

TRADITION & MODERNITY
THE CERAMIC ART OF MICHELLE ERICKSON





Timepeace, 2005

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For ceramic artist Michelle Erickson, the past, as embodied in tradition, and the present, in the form of modernity, are not mutually exclusive concepts. Through her art Erickson analyzes contemporary culture from a pointedly historical perspective by fusing 17th and 18th-century Colonial American ceramic traditions with contemporary motifs.

This blending of past and present, however, goes beyond simply decorating traditional looking works with modern motifs. Erickson painstakingly resurrects the actual techniques used by the original Colonial potters, thereby making a concrete historical connection through her ceramics between past and present that intentionally extends beyond the purely formal.

Moreover, her technical skill and historical knowledge is coupled with an uncanny ability to capture the rare and routine in ways that are delightful and provocatively relevant. In this way the connections to the past through tradition that ground her works in specific historical moments mean they also take on a special relevance for the present. For Erickson, the past as tradition and the modern present as the here and now are inextricably linked. From her perspective, "History is continually unfolding: history is now." In short, through her work Erickson argues that we live in a world that



China Junk Teapot, 2006

is still very much connected to the past, and the fragility of her medium belies a steely desire to explore this connection from a 21st-century perspective.

Far from being mere vehicles for blatant social or political messages, Erickson's ceramics reveal an underlying spirituality, and their exploration of the human condition is both empathic and, at times, accusatory. This duality of meanings, techniques, and intentions is played out in the sheer magnitude and variety of Erickson's creative outpouring. But this conflation of Colonial elements within a contemporary context is also her way of encouraging the viewer to seriously engage the past from a 21st-century standpoint.

So, while contemporary society conditions us to focus on the present as a portal to the future, Erickson seeks to view the present through a framework that emphasizes cultural memory in order to show the continuing importance of tradition for contemporary society. Her art stands as a physical and metaphorical reminder of the inter-connectedness of the past and the present.

Timepeace, 2005, thrown white stoneware with enamel and transfer print

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, ceramics were used to champion anti-slavery causes by British abolitionists. One of the first people to do so was Josiah Wedgwood whose jasperware medallion, first produced in 1786, depicts a kneeling slave in chains under the inscription "Am I not a Man and a Brother?" This slogan was adopted by the Committee for the Abolition of Slavery for its seal and motto.

At first glance, Erickson's elegant creamware forms appear to be sentimental reminders of days gone by. In actuality, they are a response to the harsh realities of



Black Teapot with Bluebird, 2001

