

# history lesson

Study your ceramic history, not only from books, but also as a maker. Getting into the studio and figuring out how something was really made, from start to finish, might be just the inspiration you need.

*In addition to working with archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians to reverse engineer old pots and rediscover lost ceramic techniques, Michelle Erickson makes work that applies her vast knowledge of these techniques to contemporary concerns. She was awarded an artist's residency at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, England, from July to September to research, make new work, and create a video series on historical processes.*

## Ceramics Monthly:

How does your technical understanding and research of historical ceramics influence your work?

by the context of its history. No matter how many techniques I have mastered, I am always pushing into unknown territory.

I find that doing something "sort of like" another thing is like running the first mile of a marathon and saying you understand what it means to run a marathon. Not every artist needs or wants to have a self-possessed understanding of what they may be inspired by, use, or otherwise appropriate, but clearly there is a huge difference between mimicking for effect and actually practicing that art, whatever it may be. That is my interest in these lost arts, to *own* the rights by making them myself, rather than to sample from them, like a mixer might do with music. My real goal is not to recreate a certain object just for the sake of doing so, but there is no other way to gain that intimate access.

My deep attraction to clay has been driven by an unexplainable connection I feel to the humanity that ceramics embodies, whether masterpieces or chamber pots. So I try to understand the medium through an age

where ceramics was integral to society and was mass produced predominantly by hand. Today the ceramic medium is most relevant to the technology of industry, space travel, and weapons manufacture so the question for me as an artist is "why clay?" The answer lies in taking a step back from the rush to embrace ever-advancing technology and looking historically at the ingenuity of these lost arts through the lens of the 21st century.

**CM:** What are some of the themes you work with and how do the historical elements help convey them?

distinction between than I can. Choosing the techniques is sometimes dictated by instinct and intuition, sometimes by very specific projects that inform the study of colonial archeology, material culture, museum interpretation, and other disciplines, and sometimes because a historical genre strikes me as clearly spanning time and speaking to 21st century issues through the universal human concerns.

I started a body of work in 2004 that was informed by the abolitionist ceramics of the late 18th and early 19th century to make a statement about child soldiering and contemporary slavery. Using ceramics to advocate for a social and political movement of human rights through the messenger of a sugar bowl stating "sugar not produced by slaves" is an eye opener to the fact that, although the topic of blood diamonds is a more high profile example, every day commodities of sugar, coffee, chocolate, metals for electronics, and other products we all use daily are driving the conditions for 21st-century slavery.

**ME:** There is a symbiotic relationship between the two areas of my work that other people make more of a

I also have a long-standing interest in using ceramic figures for political satire. Intriguingly, there was a clear relationship between satirical works of 18th-century engravers and the Staffordshire figural industry. The piece *Knight Errant* (below right) portrays an ape-like President George W. Bush wearing the "Mission Accomplished" flight suit jacket, and riding a kicking mule, with a dual reference to *St.-George-and-the-Dragon*-type Staffordshire figures and *Don Quixote* as portrayed by William Hogarth. The knight in my narrative fights windmills-turned-oil-rigs, wields a Shell Oil shield and a staff of the drug industry, grasps a javelin-like fragment of the World Trade Center that's piercing a figure of liberty.

**CM:** What are your plans at the V&A?

discovery, our own predicament with fossil fuels, and the idea of a human fossil) and am pursuing a concept at the V&A I call *Potters Field*, about the life cycles of both clay and people. The opportunity to make art in the midst of 5000 years of clay traditions represented in the V&A's collections is akin to getting the keys to the world's ceramic candy store. I hope that access to masterworks by artists such as Lucca Della Robbia, Bernard Palissy, and John Dwight will lead me to hidden secrets used by the legendary elites of ceramic art. But the V&A is an extraordinary global institution that blurs the lines between old and new, presenting masterpieces from antiquity along side the most progressive visionaries in modern art and design. That energy has already captured my imagination.

[www.michelleericksonceramics.com](http://www.michelleericksonceramics.com)  
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