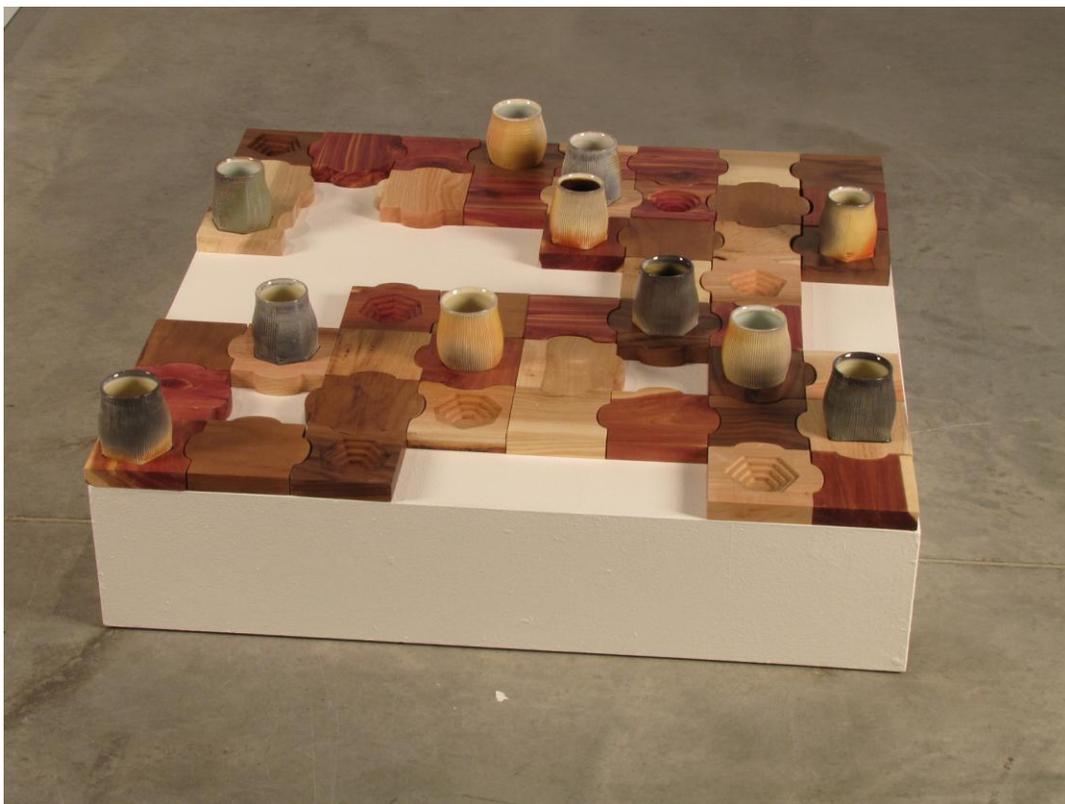
(Fig. 8 Terry Hildebrand. Tea Set with Bike Tire Pattern. 2014)

Some bike tracks in sand are clear embossings of the tire tread; others are lines in the grass, or streaks along the pavement. These patterns inspire part of my aesthetic choices of the exterior surfaces of my pots. Sometimes I use a part of a bike tire directly to create a pleasant pattern on the surface. Other times I make linear marks as inlay patterns or as a rough surface by using a trimming tool. Calgary based ceramic artist Katrina Chaytor writes very fittingly that “beauty and 'delighting the eye', which is decoration’s primary role, is achieved when the icons are repeated, layered, patterned, overlapped and imbued with coloured glazes on the surfaces” of pottery (3). Chaytor's choices of pattern are based on computer iconography, small forms and shapes she comes across every day, similar to my choice of using patterns that I see daily while commuting to the studio on my bike.



(Fig. 9 Katrina Chaytor. *Group of Green and Blue Mugs*. 2013)

Games greatly inspire my sets of drinking vessels to influence social situations. Rules, chance, and enjoyment are elements I incorporate into my works. For Bourriaud, “artistic activity is a game” rather than an “immutable essence” (11). Games come in many shapes and sizes. Usually there is logic in the patterns and positioning of the playing surface, the placement of the pieces, and the position of the players. While some games, such as chess, have clearly defined international rules, my rules are not universal. A chess table, for example, needs to be a specific size; the pieces need to be a specific colour and height. One reason for placements, specific shapes and sizes is to align the players in the optimum place to view and understand the game, another reason is comfort. I use the way games subtly position people in a space in my work. Pieces



(Fig. 10 Terry Hildebrand. Cups on Puzzle Pieces. 2014)

fit only in certain spots and the position of the tray is set. These elements invite the players to enjoy the pieces in a specific manner, perhaps by inviting the players to position themselves in a certain place and to move in a space, or to direct a conversation towards the game, the cups, or their contents.

Canadian ceramic artist Paul Mathieu similarly plays games within his work. He “designs sets of dishes that, when assembled in a certain way, produce a three-dimensional image” (Gogarty 55). In his series *Stacked Dishes*, the set titled “La Mise en Abime” from 1988, is one such visual puzzle. The set’s base consists of a large plate painted with a melon and a cucumber. Once other dishes are correctly assembled and stacked on top of the plate, the painting changes; the melon gets cut when a bowl is placed on the plate; when a saucer is laid next to the bowl, the cucumber gets cut in half.



(Fig. 11 & 12 Paul Mathieu. *Stacked Dishes*, Stage 1 & 7. 1988)

Another example of relational aesthetics in ceramic art is the work of Alberta artist Robin Lambert, who installed a show called “Service: Dinner for Strangers” in 2009 where three potlucks are enjoyed by seven different strangers. Participants bring their favourite meals, which are served on dishes commissioned by various artists. At the end, the strangers leave with the pottery. Creativity is required from each of the participants to make the food, to talk with strangers and to create the situation. “In relational art, the artist is no longer at the center. [He is] no longer the sole creator, the master or even celebrity. The artist, instead, is the catalyst. [He] kick-starts a question, frames a point of consideration, or highlights an everyday moment. And then, [he] waits” (Author unknown. “Happy to Meet You: An Introduction to Relational Art”). With my work I intend to initiate encounters and conversations between people. While the piece itself remains the same, it can trigger many different responses.



(Fig. 13 Robin Lambert. *Service: Dinner for Strangers*. 2009)

The combination of games and ceramics is not a recent idea, but goes back to the 17th century with the puzzle jug and the fuddling cups. The puzzle jug is a pitcher that does not pour normally because of holes in the neck. The solution to the device lies in a straw that is cleverly built into the piece one needs to find to drink from. The fuddling cups consist of multiple cups joined together making it difficult to drink without spilling the contents. The cups can be drained one after the other if the correct starting point is found. My pieces are not game-like when it comes to drinking, but in the placement of the vessels. The game is not intended to make the user of the vessel spill the content and laugh. The user simply needs to put the vessel back where he picked it up, or try to find another spot that has a similar pattern on the base, which creates a subtle social choreography. My goal is to encourage interaction between people at social gatherings, as well as the reflection on the placement of a vessel and the conscious consideration of the piece itself.



(Fig. 14 & 15 Puzzle Jug and Fuddling Cups)

Design can control the movement of people. In architecture, for example, buildings and landscapes are designed to change the flow of a crowd, to draw people in, to focus attention on details of a space. Both physical and psychological spaces are made to influence the movement and what is going on in certain spaces. Similarly, I create objects that either persuade or at least suggest the manner in which the objects are to be used. The most obvious way I subject the user of my drinking vessels to this control lies in the manner the pieces need to be placed and in the design of the cups for each specific beverage, which determines the beverage it will hold. Other ways of control are the number of ceramics on the tray, the size of the vessels and the shape of the tray.

Through my work all senses are stimulated. When the users are intrigued or feel pleasure through my work, I believe it is successful. A big part of the experience is in using unique items, such as my trays and cups, that are not only functional but are also a pleasure for the senses and engage the mind. Similarly, I believe vessels and trays need to be well designed for the entire experience to be enjoyed. The visual sense takes in the forms, shapes, and compositions of clay and wood. The tactile sense feels the temperature of the liquid through the vessel, as well as the surface textures and patterns. The sense of smell picks up the scents of the beverages such as steaming coffee and perhaps the more subtle scent of the wood such as the aromatic cedar. A soft thudding sound is created when putting a ceramic cup back on its wooden tray. Through the sense of taste the user obviously experiences the flavours of the beverage. With my work I wish for people to slow down, become aware of details and let the

senses enjoy.

To experience the full concept of my work it needs to be used and create a social situation. Therefore, ideally my sets of drinking vessels will be used in people's homes, in the comfort of their dining or living room, as a central standing piece at a party, on a conference table, or an office wall. While not an ideal room, the gallery gives my work its initial audience, which it needs to be viewed as a valuable object. Unlike Amy Gogarty, I do not “resist exhibition on plinths in the 'white cube' of the gallery” (54). While in a gallery setting my works cannot be used, visitors can look at the pieces and imagine how they could be used, touch them and understand how they work. The gallery is where the first engagement happens between my work and the viewers or users, and then moves on to more intimate settings, where the work invites the viewer and user to enjoy the subtleties of playful social interaction while engaging all five senses in the ritual of drinking.

The main purpose of my utilitarian ceramic work is undeniably its function. The ritual of its use becomes a central experience. I create playful sets that entice the users to interact with each other, the tray, and the drinking vessels. The sharing of food, drink, fellowship, and play lie at the heart of our existence and the conscious ritual and enjoyment of these are greatly enhanced by the experience of the visual and tactile senses that the ceramic wares address. My trays play with social relationships, such as an intimate placement of two cups, more formal or quite playful settings inspired by puzzles, seesaws, and games that require following certain rules to keep them balanced or usable. I hope that my work serves also as an analogy for social interactions and choices that consumers make. The user has to be careful and considerate with the

placement of a cup, an opposition to the mass-produced, disposable plastic and paper cups. It brings back the conscious action of drinking and using a vessel. The bike tire pattern might remind the user of the choices he or she has with the kind of marks we leave on the earth. My work creates a critical distance to the consumerist way of life in the user by requiring conscious considerations of the patterns, the forms and the placements of individual pieces.

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List of Images

Fig. 1 Terry Hildebrand. *Cups in Kiln*. 2014.

Fig. 2 Terry Hildebrand. Wine Set on Red Cedar. 2014.

Fig. 3 Terry Hildebrand. Water Tumblers Ash. 2014.

Fig. 4 Terry Hildebrand. Coffee Cups. 2014.

Fig. 5 Terry Hildebrand. Tea Set. 2014

Fig. 6 Terry Hildebrand. Whiskey Set. 2014.

Fig. 7 Terry Hildebrand. Beer Mugs. 2014

Fig. 8 Terry Hildebrand. *Tea Set with Bike Tire Pattern*. 2014.

Fig. 9 Katrina Chaytor. *Group of Green and Blue Mugs*. 2013. April 7, 2014.
<http://www.katrinachaytor.com/Cups-and-Mugs.html>

Fig. 10 Terry Hildebrand. *Cups on Puzzle Pieces*. 2014.

Fig. 11 Paul Mathieu. "La Mise en Abime." *Stacked Dishes*, Stage 1. 1988. April 7, 2014.
<http://paulmathieu.ca/>

Fig. 12 Paul Mathieu. "La Mise en Abime." *Stacked Dishes*, Stage 7. 1988. April 7, 2014.
<http://paulmathieu.ca/>

Fig. 13 Robin Lambert. *Service: Dinner for Strangers*. 2009. April 7, 2014.
<http://musingaboutmud.blogspot.com/2009/04/artist-of-day-robin-lambert.html>

Fig. 14 *Puzzle Jug*. Museum of Somerset. April 7, 2014.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Puzzle_jug_altered_2.png

Fig. 15 *Fuddling Cups*. April 7, 2014. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Fuddling_cups.JPG

Terry Hildebrand

Artist Statement

The main purpose of my utilitarian ceramic work is undeniably its function. The ritual of its use becomes a central experience. I create playful sets that entice the users to interact with each other, the tray, and the drinking vessels. The sharing of food, drink, fellowship, and play lie at the heart of our existence and the conscious ritual and enjoyment of these are greatly enhanced by the experience of the visual and tactile senses that the ceramic wares address. My trays play with social relationships, such as an intimate placement of two cups, more formal or quite playful settings inspired by puzzles, seesaws, and games that require following certain rules to keep them balanced or usable. I hope that my work serves also as an analogy for social interactions and choices that consumers make. The user has to be careful and considerate with the placement of a cup, an opposition to the mass-produced, disposable plastic and paper cups. It brings back the conscious action of drinking and using a vessel. The bike tire pattern might remind the user of the choices he or she has with the kind of marks we leave on the earth. My work creates a critical distance to the consumerist way of life in the user by requiring conscious considerations of the patterns, the forms and the placements of individual pieces.

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EDUCATION

- 2011-Present Master of Fine Arts,
University of Minnesota
Expected year of Graduation: May 2014
- 2007-2008 Special Topics in Ceramics
University of Manitoba
- 2003-2007 Bachelor of Fine Arts Honours Degree
University of Manitoba

EXHIBITIONS

- 2014 *Brown Study*, MFA Thesis Exhibition
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN (April).
- DigiFabulous*, Group Show, Juried.
Quarter Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN
(March)
- 2013 *Fresh Works*, Group Show
Quarter Gallery, University of Minnesota, MN (Sept.)
- 2012 *Minty Fresh*, Group Show
Quarter Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN
(Sept)
- 2011 *Fresh Work*, Group Show
Quarter Gallery, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN
(Sept)
- 2010 *Surrounded by Surface*, Two Person Show
GOSA, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB, (June).
Juried.
- 2008/2009 Group Display
The Manitoba Crafts Museum, Winnipeg, MB
- 2008 *Winter Warmer*, Group Show
Ace Art, Winnipeg, MB, (November)

- 2007 Teapot Exhibition, Group Show
Pembina Hills Arts Center, Morden, MB, (September)
- 2007 *Try The Glaze Room*, Group Show
Outworks Gallery, Winnipeg, MB, (April)
- 2007 *Crossing Origins*, Group Show
GOSA, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, MB, (February)

AWARDS RECEIVED

- 2013 Manitoba Arts Council Student Bursary
- 2012 Lila Wallace - Reader's Digest Endowed Scholarship
- 2011 Lila Wallace - Reader's Digest Endowed Scholarship
- 2009 Manitoba Crafts Council Grant, funded "Surfaces" project

RELATED EXPERIENCE

2011-present

Teacher Assistant/Instructor, University of Minnesota
Assisted professors and taught beginner and advanced ceramics courses, was in charge of numerous kiln firing processes, graded students.

2008-2011

Ceramics Technician, University of Manitoba Taught technical skills of clay and glaze mixing to ceramics students; built, repaired and maintained kilns; ordered materials for the clay and glaze chemistry lab, etc.

2009

Ceramic Workshop, Art City, (Spring) Co-taught one week ceramic workshop at drop-in program for children and adults.

PUBLICATIONS

Hildebrand, Terry. "MFA Factor: University of Minnesota", *Ceramics Monthly*, October 2011. (Images)

Estep, Jan & contributing artists. *Issue: Erasure*. Posit Art Press, Minneapolis, MN. Volume 3, May 2012. (Images)