

TRADITION & MODERNITY
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Timepeace, 2005

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NOVEMBER 12, 2010 – JANUARY 9, 2011

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

global conditions that, she believes, have changed very little as the world's poorest populations are still being exploited in the quest for rich natural resources. Erickson not only advocates social awareness of modern child soldiers, but by using 18th-century English ceramic forms, she also draws a direct connection between their situation and slavery, thereby constructing a potent visual parallel to the abolitionist protests of the past.

Timepeace, a monumental translation of an 18th-century creamware Liverpool jug, has a similar theme. It concerns the harsh realities of child soldiers and the blood diamond trade. To create this work, Erickson first threw a large jug then finished it in a clear glaze before applying a series of decals to simulate transfer printing—a technique utilized by Josiah Wedgwood himself. Her strategy was to juxtapose images of child soldiers with the very luxury items that have fueled the tragic social events that underlie the trade in blood diamonds. Images of gemstones and a large Rolex watch, taken from luxury magazines, contrast with the soldier in its center (whose rifle serves as the hands of a clock) and the images of children in military garb carrying automatic weapons. A bandolier of bullets, which criss-crosses the central composition, adds a chilling decorative element to the jug, especially when seen against the Rococo period gilding.

These powerful ceramics act as visual reminders of the somewhat cyclical nature of social and economic problems and make us cognizant that, without action, history all too often repeats itself.

China Junk Teapot, 2006, thrown, hand modeled black earthenware and porcelain

This blackware teapot is a historical reference to the experimental "basalt" ware from



Pickle Stand, 2010

the Wedgwood-Weildon partnership of the 18th century which, in turn, referred to the Yixing-type teapots produced a century earlier in Holland by the Elers brothers, who were imitating the original Chinese ware that fascinated Western imaginations at the time.

Inspired by artifacts discovered on shipwrecked boats from the maritime trade between Asia and Europe, *China Junk Teapot* refers to a Chinese boat called a “junk.” It incorporates a combination of ceramic trompe l’oeil elements and authentic recreations. In this instance, two Chinese finial figures nestle between a conglomerate of oyster shells, barnacles, and sediment.

Black Teapot with Blue Bird, 2001, thrown hand modeled colored earthenware with gold “japanned” decoration, private collection

This upright teapot is composed of an amalgam of references that, in their precariously positioned state, reflect upon the fragility of old ceramics. While the central earthenware teapot is akin to Chinese Yixing wares, its handle and spout are made of “agate” clays in the English style (a selection of colored clay bodies that are blended to create a marbled effect). Erickson has exaggerated the size of the bluebird finial to emphasize its instability above two decidedly wobbly legs. Thus, *Black Teapot with Blue Bird* not only intimates the fragility of its medium but also speaks to the unpredictable nature of antique ceramic production, which was often difficult to control and had little guarantee of success.

Pickle Stand, 2010, hand built, slip cast and press molded porcelain

Pickle Stand is the result of a two-year effort by Erickson to rediscover the processes used to create its 18th-century American predecessor– the pickle stands created by

the Bonnin and Morris factory, America's first porcelain manufacturer operating in Philadelphia at the onset of the American Revolution.

Bonnin and Morris produced these wares during the burgeoning movement for American Independence when the ability to imitate original Chinese ware had become a standard by which Western societies judged their sophistication and economic stature. In the context of the American Revolution, producing high quality porcelain for the American colonists was a way to undercut costly English imports and support home-grown industry. Pickle stands also represent a mid-18th century shift in dining fashion since pickled fruits and vegetables were inspired not by English taste, but by French cuisine.

The original Bonnin and Morris pickle stands shared stylistic influences with English silverware and typically were adorned with fanciful marine elements in the Rococo style. A typical pickle stand consisted of three scallop-shell tureens surrounding a fluted bowl; crustacean shells and other marine elements were used by the potters to hide the construction joints.

Erickson has remained faithful to Bonnin and Morris's original manufacturing and constructing processes. However, in addition to utilizing specific Rococo iconography, she has used the original design to incorporate contemporary motifs. The original coral stem has been replaced by a gas pump nozzle and the usual conglomeration of shells are now represented by both fossilized impressions of natural shells as well as munitions. A hand grenade fragment mimics the fluted cup found atop the originals and what look like the interior of pecten shells are used for the dishes themselves. Shellfish have long been integral to human existence, not only as food, but as utensils,

cutting tools, personal ornamentations, and even as weaponry. Indeed, New York, under both Dutch and English rule, was once a great shellfish exporting city. That trade was eradicated long ago by overharvesting and pollution so that today shells are viewed mainly as iconographical symbols of the fossil fuel industry. Erickson's *Pickle Stand*, by being produced through traditional methods, recreates a historically important utilitarian object that underscores the changed meaning shells have in contemporary society. *Pickle Stand* alludes to the fossil fuel industry while intentionally linking past environmental issues to the present.

Originally intended for daily interaction, these somewhat mundane forms are what make Erickson's work so uniquely and humanely enduring. They suggest a connection between past and present that is not limited to cultural transactions, but is invested with the ephemera of human existence. This is symptomatic of Erickson's desire to remind us that tradition still has value in a contemporary context and that the past should not be ignored. By selecting specific elements from the past and re-presenting them to carry their meaning forward into the present, Erickson underscores the importance of the past for understanding the present.

—Hayley Sykes-Ludden, Curator

I would like to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to Dr. Howard Risatti for his advice and guidance which in itself is an education. Mr. Robert Hunter, Editor of *Ceramics in America*, for his generosity, and Katherine Huntoon and Robert Barrientes for their collaboration and support.

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