



## Michelle Erickson at the Victoria and Albert Museum

As the Olympics get underway in London this summer, a spectacular talent of a different sort will be on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Known for her brilliant engagement with historical styles and subjects, Virginia ceramist Michelle Erickson begins her stay as artist-in-residence at the metropolis's chief design museum on July 3.

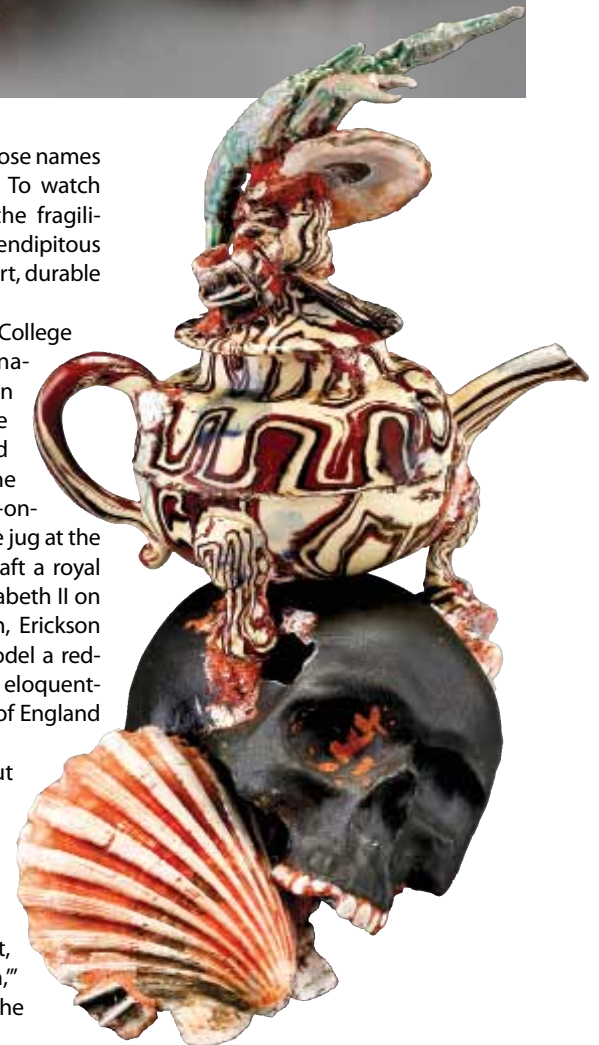
Over the course of three months, Erickson will demonstrate the technical skills that have burnished her reputation as something of a performance artist, one who reanimates the past by inhabiting it. "She is able to reproduce virtually any ceramic that was made in the eighteenth century, including all the various body types and decorative treatments. Not only can she do it, she can show you how to do it," says Ivor Noël Hume, former chief archaeologist at Colonial Williamsburg. "It is one thing to quote and another thing to physically re-create. She is engaged in an archaeological process," adds the V&A's head of research, Glenn Adamson.

Erickson, who by her own description speaks "the language of making," is an ardent advocate for the integrity of craft

and a surrogate for artists whose names and histories are lost to us. To watch her work is to appreciate the fragility, unpredictability, and serendipitous achievement of the potter's art, durable only after it has been fired.

Educated at Williamsburg's College of William and Mary, the native Virginian is not unknown in the United Kingdom. She demonstrated slipware and agateware techniques at the Potteries Museum in Stoke-on-Trent and made a delft puzzle jug at the British Museum. Asked to craft a royal gift to present to Queen Elizabeth II on her 2007 visit to Jamestown, Erickson used indigenous clays to model a redware medallion that spoke eloquently to the entwined destinies of England and its lost colony.

"We knew of her work but it was really when I attended the American Ceramics Circle symposium in Milwaukee in 2010 and saw Michelle's fantastic on-stage performance that I thought, 'we must have this person,'" says Reino Liefkes, head of the



*Am I Not* by Michelle Erickson, 2010. Porcelain; height of each 5 inches. Taking inspiration from a nineteenth-century abolition medallion by Wedgwood, this pair of shell dishes decorated with boy soldiers condemns contemporary child slavery. Courtesy of Michelle Erickson.

*Deepwater Teapot*, 2011. Earthenware, porcelain and indigenous clays; height 14 inches. Erickson's knowledge of eighteenth century agateware technique is on view in this memento mori. Collection of Pamela K. and William A. Royall Jr.

Photography by GAVIN ASHWORTH



Dishes from Erickson's Potter's Field Series, 2011. Earthenware with reverse slip decoration; diameter of largest 15 inches. Erickson references vernacular English pottery in new work that ponders the organic, reusable past. *Courtesy of Michelle Erickson.*

for whom Erickson's sculptures bring to mind the pungent satire of a Hogarth engraving and the spirited topicality of a Staffordshire figural group, both products of England's age of caricature.

What makes Erickson's work compelling, especially for those who share her love of historic design, is her conceptual originality, talent for modeling, and the uncanny authenticity of her technique. Not surprisingly, museums interested in ceramic history have been eager to acquire her work, finding many avenues for exploration in its rich variety of references. The Yale University Art Gallery and, most recently, the Seattle Art Museum purchased teapots from Erickson's Junk series, loosely inspired by antique porcelain recovered from the wrecks of merchant ships bound for the West. Encrusted with live-cast ceramic shells, Erickson's jumbled arrangements suggesting historical happenstance and natural accretion are meditations on time and timelessness. "Junk" simultaneously refers to the accumulated detritus of the ocean floor and to the distinctive Chinese boats with their pleated, shell-like sails.

Bolder institutions have embraced Erickson's overtly political wares.

V&A's ceramics and glass collection.

Erickson's workplace will be in the museum's Making Ceramics gallery, not far from the partial reconstruction of the studio of Dame Lucie Rie, a leading twentieth-century British studio potter, and near the museum's all but encyclopedic displays of world ceramics from 3000 BC to the present.

Busy with lectures, demonstrations, and workshops while in residence, Erickson will also devote time to the expressive, deeply personal work that has been her focus over the past decade, when she began reassembling bits of the past into witty, often acerbic critiques of the present. "She has thought a lot about the historical place of propaganda and social commentary and has a strong sense of precedent that is linked to the inspiration that she finds in the history of production," says Adamson,

Erickson with a trial waster for *Ruin*, her 2002 tribute to the September 2001 attacks on New York's World Trade Center. Erickson makes all of her own glazes, colorants, and slips using raw materials and metallic oxides. In *Ruin* she experimented with an eighteenth-century formula for jasperware.







Purchased by the Chipstone Foundation in Milwaukee, *Front and Centerpiece* uses the popular nineteenth-century pottery technique of transfer-printed decoration to protest the forced military conscription of African children. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond recently acquired *Fossil Teapot*. Fashioned as a skull with a gas pump for a handle, the porcelain sculpture is a harsh indictment of the world's increasingly lethal demand for oil.

British ceramist and author Edmund de Waal selected Erickson's *Pecten Shell Teapot* for his 2011 survey, *The Pot Book*. On the broad theme of production and consumption, the sculpture conflates two tales of East-West exchange—one past, one present—and muses on the consequences of industrial colonization by multinational corporations. The work's central motif is the logo of the Shell Oil Company, whose nineteenth-century roots, interestingly, were in the China trade.

For her stay in London, Erickson is likely to continue exploring fossil relics. Lately she has been de-

veloping a series, titled *Potters' Field*, of skeleton dishes whose warm toffee and chocolate-colored palette calls to mind slip-decorated English earthenware excavated at colonial American sites. "These are as much about materiality as subject matter," says Erickson, who wields liquid slip much as another artist might deploy a pigment-lad-

en brush, creating designs of satisfying spontaneity.

Visitors to the V&A will also find Erickson's work in the museum's new "World Ceramics" display, where fifteen hundred objects are marshaled to tell the story of international ceramics from 2500 BC to the present. "It's a fantastic piece," Reino Liefkes says of Erickson's 2008 *Octopus Junk* (on loan from Chipstone), which suggests a shipwreck find of fused shells, barnacles, and Chinese porcelain tea wares. "The first case in the gallery deals with shipwreck ceramics and the last case has Michelle's piece, so we come full circle."

*Ars longa, vita brevis, ceramics aeternam.*



*Deep Water Squirrels*, 2011. Porcelain; height 9 inches. Inspired by eighteenth-century Chelsea porcelain figures, these squirrels suggest the fragility and interdependency of all life in the aftermath of the Gulf Coast oil spill. Courtesy of Michelle Erickson.

*Fossil Teapot*, 2008. Colored porcelains and indigenous clay; height 11 inches. Erickson considers the influence of natural history, in this case fossils, on eighteenth-century design, collecting, and display while interpreting anew the classical theme of human mortality. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond.