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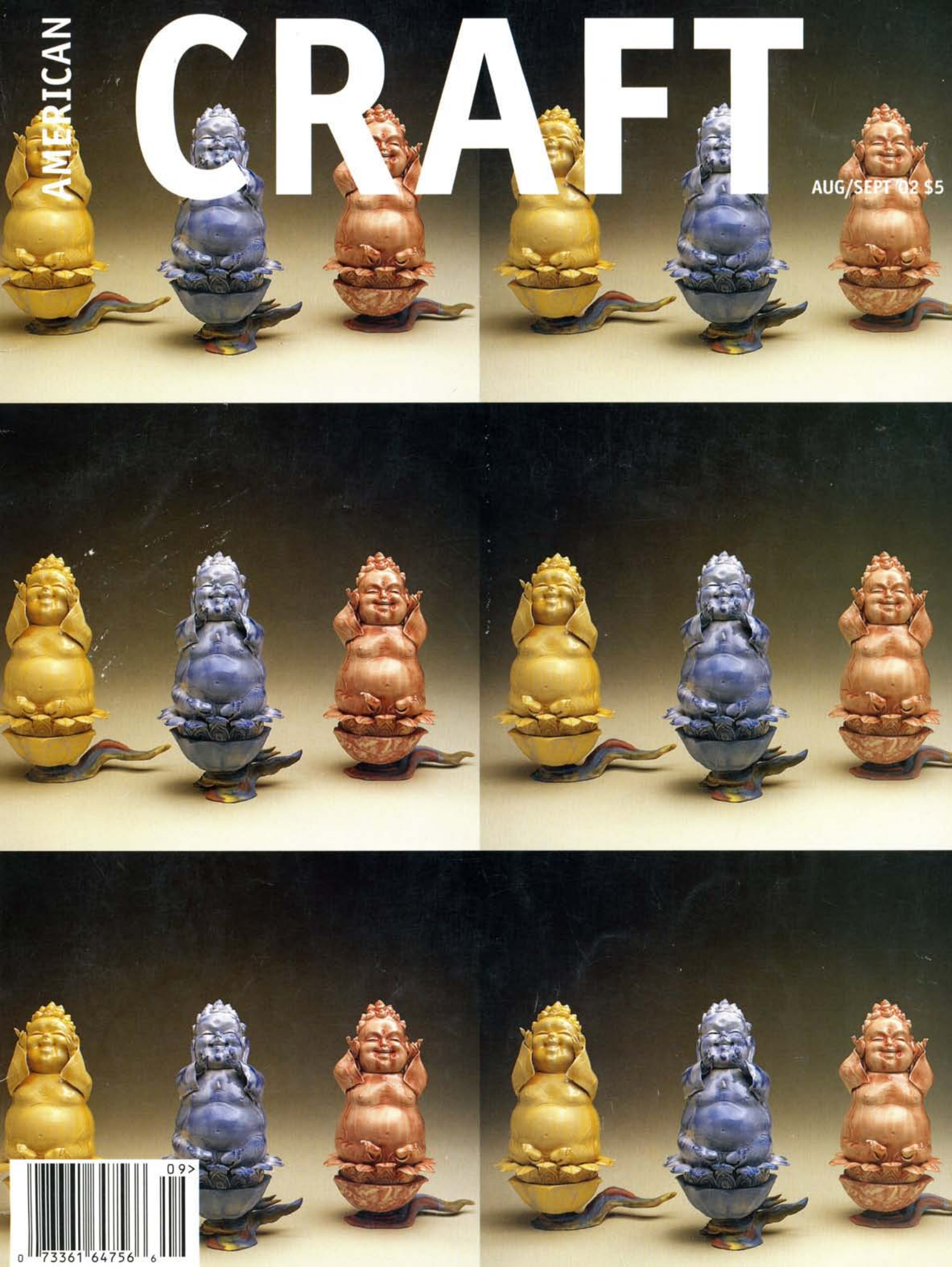

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COVER: *Laughing Buddhas,* 2002, colored and agated porcelain, 8½by 24 inches, by Michelle Erickson. Photo/Gavin Ashworth. See page 56.

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MICHELLE ERICKSON

She preserves both the personal foibles and the slightly unschooled sensibility of her source material—British vernacular pottery— so that a warm directness pervades her objects.

BY GLENN ADAMSON • PHOTOGRAPHS BY GAVIN ASHWORTH

Postmodernism, long the cutting edge, has entered ceramic art's past tense. We know this because Mark Del Vecchio's book on the subject, *Postmodern Ceramics* (Thames and Hudson, 2001 [see page 16]), claims the category for history by its title alone, but it is also clear that the techniques and stance of postmodernism have gradually been abandoned over the last decade. First painters, then architects and sculptors seemingly have had their fill of keeping their tongue in cheek. As the book attests, many potters are now straining at the leash as well. Postmodernism may, as Garth Clark writes in his introduction to the book, be a "big tent," but it is not infinitely malleable. The question looming over postmodern ceramics—is, What happens next? It seems vital to sustain some of postmodernism's freedom, self-critique and rejection of doctrine. But postmodernists had a disapproving side, too, in that they disdained many of the humane social values that most people associate with ceramics. What seems urgent now is to marry postmodernism's hip sophistication with modernism's heartfelt idealism—a tough trick, but one that will necessarily define the next decade in ceramics.

No doubt the solutions to this dilemma will be as various as the ceramics field itself. For now, though, it is enough to see it happening at all. One such instance is the work of Michelle Erickson, from Yorktown, Virginia. She is self-trained, primarily as a ceramics historian who conducts research by making reproductions of antique pots. Virginia is one of the few places where one can do this professionally, because of the exhibit and sales opportunities at Colonial Williamsburg. Erickson has orbited around this community since she was an undergraduate ceramics student at William and Mary College. It was there, in 1982, that she had her first exposure to the British pottery tradition, which is still the basis for most of her work. It was there that she first found work as a reproduction potter for the Jamestown Pottery.

As she grew to maturity in this field of "period pottery," she became increasingly interested in the ceramics that were found by archaeologists in the area. This material was incredibly varied and vibrant, ranging from Chinese porcelains and Portuguese delft to British sgraffito wares and Italian slip-decorated vessels. It struck her that she had never been exposed to the great majority of the ceramic types she was seeing (she notes that even today, most students of the medium receive "very little exposure to western ceramics that aren't antiquities"), and she was curious about their manufacture. Working in large batches to capture the feel of the originals, which were produced en masse, she developed a wide repertoire of period techniques and clay bodies, slips and glazes. In the process, Erickson has been able to provide other ceramic scholars with an improved understanding of the technologies and procedures that were used hundreds of years ago. "It's really opened a lot of eyes in the decorative arts community," she says. "I was asked to demonstrate English pottery techniques at the British Museum, and I'm an American! A lot of these techniques are lost."

In fact, most of Erickson's work has been within the British tradition: earthenwares of the 17th and 18th centuries; the somewhat later development of "mocha" glazes; and, more recently, medieval handbuilt pottery and early soft-paste porcelains. Currently, she is recreating the clay body for Wedgwood's famous Jasperware, using an extant 18th-century formula as a guide. In each of these areas of exploration, she undertakes lengthy experiments to determine the original compositions and handling methods used by potters past. It can be difficult to arrive at the exact method of historical manufacture—as Erickson puts it, "There's more than one way to skin a cat." Surprisingly, she can fire most of her pieces in an electric kiln, because most historical British wares were fired in saggers that protected them from ash fall and other incidents. More problematic is the exact composition of historical clay bodies, whose impurities can be very difficult to discern and yet are important in the feel and appearance of a pot's surface. Because of hurdles like these, and because her pieces look brand-new, Erickson's re-creations would rarely be mistaken for the genuine article. But that's not really the point. Her attempts to reverse the process of creation have a considerable payoff, both in objective data about process and in what she calls a "kinetic" understanding of the way that bygone potters practiced their craft.

Erickson puts these insights into practice in her artwork. When making her inventive sculptural pieces, she usually uses the same materials and techniques that she does in her reproductions. The resulting technical rigor removes from her sculptures the irony and detachment that postmodern ceramics typically display. Foremost, Erickson's work is about the very un-PoMo value of authenticity. Yet it reflects a full understanding and articulation of the lessons of postmodernism. Many of her sculptures—particularly her signature teapot towers, which

OPPOSITE PAGE: ***Black Teapot with Bluebird*, 2001, colored earthenware, porcelain, thrown, modeled, multiple-fired, 18 by 6½ inches.**

OPPOSITE PAGE CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ***Adam and Eve Roemer*, 2002, porcelain, thrown, sgraffito, slip, 8 by 5 inches; *Two Teapots*, 2002, earthenware, thrown, lathe-turned, slip, 14 by 10 inches; *Mocha Cup with Handles*, 2000, earthenware, thrown, lathe-turned, slip, 15 by 8 inches; *Pagoda Pyramids*, 2002, earthenware, thrown, lathe-turned, slab-constructed, slip, 24 by 10 inches.**

feature various forms cribbed from ceramic history piled high atop one another—compare closely to the works of blue-chip postmodernist potters like Adrian Saxe, Richard Notkin and Michael Lucero, who have riffed on Sèvres porcelain, Yixing stoneware and George Ohr, respectively. Erickson has clearly learned from these ceramists and their contemporaries, but she sees the work of such artists as being more "sharp" and possibly less humane than her own.

Del Vecchio aptly describes postmodernism as "a kind of sophisticated romper-room aesthetic for adults." It's clear that Erickson's creations are considerably more constrained. Anything very much *doesn't* go in this work. When Lucero makes an Ohr-like squiggle handle, it reads as witty appropriation, and it can take on symbolic and narrative meanings. When Erickson duplicates the squiggle on a slipware plate, by contrast, it is always burdened by a specific historical content—a sympathy with and respect for the people who came up with that squiggle in the first place. Perhaps because of this underlying humanism, Erickson focuses primarily on vernacular pottery traditions, especially British ceramics, which was forever playing catch-up with the more sophisticated wares made in Asia and on the Continent. Erickson preserves both the personal foibles and the slightly unschooled sensibility of her source material, so that a warm directness pervades her objects, even when they jumble together into barely legible narratives. She seems particularly drawn to ceramic typologies that feature immediate, even random decorative techniques, such as the action of wet slip on slip. This loose gestural quality further distinguishes her pots from the steely perfection of much postmodern work.

Erickson blends her repertoire of clays, imagery and techniques carefully, usually in a manner that responds to a specific theme or moment in ceramic history. *Black Teapot with Blue Bird*, 2001, is typical in this regard, a combination of erudite potting references that coalesces into an allegory. The central teapot is based on the work of the Elers brothers, who pioneered stoneware manufacture in England in the 17th century with a clay body that approximated Chinese Yixing wares. Its spout and handle are made of marbled or "agate" clays, another technique of Chinese derivation. Atop the teapot is an absurdly overgrown version of the bird finials that sometimes served as the handles for teapot lids, and underneath is a stand, featuring a simulation of a tea egg that has hatched two spindly legs. The legs in turn appear to wobble on an overturned blue and white porcelain cup, complete with a spill of tea-colored glaze. It seems as if the stack of forms might come crashing down at any moment; according to Erickson, it nearly did in the kiln. And this is the point. The piece is a meditation on the fragility and haphazardness of old ceramics. As the cup threatens to roll away and leave the superstructure unsupported, one can imagine the Elers brothers nodding ruefully—ceramics used to be a risky business, governed more by chance dependencies than sure things.

Erickson's work is not always so complex, and many of her most effective pieces are simple and quasi-functional. Most of her works in porcelain take the shape of medieval *roemers*, Germano-Dutch drinking vessels with applied bosses that help the user keep a firm grip, which were originally executed in glass. Though the medium is transposed, she still applies decorative slips much as glassmakers applied strands of hot glass, and also strives to make the porcelain walls as thin and even as the glass of the originals. Like the late Rudolf Staffel, Erickson capitalizes on the translucency of the porcelain, which here creates an impression that these are ghosts of vessels past.

The red, blue and yellow *Laughing Buddhas*, 2002, is a disarming take on the historical precedents of contemporary kitsch. The piece consists of three fat figurines in a modified version of the "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" motif that appears so often on trinkets imported from China and Japan. This topical reference is enriched by allusions to similar bouts of chinoiserie in centuries past. The Buddha figures are drawn from mid-18th-century teapots made in Chelsea, England, in imitation of Chinese blanc-de-chine ware, while the soft primary colors evoke both plastic toys and Buddhist devotional paintings. This mélange of allusions plays as light comedy, but it is also an attempt to collapse current and historical forms of orientalism. The *Buddhas* are typical of Michelle Erickson's work in that they are an essay in ceramic history, but also remind us that we are part of that history. It is ultimately this that makes her ceramics relevant to the post-postmodern condition. Her works are filled with appropriated fragments, allusions that can be knowing and sly. But each one has been chosen with the very old-fashioned attitudes of humility and conviction. ■

Glenn Adamson is curator at the Chipstone Foundation, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.