

COMMON GROUND
FINDING AN AMERICAN AESTHETIC IN CERAMICS
THROUGH THE HISTORY OF WILDERNESS AND CERAMIC ART IN AMERICA

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
Of the requirements for the degree

Of
Master of Fine Arts
In
Art

MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY
Bozeman, Montana

April 2021

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DEDICATION

To the mentors that have helped me navigate my way through life: My abuelito and abuelita, Ubaldo and Clementina Alvarez, to my grandma Harriet Botelho, Dominic Bradford, Doug Larsen, Marquam George, Kevin Maier, Forest Wagner, Jeremy Jr. Kane, and Joshua DeWeese: you have inspired me to always give my best to whatever I do and to love the pursuit of knowledge and exploration. Thank you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I begin by honoring the Apsaalooké, the Salish Kootenai, and Cheyenne on whose land I have spent the last three years in Bozeman.

To my Parents, Bruce Manuel Botelho and Lupita Alvarez Botelho: you have shown unyielding support for all of my vast and disparate ambitions. Your love and encouragement has allowed me move through life without fear of being alone.

To the faculty of the University of Alaska Southeast and the faculty of the School of Art and Architecture at the Montana State University, and in particular my committee members; Josh DeWeese, Gesine Jansen, and James Zimpel for helping me through the adversity that is graduate school and for encouraging me to pursue my passions and to take a deep dive into my research without reservations.

To Josh DeWeese and Jeremy Hatch, who were constantly ready to support me in any way to further my knowledge within the field of ceramics and always encouraging more experimentation and to “just keep making”. You were always willing to endorse any effort that streamlined the pottery making process out at the Melvin Graduate Studios.

To my partner, Leanora Skaggs, without whose help and constant support throughout these last three-years I would not have been able to complete this program. Nights spent together editing and refining my papers, prepping wood, loading and firing kilns, and so much more. I owe you so much. Words cannot express how much I love and appreciate you. I hope someday I can return the favor. Thank you all.

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ABSTRACT

My quest to find a unifying principle that constitutes “American ceramics” has led me to survey the histories of studio ceramics in America and Wilderness and Nature in America. I’ve discovered resounding similarities between the two: both were responses to a flagging sense of identity and a hope to (nostalgically) confirm and promote certain values and worldviews (over others). Both our relationships with nature and American studio ceramics are monolithic in their founding ideals and have persisted into the 21st century; both have been fundamental in my upbringing and have codified my own worldview. However, I’ve become sensitive to the fact these particular values are rooted in privilege, are fundamentally exclusionary, and are ripe for a reexamination. In this paper I propose that we revisit the bearing of the values that wilderness and the aesthetic judgements of ceramics in the early 20th century have on society today. It does not mean that these traditions should be totally abandoned. Instead, I am convinced that a more pluralistic and inclusive approach to both is a more holistic way forward.

By appraising the histories of wilderness and ceramics in America I hope to uncover some of the unrecognized people and cultures that have been deliberately redacted from the history. In so doing, I expect to find similarities and trends within the existing canon that are commonly celebrated and introduce the forgotten traditions back into the fold, such that it might lead to a new vision for American ceramics.

In conclusion, I hope that this rediscovered American aesthetic might be the framework in which I create my own body of work, with a particular appeal towards process rather than form, as a criterion of excellence. With an understanding that American studio pottery has many different traditions to pull from that are still being “digested”, but that these diverse inspirations is not a weakness, but a strength.

PREFACE

I want to provide context about the relationship between art and nature¹ in order to describe why the origins of both ceramic art and our modern conception of nature matter so much to me. I was twelve or thirteen when I started to rebel somewhat against my parents and decided to reject most of the sports and activities that I had participated in up until that point. I stopped playing piano, going to choir, swim team, and soccer. Instead, I wanted to snowboard. Only then did I feel a freedom that I hadn't experienced anywhere else. However, there was one last thing that was getting in my way of being able to be up at Eaglecrest, our local ski area, every moment of the weekend: church.

Going to church on Sunday meant that I missed the bus to the mountain that left at 9am so I could only go after my mom got done with yoga at noon, and could drive up for a half day. The thought of missing three hours of prime snowboarding was crushing, so I mustered up the courage to ask my parents the unthinkable, "Could I skip church to go up to Eaglecrest?". My parents, who were not very invested in organized religion, nevertheless did encourage the moral foundation that church provided (and the pacifying effect it had on my grandmothers

¹ When writing, I want to make clear, that unless otherwise stated I will use Nature and Wilderness synonymously to reference places that are less regulated by human presence. Though they both have particular meanings in specific contexts, both legal and cultural, for the extent and purposes of my thesis, using them interchangeably will benefit the flow of the essay. Similarly, my use of ceramics and pottery will be readily interchanged for the benefit of the reader. The distinction of the two is subtle and generally uncontested, but worth noting; in this case they will be one in the same. I also recognize that in telling this history I am being selective in my references and anecdotes to tell a narrative. Though I critique the canon for its exclusion of certain histories and icons, I too am guilty of this trespass. The narrative I am sharing is one that has influenced my own experience and reflects my own perspectives and hopes for the discipline of ceramics.

knowing that I wasn't godless). But despite this ambivalence, my parents responded to my question by spoon-feeding me the most diplomatic response. My dad said, "why do you want to go up to Eaglecrest, is it because you want to be closer to God?" It wasn't until years later that I realized that this argument my dad had handed me was foundational to our modern conception of what wilderness and nature are. It was this transcendentalist belief that in nature one would find God, that led to the formulation of our modern conception of wilderness. It was this idea that first gave me a sense of independence as a child, not for its religious connotations, but for its liberating effect, allowing me to break from family expectations and fulfill my own pursuits. It was this appeal that formed the foundation of my personal values surrounding nature and wilderness. Ecstatically I replied to the almost rhetorical question, "totally!"

Freedom was what nature offered, and in Southeast Alaska, there was plenty of it. In every direction there are forests, mountains, glaciers, or the ocean. Growing up I spent countless weekends with the Boy Scouts camping and testing myself out in the elements. On my own I explored new places to snowboard, seizing every opportunity to escape and return to my home in the mountains. I further embraced the ideals of the transcendentalists, unknowingly subscribing to one of Henry David Thoreau's axioms "In wilderness is the preservation of the world". It was the immersion into wilderness that made me fall in love blindly with nature.

It wasn't until college that I became aware of some of the contradictions and hypocrisy my idyllic view of nature carried. Up until that point I had never really questioned what my relationship with nature truly was. It had never occurred to me that my understanding of

nature was so dualistic, even Manichaeism: nature vs. human. Certainly, my relationship with nature wasn't as adversarial as this dichotomy implies. I didn't feel like I was conquering nature as one might stereotypically assume of someone obsessed with scaling mountains, but it definitely reinforced my separation of the natural world and the humanmade.

This division between human and nature was made plain to me in an experience I had while travelling in Patagonia and later to Buenos Aires. I was down in Torres Del Paine National Park on the last tour bus of the season to be dropped off at the left most trail of the "W": a 52-kilometer trek across a stunning granite mountain range spared from the abrasive erosion of the glaciers around it. The driver told me, "Make sure you're there in four days, because otherwise I'm not sure when or if you'll be picked up." I smiled nervously and nodded, and then started marching. It was within the first few hours that I had what would clinically be referenced to as a panic attack, but also a sublime experience. At the sight of the sun setting behind these majestic mountains and the thundering sound of the glacier calving into the lake below, I broke down in tears. It was a fleeting moment, but one of both terror and joy.

This feeling of agitation lasted throughout the trek, and bizarre coping mechanisms took over to calm my anxious nerves over the loneliness to which I was subjecting myself. I'd talk to myself out loud about the sights I was seeing, the birds I was hearing. I frequently played out scenarios of how I might fight off a mountain lion if it attacked me from my left flank, my eleven-o'clock, or directly behind me (in all cases, I figured my only way to successfully win in a bout with a cat was to get on top of it and hope that I could keep it in a headlock). The opportunity to test my theory never presented itself. Although I was feeling a lot of what could loosely be described as "negative" emotions, there was a general sense of peace while I was

out there. My emotions and actions felt organic in this place. I wasn't distracted or interrupted by my own cognitive analyzations of the things around me. In a word, it was simple.

Emerging from that wilderness experience, I booked a flight from El Calefate to Buenos Aires in order to make my way back north to the Andes. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary in the travel experience. Everything went as one would expect traveling from one place to another by plane. I landed, took a cab to my hostel and set out from there on foot to get to know my surroundings.

Buenos Aires is a city of about 2.5 million people, with something like 15 million within its metro area. It was a dramatic contrast to the last town I had visited, where at 5pm during the daily siesta the only people I encountered on the street were to two Brazilian men who shared a room with me at the local hostel. In Buenos Aires I remember following a stream of people on a pedestrian way to a nearby park. I looked around at the massive buildings surrounding me. In one sense they towered over me in the same way that the mountains of Torres del Paine had, but this feeling was much more ominous. I became hyper-aware of the fact these buildings were representative of people being stacked on top of people, so many people that the horizontal plane of the world was no longer sufficient at accommodating everyone. There was an overwhelming amount of activity happening all around me in this park and I had no idea how to comprehend any of it. Like my sublime experience in Patagonia, I was overwhelmed by emotion, but without any measure of joy. It was the purest sense of alienation I had ever experienced. I felt totally removed from this collective, I had absolutely no business in this place. I did not identify with anything within the boundaries of this concrete jungle. I questioned how anyone ever could. It was this experience that reaffirmed my innate

preference for wilder places, but also caused me to question the human construct that tries to draw a distinction between nature and himself/herself. Could I ever expect to experience the same sense of peace in man-made environments that I do with nature? My experience of alienation in Buenos Aires led me to resolve to avoid anything that might make me feel that sense of being totally detached from the people, places and things around me.

At the time, I was pursuing a degree in Engineering, a natural progression from the two-year program I did in Cold Climate Construction. I thought I would feel validated by a four-year degree; that I knew what I was doing. Yet I soon realized that the engineering classes I was taking did not inspire me. I gravitated instead to the classes that had real life application and I could see real-life forms emerging from the processes I was investigating. Then, I discovered ceramics.

I was enthralled in the haptic nature of clay. It was responsive to touch, and an immediate experiment of causal forces. It was also an examination of boundaries and exploration: if pushed too far, failure ensued. In many ways the same was true in nature experiences, however, in clay the failures were less consequential.

Part of my enthusiasm came from a contemporary history of ceramics I was taught, that appeared only to be a few generations deep and whose history's turning point in the United States was Bernard Leach's and Shoji Hamada's 1951 lecture and demonstration tour. I was led to believe that Leach judged ceramic practices in the US to be second-rate, compared to the traditions of Eastern ceramics and those of Europe. Though the exact criteria of its inferiority eluded me, I took it as a challenge. Could I arrogantly measure up to the task of elevating American ceramics to Leach's standards?

After years of practicing ceramics, this ambition to make work that would satisfy Leach began to feel empty. Why was I trying to justify or appease a man who by his own admission wasn't particularly good at throwing himself? Why was the aesthetic of an English man embracing Japanese culture the epicenter of ceramic validation? Upon further reflection more questions came to the surface. What exactly was it that Leach was dissatisfied with in American ceramics? What is American ceramics? How might someone today identify American ceramics?

My quest to find a unifying principle that constitutes "American ceramics" has led me to survey the histories of studio ceramics in America and Wilderness and Nature in America. I've discovered resounding similarities between the two: both were responses to a flagging sense of identity and a hope to (nostalgically) confirm and promote certain values and worldviews (over others). Both our relationships with nature and American studio ceramics are monolithic in their founding ideals and have persisted into the 21st century; both have been fundamental in my upbringing and have codified my own worldview. However, I've become sensitive to the fact these particular values are rooted in privilege, are fundamentally exclusionary, and are ripe for a reexamination. In this paper I propose that we revisit the bearing of the values that wilderness and the aesthetic judgements of ceramics in the early 20th century have on society today. It does not mean that these traditions should be totally abandoned. Instead, I am convinced that a more pluralistic and inclusive approach to both is a more holistic way forward.

Today's society is struggling with the feelings of alienation and wavering identity that challenged America in the 19th century, a period that gave rise to the ideals of wilderness and studio ceramics that are prevalent today. We have blindly and without a critical eye accepted the premises of American studio ceramics and wilderness because they once served a purpose,

but these traditions have become more alienating today because we are no longer collectively trying to serve a dominant elite.

Though these values of fine craft in ceramics and pristine and untrammelled land in wilderness were created to mend the void that an increasingly alienated society produced; It seems clear to me that in order to hold these values with such esteem will only re-enforce the dogma of separation and hierarchy. Through the survey of the histories of studio ceramics in America and Wilderness and Nature in America, we'll discover that they originated from a similar moment in history when progress and industry were accelerating at a pace that many could not grasp and therefore turned to a nostalgic vision of the past to find redemption. These nostalgic visions for a pastoral and medieval life favored those who created them, but have ultimately left the majority of peoples forgotten in the quest for purpose.

By appraising the histories of wilderness and ceramics in America I hope to uncover some of the unrecognized people and cultures that have been deliberately redacted from the history. In so doing, I expect to find similarities and trends within the existing canon that are worth celebrating and might lead to a new vision for American ceramics. Lastly, I hope that my research will assist me in finding validation in the work that I'm pursuing today.

MODERNITY AND ALIENATION

The history of studio ceramics and the relationship between civilization and wilderness in the United States are both rooted in a growing sense of alienation in the 19th and 20th century on a global scale, largely caused by industrialization and the evolution of ever-growing metropolises and the stratification of classes. As the world markets became more interconnected and labor and communities became more specialized, the holistic understanding of one's community and environment became secondary. Icons of this generation such as Frederick Nietzsche, Karl Marx, John Ruskin, William Morris, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry Thoreau all recognized that the 1800's and 1900's were in the midst of a paradigm shift.

This was the fertile ground upon which Karl Marx would begin to formulate his economic and class ideologies. The Industrial Revolution and the political climate of the time embraced a rationalism that dehumanized the laborer, "it reduces labour to something which is inhuman, so the worker is no longer valued for him or herself as a human being, but rather as simply as a unit of productivity."² Marx was concerned about how industrialization led to the alienation of the individual.

What Marx observed was that in the feudal-serf societies, individuals were still masters over their own production, often possessing between 50-70 percent of their own production

² Ree, Johnathan. "The Big Question: What Inspired Marx?" *OpenLearn*, The Open University, 30 Aug. 2019, www.open.edu/openlearn/society/politics-policy-people/politics/what-inspired-marx.

from what they could produce from the land they tended.³ Prior to capitalism, an individual's labor and the resources that it produced were tangible and interconnected. But under the microscope of efficiency and the division of labor, a person's labor was almost entirely removed from its connection to the resource.

On the one hand, there have started into life industrial and scientific forces, which no epoch of the former human history had ever suspected. On the other hand, there exist symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors of the Roman Empire. In our days everything seems pregnant with its contrary. Machinery, gifted with the wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some strange weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by loss of character.⁴

So as capitalism promised progress for society and efficiency of production, it was clear the price of progress was the dehumanization of the worker.

What Marx realized was that capitalism and the alienation that ensued also changed our relationship to goods and services that were received outside of the production-line. What Marx saw was our relationship to others change from recognizing one another as individuals to recognizing others only as different representatives of the means of production and extensions of capitalism.⁵

What Marx observed in the mid 19th century was a massive change in our social structures and the way that economies and industry were shaping and manipulating the fabric

³ Cox, Judy. "An Introduction to Marx's Theory of Alienation." *International Socialism*, no. 79, July 1998.

⁴ Karl Marx, 'Speech at the Anniversary of the Peoples' Paper' quoted in E Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism* (University of California Press, 1984), p31.

⁵ Ibid.

of society. To be clear, the alienation in which Marx was referring to was strictly in relation to means of production and manipulations of capitalism on social structures.

But others drew more generalized conclusions. When Friedrich Nietzsche proclaimed in 1886 that, “God is dead, and we have killed him”, he was reflecting on the moral and cultural consequences of modernity. The Industrial Revolution was in full-tilt and capitalism was burgeoning.⁶ It was the promise of prosperity and progress that moved us towards values of profit and capital rather than community and environment.

While Marx was firmly critiquing the alienating effects of industrialization on the worker, others were simultaneously recognizing that industry and machinery were altering the quality of products and aesthetics available to the mass, and feeling - a general degradation of culture in this new era.

Marx’s views found resonance in the world of ceramics and other folk arts. John Ruskin and William Morris, the founding figures of the Arts and Crafts Movement in England, pushed back against the growing power of industrialization and how it impacted the common laborer. Central to the Arts and Crafts Movement’s rejection of industrialization was the division in labor that was increasingly common in factories and the lack of human work in the products produced in the late 19th century.⁷

Morris was not entirely against the use of machines, but felt that the division of labour –a system designed to increase efficiency, in which the manufacture of an

⁶ It is, I believe, no coincidence that during this same period of rapid change, evangelical movements experienced their first and second “Great Awakenings”, a religious response to the ills of industrialization.

⁷ “V&A · Arts and Crafts: an Introduction.” Edited by Victoria and Albert Museum, *Victoria and Albert Museum*, 2021, www.vam.ac.uk/articles/arts-and-crafts-an-introduction.

object was broken into small, separate tasks, meaning individuals had a very weak relationship with the results of their labour – was a move in the wrong direction.⁸

What Morris and Ruskin promoted was the revitalization of the handcrafts. They both believed in the moralization of art and architecture and felt that through industrialization there had been a growing divide between art, production, and life.

Persuaded by the economic philosophy of Marx, Morris felt that the division of labor of the industrial era produced ugly and horrible objects. “Production by machinery necessarily results in utilitarian ugliness in everything which the labour of man deals with, and that this is a serious evil and a degradation of human life.”⁹ What Morris advocated was the reclamation of the mode of production. He believed that the moral quality of people’s lives were degraded by the continued advancement of the division of labor that he referred to the life of the “well-to-do man” as a “vicarious life” one in which the individual had little or nothing to do with the products with which they interacted.

William Morris insisted on a world in which people made objects out of utility and not beauty. The time to make anything for the sake of beauty was foolish because the public could no longer discern good taste and bad.¹⁰ To Morris, if hand crafts were reevaluated to be the nobler form of production, the aesthetic and moral degradation (as he saw it) of the late 19th and early 20ths century could be reversed.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Morris, William, and May Morris. “The Revival of Handicraft [1888].” *The Collected Works of William Morris*, pp. 331–341., doi:10.1017/cbo9781139343145.015.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Yes, we do sorely need a system of production which will give us beautiful surroundings and pleasant occupation, and which will tend to make us good human animals, able to do something for ourselves, so that we may be generally intelligent instead of dividing ourselves into dull drudges or duller pleasure-seekers according to our class, on the one hand, or hapless pessimistic intellectual personages, and pretenders to that dignity, on the other. We do most certainly need happiness in our daily work, content in our daily rest; and all this cannot be if we hand over the whole responsibility of the details of our daily life to machines and their drivers.¹¹

William Morris's Arts and Crafts movement was a direct response to the effects of industrialization on the cultures of the world: globalization in which products that once were for local economies could be exchanged from across the globe. This "counter-revolution" took shape not only in England, but notably in Japan as the Mingei Movement and in the United States.

The American Arts and Crafts movement did not directly identify with Morris's socialist utopia. Though many of the tenets of the Arts and Craft movement were maintained, a capitalist bent was engendered in the American version. though isolated communities formed (e.g. Rose Valley). Yet it was egalitarian in that women were encouraged to undertake pottery, jewelry and the like, emphasizing simplicity and form.¹²

Regardless of its political agenda the Arts and Craft Movement in America was reacting to the growing power of industry and ubiquitous nature of the mass-produced objects of the time. Urbanization was seen as the culprit for many of these developments. What emerged

¹¹Ibid.

¹² Bond, Gordon, and Stephanie Hoagland. "Gustav Stickley and the American Arts & Crafts Movement." *Choice Reviews Online*, vol. 48, no. 08, 2011, doi:10.5860/choice.48-4278.

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from this discontent was a movement away from the cities and away from industry in an attempt to reclaim a sense of moral purity that was tarnished by modernity.

BACK TO THE WRONG NATURE¹³

If the English Arts and Crafts movement was a rebellion against industrialization and mass production, making individuals feel alienated and dehumanized from their labor and communities, it found its philosophical counterpart not so much in socialism, but in the American Transcendentalist movement that encouraged going out in the woods to escape the trials of alienation and modernity. It was also a nostalgia for the past, to what was perceived as a 'simpler time'. The Transcendentalists viewed nature as benign, a means to reach God. Most of their contemporaries and antecedents had a much darker view of nature, one that fostered the ideal of the rugged individual pitted against the elements. This was a narrative that Americans adopted as their ethos in the 19th and 20th century about the frontier, a legacy that persists today.

By most metrics of affluence, the New World was towered over by Europe: in manufacturing, industry, art and culture. Collectively, there was little to rally behind. However, what stood out for the Americas that Europe could never have again was the frontier and the wilderness landscape that expanded from the Appalachian Mountains to the Pacific Ocean.

It was this frontier experience that forged the character of the pioneer and the frontiersman. It was his sacrifice to sojourn in the waste and overcome the trials of this forsaken place that galvanized the portrayal of the frontiersman as a rugged individualist. This

¹³ "Back to the wrong nature" is based on William Cronon's seminal essay "The Trouble with Wilderness".

narrative conveniently dovetailed with “Manifest Destiny”¹⁴, the notion that the American people had been chosen by God to reclaim the wilderness and create Eden in the New World.

[C]ourageous pioneers believed that America had a divine obligation to stretch the boundaries of their noble republic to the Pacific Ocean. Independence had been won in the Revolution and reaffirmed in the War of 1812. The spirit of nationalism that swept the nation in the next two decades demanded more territory.¹⁵

In its time it was considered a great testament to one’s commitment to American ideals of freedom and equality to expand the reaches of the newly founded nation. Late 19th Century historian (and champion of the “Frontier Thesis”) Frederick Jackson Turner asserted that the frontier became the place where the American identity was most clear.¹⁶ Manifest Destiny gave pioneers a purpose and an identity. But much to his dismay, Turner observed that the frontier was vanishing and as a consequence, the American identity of rugged individualism was also vanishing. “Up to our own day American history has been in a large degree the history of the colonization of the Great West. The existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development.”¹⁷ What Turner was making the case for was the American Frontier as a place where quintessential values of America were most freely expressed.

¹⁴ The term, Manifest Destiny, was coined by the Newspaper editor John O’Sullivan in 1845

¹⁵ “Manifest Destiny.” Ushistory.org, Independence Hall Association, www.ushistory.org/us/29.asp.

¹⁶ Turner, Frederick Jackson, 1861-1932. The Significance of the Frontier in American History.

Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1894.

¹⁷ Ibid.

This frontiersman mentality had been developing for some time. Henry David Thoreau accurately captured the sentiment “Wilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good – it had been the darkness, one might say, on the far side of the garden wall – and yet now it was frequently likened to Eden itself.”¹⁸ In a relatively small period of time, wilderness went from being “Satan’s home (to) God’s own temple”.¹⁹ The transition of opinion was in no small way a political move as well as a spiritual one reinforced by Romantics.

Prior to this mass ideological adoption of a romantic appreciation of the sublimity of nature, the wilderness that overwhelmed the Americas was seen as a liability. However, Nationalists in the mid 19th century believed they could appropriate wilderness to be a cultural and moral resource.²⁰ Looking to create an image of America as a country worthy of its new-found severance from England and the Old World, nationalists

...(s)ought something uniquely ‘American’... The nation’s short history, weak traditions, and minor literary and artistic achievements seemed negligible compared to those of Europe. But in at least one respect Americans sensed that their country was different: wilderness had no counterpart in the Old World.²¹

As Nash points out, what becomes abundantly clear to Americans at the time is what set America apart from Europe was its wild landscape; something that Europe could never reclaim

¹⁸ Cronon, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness: or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” *Uncommon Ground: toward Reinventing Nature*, by William Cronon, W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, pp. 72

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Nash, Roderick F., *Wilderness and the American Mind*: 5th edition., Yale University Press, 2014, pp 67. Nash is professor *emeritus* at U.C. Santa Barbara.

²¹ Ibid. pp 67

and was abundant in America. Though Europe could claim to have brilliant peaks and awe-inspiring vistas, Europe had long lost the wildness that the New World bolstered.

Industrialization along the Atlantic coast was beginning to be seen as overly materialistic and commercialized. Henry David Thoreau and other Transcendentalists were discontented by this development in the name of progress. "A mechanized way of life seemed on the verge of overwhelming innocence, simplicity, and good taste."²² Thoreau's own philosophy was a rejection of this mechanized way of life in favor of a more "primordial" existence, because, as Thoreau saw it, "to the extent a culture, or an individual, lost contact with wildness it became weak and dull."²³ Together, Thoreau and Turner's perspectives culminated in an Frontier Ethos, one that celebrates individualism and uses wilderness as its backdrop.

However, as Turner correctly suggests in *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*: as more Americans moved out to the West, the frontier continued to shrink, marking the realization that some-day the wildness that characterized the nation would disappear. This sentiment created a nostalgia for the frontier, one that longed for the wildness and primitivism that righted the ills of modernity.

This nostalgia for a passing frontier way of life inevitably implied ambivalence, if not downright hostility, toward modernity and all that it represented. If one saw the wild lands of the frontier as freer, truer, and more natural than other, more modern places, then one was also inclined to see the cities and factories of urban-industrial civilization as confining, false and artificial.²⁴

²² Ibid. pp 86

²³ Ibid. pp 88

²⁴ Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness: or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: toward Reinventing Nature*, by William Cronon, W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, pp. 72

It was this nostalgia for the frontier that was the bedrock for the formation of the National Parks and the establishment of legal wilderness in the United States. In an effort to preserve what was seen as the most natural of wilderness spaces, Yellowstone National Park was established in 1872. When President Ulysses S Grant signed the Yellowstone National Park Protection Act, he signaled to the world how Americans would protect their most sacred spaces. "In just this way, wilderness came to embody the national frontier myth, standing for the wild freedom of America's past and seeming to represent a highly attractive natural alternative to the ugly artificiality of modern civilization."²⁵

Here we see the evolution in the predominant American stance towards nature: (1) arriving to this continent struggling to survive against the rugged environment; (2) Using technology and industry to shape America as an economic powerhouse, recognizing that this progress came at the cost of social and moral degradation; and (3) viewing that rugged environment as a mode to redeem the nation of its moral decay where wilderness embodied a new American identity, one that valued self-reliance, rugged individualism, a perceived purity of landscape that hasn't been tainted by humanity.

²⁵ Ibid. pp.78

AN EASTERN AESTHETIC

Like the origins of the wilderness movement, prior to the 19th century the tenets that defined the identity of American ceramics were flagging. The legacy of being a colony of England restricted American ceramics to simple utilitarian forms so that they didn't compete with the reputation of the British and European ceramic traditions.²⁶ After the war was won, the quintessence of ceramics in America was undefined.

American studio pottery had its adherents in the 19th and early 20th century, but George Ohr, "The Mad Potter of Biloxi" was not one of them. Born in 1857 in Biloxi Mississippi, Ohr grew up looking to pick up a trade. When in 1879 a friend took Ohr to New Orleans to visit a pottery studio. He first learned how to throw on the wheel. After that point, Ohr became enthralled by the experience of working with clay.

In the early 1880s, he traveled through 16 states, dropping in on ceramics studios, shows and museums. By the time he got back to Biloxi in 1883, he had absorbed the essence of America's burgeoning art-pottery movement... potters were decorating their wares based on Japanese or French ceramics, adding animals, birds and bright floral designs. Ohr returned home determined to make art, not pots."²⁷

As Bruce Watson relays, many American Potteries at the time were replicating works from other parts of the world. What Ohr and some potteries at the time were trying to accomplish

²⁶ Garfield, K. Sterling, S. (Director). (2011). The Tradition of No Tradition [Video file]. Queens Row. Retrieved February 25, 2021, from Kanopy.

²⁷ Watson, Bruce. "The Mad Potter of Biloxi." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, 1 Feb. 2004, www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-mad-potter-of-biloxi-106065115/.

was to create a distinctly American Aesthetic. For Ohr that meant embracing rugged individualism and pioneering a path towards the expressionism of the mid 20th century.

George Ohr's work is characterized by its loose and out-of-control aesthetic, "no two pots are alike" he would proudly proclaim. His work often looked like it was on the verge of collapsing. His aesthetic challenged all conventions within the realm of ceramics at the time. He was clearly navigating uncharted territory within the medium. Though in his lifetime he was never given credit for his self-taught skills, Ohr was never shy to claim he was the "[u]nequaled, unrivaled, undisputed, greatest Art Potter on the Earth"²⁸.

The Arts and Crafts Movement of the early 20th century led to the founding of several significant pottery communities, most notably the Rosewood pottery, Rookwood Pottery and the Weller Pottery. The Rookwood Pottery, founded by Maria Longworth Nichols in Cincinnati, was particularly recognized for its development and use of glaze atomizers for glaze application to create a gradient effect, previously never achieved.

Despite these efforts, there was a general disdain for the state of ceramics in the United States before Bernard Leach's tour of the country in 1952.²⁹ Leach, born in Hong Kong in 1887, began his formal art education at the Slade School of Art in London in 1903. Leach later attended the London School of Art, where he studied etching and drawing. "Missing the East, he returned in 1909 with the intention of teaching etching in Japan and instead became a

²⁸ Watson, Bruce. "The Mad Potter of Biloxi." *Smithsonian.com*, Smithsonian Institution, www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-mad-potter-of-biloxi-106065115/.

1 Feb. 2004,

²⁹ See Martha Drexler Lynn, *American Studio Ceramics: Innovation and Identity 1940 to 1979*

student of the art of ceramics”³⁰ In Tokyo Leach quickly became acquaintances with members of the Shirakaba Group, who were interested in introducing Western Art into Japan. After attending a Raku firing Leach began to study under Urano Shigekichi, for almost a decade Leach lived in each Japan or China studying ceramics. It was towards the end of his tenure in Asia, that Leach first met Shoji Hamada.

In 1920, Leach and Hamada returned to St. Ives, where Leach established the Leach Pottery. While Hamada was there, he and Leach made the first-ever Noborigama kiln outside of Asia. Having established a name for himself as a conduit of Eastern and Western traditions. Leach tokenized himself in Japan as a Westerner interested in adopting the values of the Mingei Movement.³¹

In 1940, Leach first published *A Potter's Book*, often referred to as “the ceramics bible”, which would shape the way that Americans and people from around the world have approached pottery ever since. In his grand tour, Leach brought with him a romantic notion of what ceramics and potters were, and insisted on developing a standard of aesthetics that dominated and continues to dominate the realm of ceramics. Ultimately Leach shifted the entire ethos of ceramics towards Orientalism, instilling a belief that the epitome of ceramics excellence was found in the East. Leach was critical of the United States and the potters with whom he interacted. He often claimed that Americans had no “taproot to tradition” and

³⁰ Cooper, Emmanuel. “Bernard Leach: Life and Work.” Edited by Garth Clark, *Chipstone*, 2005, www.chipstone.org/article.php/244/Ceramics-in-America-2005/?s=leach.

³¹ The Mingei movement was Japan’s version of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Spiritually, it shared the same opposition to the industrialization and commodifying that motivated Morris and others associated with the English movement.

therefore were inferior in their production. Nor was his condescension limited to American ceramicists. His judgment on his fellow Englishmen could have been as easily applied to their American counterparts. In the opening section of his seminal book Leach writes,

Very few people in this country think of the making of pottery as an art, and amongst those few the great majority have no criterion of aesthetic values which would enable them to distinguish between the genuinely good and the meretricious. Even more unfortunate is the position of the average potter, who without some standard of fitness and beauty derives from tradition cannot be expected to produce, not necessarily master pieces, but even intrinsically sound work.³²

Early American ceramics, like the nation as a whole, was seeking an identity to ground itself in, to form a tradition. Lacking its own organic authenticity, much of the ceramic production of the early 19th century was focused on replicating trends of European ceramics. In the early 20th century, particularly during the inter-war period ceramicists were focused on the adoption of Oriental aesthetics in the crafts³³.

There are signs that the present rapidly increasing preoccupation with Oriental art will be more intense, and produce a profounder impression on our views, than any previous phase of Orientalism... To us the art of the East presents the hope of discovering a more spiritual, more expressive idea of design.³⁴

It was the adoption of orientalist aesthetics that moved the whole of American ceramics forward. This attitude towards Chinese and Japanese ceramics was exemplified by Bernard Leach in his publication of *The Potters Book* and his critique of America studio ceramics in the 1950's. For a

³² Leach, Bernard. *A Potter's Book*. Unicorn, an Imprint of Unicorn Publishing Group, 2016.

³³ Stair, Julian. "Re-Inventing the Wheel: The Origins of Studio Pottery." *The Ceramics Reader*, by Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie, Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020, pp. 149–159.

³⁴ Ibid.

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time, the standards of Leach were confirming the values and world views that American ceramics so desperately needed to fulfill an otherwise rudderless craft.

APPRAISING HISTORY

Have the moves towards arts and crafts and towards nature succeeded in remedying our collective dehumanization? Or, do they harbor other forms of disenfranchisement that have ultimately created more alienation among the masses than resolved? From my own experience, appreciation of nature and the arts have a pacifying effect on my own feelings of alienation and dehumanization within modern society, but there is room to recognize that the histories of ceramic art and wilderness are both fraught with inconsistencies and prejudices and must be more inclusive in the 21st century.

In the last fifty years or so, the environmental movement has made a deliberate attempt to reconcile and re-evaluate our conception of wilderness. It attempts to unpack the dualistic relationship between humans and nature and the mythology of the American frontier being a place untrammelled and altered by human presence, when in fact the American continent had been inhabited and stewarded by Indigenous peoples for millennia before colonists first came to the New World.

Similarly, in the more recent past, ceramicists have been reimagining their own history. New urgency has been placed on this effort in recognition of the latest wave of virulent white supremacy. Both our conceptions of wilderness and ceramic art have been founded on romantic notations that art and wilderness might redeem the human spirit from the ills of modernity.

Wilderness as the testing ground of one's physical and moral fortitude is predicated on the condition of purity in wilderness. As William Cronon, Dina Gilio-Whitaker and others assert, our earliest beliefs of wilderness are built on myths of the frontier.

The national park system has long been lauded as 'America's greatest idea,' but only relatively recently has it begun to be more deeply questioned... Mark David Spence delivered a long-overdue critique that linked the creation of the first

national park with the federal policy of Indian removal. Spence points out that the first so-called wilderness areas that had been deemed in need of preserving were not only and in actuality Indigenous-occupied landscapes when the first national parks were established, but also that an uninhabited wilderness had to first be created.³⁵

The concept of wilderness had long been predicated on the idea that the American continent was barren and free of human impact. In preserving the myth, we actively removed any signs or peoples that threatened our national bequest. For some reason it was incompatible to conceive our nature and the values of individualism if that nature had been previously altered.

In trying to claim a national identity and redeeming a sense of humanity from the alienating effects of industrialization, Americans dehumanized Indigenous peoples and were complicit in their genocide.

Gilio-Whitaker succinctly and pointedly summarizes the contradictions inherent in our treatment of wilderness:

The idea of wilderness as conceived by preservationists and conservationists was a white-settler social construct. It imagined an unpeopled, wild landscape as pristine, pure, and unspoiled, and as the environmental historian Carolyn Merchant asserts, reflected values that equated wilderness with whiteness and, after postbellum black urban migration, cities with darkness and depravity. These tropes, rooted in policies of removal and serration, she argues, led to the idea of an American 'colonized Eden,' a controlled, managed garden' from which colonized Indigenous peoples, immigrants and people of color were systematically excluded and which led to pattern of toxic waste dumping in communities of color³⁶

"The trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very early the core of wilderness represent

³⁵ Gilio-Whitaker, Dina. *As Long as Grass Grows: The Indigenous Fight for Environmental Justice, from Colonization to Standing Rock*. Beacon Press, 2020. Pp 93

³⁶ Ibid.

the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our mark the world.”³⁷

William Cronon asks us to reimagine our relationship with nature to overcome the discrepancies that arise from our current state of affairs. Our idealization of wilderness necessarily distances us from nature. If nature is characterized by an absence of humans, then by definition we are at odds. What Cronon and others propose is redefining nature so that it allows the possibility of “responsible use” such that “idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home”³⁸ To treat the landscapes and places that we more regularly occupy with the same respect that we do wilderness may redeem a sense of stewardship and identity that is otherwise distant space that only signals our values.

Giovanna Di Chiro and Stephanie Walrath observe in their work, *Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice* and *Decolonizing National Parks: A Conversation about Repatriation and Shared Authority*, “The merging of social justice and environmental interest . . . assumes that people are an integral part of what should be understood as the environment.”³⁹ Challenging the colonial discourse of nature and adopting a pluralist and multicultural approach to how humans are to engage with nature allows for a working relationship with the environment that can also address issues of pollution and degradation of urban environments led by BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and Peoples of Color) communities.⁴⁰

³⁷ Cronon, William. “The Trouble with Wilderness: or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” *Uncommon Ground: toward Reinventing Nature*, by William Cronon, W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, pp. 69–90.

³⁸ Ibid. pp 85

³⁹ Di Chiro, Giovanna. “Nature as Community: The Convergence of Environment and Social Justice” *Uncommon Ground: toward Reinventing Nature*, by William Cronon, W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, pp. 298-320

⁴⁰ Ibid. pp. 312

Likewise, Stephanie Walrath investigates the possibility of repatriation in national parks and suggests that the inclusion of tribal communities in the management of national parks could dismantle a legacy by the federal government to conceal hard truths about the formations of America's most idyllic nature refuges.⁴¹ Though Walrath concludes that such projects of repatriation may not lead to direct policy change, it may represent an acknowledgement of past wrongs by the US government, and allow for future generations to create the place identities that might redefine what it means to be an American and provide "a new and holistic conception of wilderness, recreation, sustainability, power, and perhaps a new national identity that reframes the duality of belonging".⁴²

This history has its analogue in the story of studio ceramics in America. Leach and the early 20th century orientalism that dominated the narrative of aesthetic preference ignored many rich ceramic histories and aesthetics that originated on the continent. There is also a notable dismissal of women within the history of ceramics, though their involvement in the field is irrefutable and essential in the articulation and defense of an American Aesthetic.

To be sure, Leach had his contemporary critics who rejected his insistence that the pinnacle of ceramics lay in the East. To some of his critics, Leach was simply disseminating a dogma that elevated his own work. His celebration of the Mingei movement can only be seen as distant.

The rhetoric is hyperbolic and overheated and both these friends see each other as the conduit of spiritual truths, as seers... For Yanagi, as an urbane young aristocratic intellectual, his own relationship with rural Japan was similar to that of an ethnographer. Rural potters or weavers, any Korean Makers, at all, were almost as exotic to him as to Leach.⁴³

⁴¹ Walrath, Stephanie. *Decolonizing National Parks: A Conversation about Repatriation and Shared Authority*. Duquesne University. Graduate Student Research Symposium. 2019.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ De Waal, Edmund. "Towards a Double Standard?" *The Ceramics Reader*, By Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie, Bloomsbury Academic, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017, pp 144-148

Chief among Leach's critics was Marguerite Wildenhain, who had been a notable participant in the *Bauhaus* movement in Germany and who had immigrated to the United States shortly before World War II. Relocating to California, she formed the nucleus of what became known as the *Pond Farm*.

It was an address that Leach delivered in 1952, in which he offered a blistering indictment of American potters, that triggered Wildenhain's eloquent response. Speaking to the first (and only) International Conference of Potters and Weavers at Darrington Hall (Devon, England), he declared:

Americans have the disadvantage of having many roots, but no taproot, which is almost the equivalent of having no root at all. American pots follow many undigested fashions and, in my opinion, no American potter has yet emerged really integrated and standing on his own feet⁴⁴

In short, Leach thought that work of American potters was uninformed and a bastardization of multiple traditions.

Wildenhain framed her response as *An Open Letter to Bernard Leach*.⁴⁵ Unlike Leach, Wildenhain celebrated the diversity of America's "roots". "They are many and they come from all over the world, from all races of the earth, from all classes of society—that is its grand uniqueness, this growing together of a thousand parts." She goes on to note:

The native (homegrown) potter of the United States has not yet arrived at his ultimate goal – a truly American tradition upon which to base his efforts. His

⁴⁴ Johnson, Brent. "A matter of Tradition: A Debate Between Marguerite Wildenhain and Bernard Leach" *The Ceramics Reader*, By Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie, Bloomsbury Academic, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017, pp. 114-120

⁴⁵ Marguerite Friedlaender Wildenhain. "Open Letter to Bernard Leach", 1953. Marguerite Wildenhain papers, 1930-1982. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

greatest present need is the digestion of many diverse influences besetting him both from the Orient and Europe; ultimately this digestion process will lead to the development of a tradition of his own building.

That is America's beauty and greatness, and nobody would want to see just one single form, one single way of thinking grow(s) on this continent. For our tradition is just the opposite: it stands for the free choice of each individual.

It is time then to search honestly for those forms that are related to us, that express what we feel, think and believe.⁴⁶

Though it has been nearly seventy years since Wildenhain's petition to reject the dogma of the East, it seems that her call was met mostly by deaf ears. Though certainly American ceramics went through a modernist phase after Peter Voulkoz, the Otis school, and the Funk art movement of the 60's in California; the "canon of pots" mostly stood unchallenged.

Part of what made Bernard Leach so influential in his time (and to this day) is that prior to *A Potter's Book* there were few, if any, publications that advocated for a particular genre of ceramic making. In that way, Leach capitalized on that moment and shaped the way many would approach ceramics. In a similar fashion, Clary Illian now stands out as giant in the pedagogy of the field of ceramics (a symptom of her gender to be recognized for her teaching, but not for her own work).

In 1999, Clary Illian published *A Potter's Workbook*, a book of philosophy and aesthetics cleverly disguised as a "how-to" book. If *A Potter's Book* is the Old Testament, *A Potter's Workbook* is the New Testament. Illian, by her own admission is a disciple of Leach. She apprenticed at the Leach Pottery in 1964-65 and credits much of her own understanding of

⁴⁶ Johnson, Brent. "A matter of Tradition: A Debate Between Marguerite Wildenhain and Bernard Leach" *The Ceramics Reader*, By Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie, Bloomsbury Academic, an Imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017, pp. 114-120

pottery to Leach. However, as often as she tributes certain thoughts to Leach, Illian maintains her novelty in an openness for change. “I remember vividly the moment when I realized that I was not learning shapes but processes, and that the way a thing is made and its appearance are one in the same.”⁴⁷ Process rather than form was the emphasis of Illian’s tenets of progressive ceramics. It was through making, repetition, and reflection that one learned how to be make good pots. Unlike Leach, who encouraged a finite ideal, Illian garnered an appreciation for diversity and individuality, tenets of our American Heritage.

Marguerite Wildenhain advocated for a pluralist approach, when looking for new inspiration for an American tradition in ceramics. She was willing to accept that America was “digesting” and that no one tradition was going come out on top. To that end, it seems that the plurality that Wildenhain anticipated is becoming more mainstream. In the articulation and dissemination of *A Potter’s Workbook*, Clary Illian took Wildenhain’s mantle. Influences from Europe and Asia are still prevalent, but new unrepresented forms and aesthetics are being adopted into the canon. It is this legacy of acceptance that I think is fundamental in formulating an American Aesthetic.

For a time, it appeared that Wilderness was successful at reinforcing the values of individualism and self-reliance, a place to cherish for its natural and wild state; a sanctuary to escape from the responsibilities of daily-life and the struggles of modern civilization. However, we’ve found that “there is nothing natural about nature”. It is a constructed space that has

⁴⁷ Illian, Clary. *A Potter’s Workbook*. University of Iowa Press, 1999.

been used by the privileged to affirm their own values during their experience in this exotic other, while simultaneously undermining and devaluing those same values in the places we all call home.⁴⁸ Wilderness (as an unpeopled and unaltered space) is the standard to which we measure all nature. In that way, wilderness has alienated us from nature in that we do not envision ourselves in wilderness; except as the sojourner and the tourist.

When writing *A Potter's Book*, Leach was seeking to create a unifying theory of ceramics, one that valued the hand-crafted, modest, traditional, and useful object, such that it rejected the "ugliness of commercialism". It was a rejection of the modernization and industrialization, that dehumanized the society. Leach advocated for incorporation of beautiful objects into daily life, believing that it was the antidote to these feeling of a wavering social values. However, in his polemic against all other aesthetics, Leach prescribed a hierarchy that had no connections, no roots to most of the world. So of course, when he prescribes an Asian aesthetic to the world, he'd be dissatisfied with its adoption. How could such a proposition ever organically manifest a "taproot"? Instead, the patience and plurality that Wildenhain and Illian propose seem the most appropriate in allowing for roots to grow.

As I have explored the twin mythos surrounding wilderness and ceramics in the United States, it is event that both narratives attempted at regaining a sense of tradition that could bolster an otherwise degrading sense of identity. In our American setting, wilderness has called

⁴⁸ Cronon, William. "The Trouble with Wilderness: or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." *Uncommon Ground: toward Reinventing Nature*, by William Cronon, W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, pp. 69–90.

us to a singular individualism—the rugged frontiersman or the person with backbone to stand up to wrong-doing. In ceramics, it was Leach’s—largely successful—efforts to entice us to a 9th or 10th century Japanese sensibility of beauty. In this sense, these narratives are great motivators.

At the same time, I recognize that each of them edits out the role of a diverse humanity. In our broader mythology about the West and wilderness, it is the marginalization and elimination of this country’s Indigenous peoples. In the paradigm offered by Leach, beauty is only measured by conformity to a style and period of one nation’s history, not our own.

The narratives wilderness and ceramics today, both call for the dismantling of the monolithic ideals of the past; to recognizes how these paradigms failed to incorporate the traditions of a broader human experience. They purpose a restructuring of our values such that when we consider nature, we consider the environments we inhabit, not just the distant islands of wilderness that are so removed from our daily-lives. That we consider all traditions of ceramics worthy of celebration and that the respectful arrogation of many practices may be the most authentic manifestation of an American tradition of ceramics.

MY WORK: THE LUMBERJACK AND THE MODERNIST

The narratives of wilderness and ceramics in United States and how they were both founded on monolithic ideals that served a dominant cultural narrative of white colonialism, is not unique to these two subjects. Similar narratives of disenfranchisement and erasures of history and cultures is our nation's original sin. However, I choose these two topics as my locus of investigations because my relationship with nature and my practice of ceramics fulfilled a desire for autonomy and achievement that I rarely found in modern life. As, I became more entrenched in both, I found certain values did not align with my own.

In describing the dualities of tradition versus modernity, wilderness versus urban humanity, I have aimed to explain the work that I do and the ideas and places that influence my art. As a youth, I found freedom in nature. As an undergraduate I discovered ceramics as my premiere creative outlet. What art and nature provided me was purpose and intentionality when I was otherwise rudderless as I tried to navigate modern life.

I found myself caught in the middle of an existential game of tug-of-war: on the one hand, the idealism of the American wilderness and, on the other, the dogma of Bernard Leach for a Japanese aesthetic in ceramics.

This existential tension that I feel is illustrated well in the environmental conflict that Richard White evaluated in his essay, *"Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?" Work and Nature* about the late '80s and early '90s controversy over the spotted owl and old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest that fueled the logging industry. What White

assesses is the dialectic relationship between work and nature and how in our construction of an environmental ethic we have fundamentally removed ourselves from the picture.

Most equate productive work in nature with destruction. They ignore the ways that work itself is a means of knowing nature while celebrating the virtues of play and recreation in nature. A smaller group takes a second position: certain kinds of archaic work, most typically the farming of peasants, provides a way of knowing Nature⁴⁹

White notes that our American frontier history always put humans and nature in constant-conflict and how “progress” inextricably pushed us further and further away from having a cooperative relationship with nature. White argues for an integration of work and nature, an incorporation of the values of wilderness into our daily lives.

This sensibility directly appeals to me. Growing up in Alaska privileged me with the opportunity to be immersed in nature. It manifests in even the most consciously unremarkable ways. For example, unlike any other place, Southeast Alaska is free of fences. The most desirable properties are adjacent to the largest temperate rainforest in the world. Nature is literally welcomed in the backyard.

Both environmentalists and ceramicists have recognized that humans have distanced themselves from things integral to making life fulfilling and meaningful. In our evaluation of the histories of ceramics and wilderness in the United States, we responded to modernity by trying to romanticize a pastoral existence, a pastoral life where individuals produced the products of their labor and communed with nature. This past hasn’t existed in Western cultures for over

⁴⁹ White, Richard. ““Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” Work and Nature.” *Uncommon Ground: toward Reinventing Nature*, by William Cronon, W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, pp. 171

200 years, if ever. Bernard Leach, William Morris, Soetsu Yanagi, and the American nationalists that created the ideas of the frontier, readily romanticize the past, assuming that somehow it was better while rejecting the monumental changes of the 19th and 20th centuries.

My work is not exempt from reverting to a similar type of nostalgia. Like Morris, I value the handmade object. I value the ownership of my labor and the craft involved in my practice.

Unlike Morris, I do not disdain the machine. As Richard White notes,

Coming to terms with modern work and machines involves both more complicated histories and an examination of how *all* work, and not just the work of loggers, farmers, fishers, and ranchers, intersects with nature. Technology, an artifact of our work, serves to mask these connections. There are clearly better and worse technologies, but there are no technologies that remove us from nature.⁵⁰

Somewhat Ironically, I have been using Victorian floral motifs to reference some of the underlying values that are present in ceramics, but they have been cut by a CNC router/printer, a piece of technology that Morris would no doubt say robs me of the pleasure of painting it on my work myself.

The standards Bernard Leach disseminated to the masses through the publication of *A Potters Book*, and his aesthetic appreciation of the Japanese and Chinese ceramics, I confess has influenced my work vicariously through my ceramics education. I became attracted to the forms of Sung dynasty celadon ware and the wabi-sabi aesthetic of Japanese raku ware. Most influential to my work was the inspiration of the fluid ash glazes achieved from the woodfired

⁵⁰ White, Richard. "'Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?' Work and Nature." *Uncommon Ground: toward Reinventing Nature*, by William Cronon, W.W. Norton & Co., 1995, pp. 182

kilns of China, Japan, and Korea. For a time, my work desperately wanted to make direct references to nature. My thought process was that if I could make those connections for my audience, I could facilitate the re-connection between humans and nature. I've since adopted a subtler method of making those associations through my work. The use of clay to make utilitarian ceramics necessarily bridges the need for integrated relationships with nature. Where I can, I source materials native to my environment. This deliberate choice reinforces a connection to place and is a step towards alleviating some of the alienation associated with ceramic production. Short of sourcing all of the raw materials that I use, I am solely responsible for the production of my work and thus fulfill a Morrisian reclamation of the means of production. By extension, the void between nature and my audience is marginally healed, though immediate connections may be lost on some.

It is the tension between trying to uphold tradition and the autonomy of individual expression that my work negotiates. I have embraced Wildenhain's vision of America's pluralistic ceramic inspirations, while maintaining an appreciation for the ceramics that Leach so staunchly advocated. I draw inspiration from nature and wild places; I am inspired by the illusion of unaltered landscapes, but recognize that to revere these places with such high esteem can foster contempt for the spaces we call home. As White suggests in the title of his essay, our values and our lives have been at odds far too long. My work unifies my interest in organic forms while also celebrating my own individualism and sense of accomplishment.

What my work has done for me is create common ground between my intersecting interests in American Wilderness and trying to maintain a relationship with my environment while facilitating my pursuit for an identity within ceramics as an American potter and

preserving an interest in integrating art with life through production of utilitarian and domestic objects.

Handmade Objects are an antidote to a soulless world flooded by products made with a minimum of effort for maximum profit and no reverence for natural materials. A pottery is an alternative to workplaces that are inimical to a worker's need for pleasant conditions and a sense of accomplishment. The life of a potter provides a chance for autonomy and social relevance.⁵¹

⁵¹ Illian, Clary. *A Potter's Workbook*. University of Iowa Press, 1999.

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IMAGES



Show title (Common Ground) & Teapot Set (Thesis exhibition)



Cup Wall & Large Jar with Underglaze Decal (Thesis Exhibition)



Cup Wall installation (Thesis exhibition)



Installation of thesis exhibition, Common Ground (South view)



Tumblers & Pitcher



Installation of thesis exhibition, Common Ground (North view)



Installation of thesis exhibition, Common Ground (East view)



Large Jar



Large Serving Bowl



Large Serving Platter



Tea Set



Teapot



Pitcher Set



Pitcher Set w/ Decals



Cup w/ Decal (Detail)



Cup w/ Gold Luster Decal



Cup w/ Gold Luster Decal



Cup Set w/ White Gold Luster Decal



Large Bowl



Cup w/ Porcelain Slip Decal