

SOLVING PROBLEMS

- From Engineering to Studio Ceramics -



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BY NICOLE AQUILLANO

While pursuing my undergraduate degrees in mathematics and civil engineering at Carlow University and Carnegie Mellon University, respectively, I fell in love with clay. I always romanticized the idea of being a potter, but I had a hard time convincing myself that it was a smart way to make a living. After moving to Boston to pursue a career as an environmental engineer at the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a few things happened that made me realize that life is too short to not do exactly what I've always dreamed of doing. And so I began working towards my goal of becoming a potter.

After four years of taking continuing education classes, mostly at Massachusetts College of Art and Design, I felt ready to apply to MFA programs, and was accepted to Rhode Island School of Design in 2010. I worked at the EPA part time through graduate school and for a year after graduate school. Two years ago, I decided to completely leave my engineering job to be a potter; it was one

of the hardest, and best, choices I've ever made. Life is so different when you love what you do everyday.

Solving Problems

I think the basis of any engineering degree is to teach students how to solve problems, and how to manage the immensity of information available to solve those problems. Which basically sums up ceramics—there's always a problem that needs solved and a lot of information out there to help solve it! This applies not only to the technical aspect of ceramics, but also to the practical side of making a living as a ceramic artist. One of the most important skills I learned as an engineer was project management, which definitely helps me as a ceramic artist today. It's an essential skill both for working efficiently in the studio on multiple projects, as well as on the aspects of running a small business.

The biggest difference is that as a ceramic artist, I am my own boss. It's invigorating to see the direct relationship between the effort

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that I put in and the success of my business. I love the flexibility to structure my day around how to be most productive and effective, something that is hard to do with a 9–5 job. I love that I can take a break when I need it, for lunch or an afternoon run. And unlimited creative freedom is the ultimate perk!

Repeatability: The Path to Clarity

My background in engineering is directly connected to my fascination with repetition. I find stability and comfort in repeatability, since in my mind it is the path to clarity. Through careful analysis of repeatable results, the answer becomes certain and clear. The majority of my inlaid surface treatment originates in my fascination with structures. The geometric repetitiveness comprising structures, particularly the repetitive lines within structures, are appealing in how they relate to my tendency to organize and index.

Experience and Nostalgia

My training and work in engineering has an undeniable relationship to the architectural subject matter I use. However, my love of memories associated with objects is really why I make what I do. Like many people, I’ve always been a collector. I find it’s a good way to hold on to the past. I’m an incredibly nostalgic person and am easily overcome by the loss we encounter in life time and time again. So for me the work that I make, using imagery from my past experiences, is a way to create a concrete connection to the past and satisfy an emotional longing for what once was. A recurring theme in my work is place. I am fascinated by the ability of place to define and connect people, as well as its ability to elicit memories of the past. I enjoy creating work that establishes an emotional connection and bridges the gap to the past. For this reason, I often reference bridges from specific cities on my work. I also reference the idea of home through use of my childhood home.



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1 Pittsburgh Skyline tumblers, 4¼ in. (11 cm) in height, 2014. 2 The Strip District tall vases, 6½ in. (17 cm) in height, 2014. 3 Cityscape bowl, 13 in. (33 cm) in diameter, 2014. All pieces are slip-cast porcelain, underglaze mishima decoration, glaze, fired to cone 10.



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Techniques

I make positives out of plaster, clay, or plasticine and then make plaster molds from which I slip cast all of my forms. I use photographs as reference for my imagery and a Dolan knife to freehand the drawing. I then apply an underglaze, let the piece dry beyond leather hard, and wipe it with a damp sponge to remove the underglaze from the surface. This leaves the knife-drawing filled with underglaze embedded in the clay, a technique known as mishima. After bisque firing, I apply various clear glazes, some with Mason stains added, and fire in an electric kiln to cone 10. The high temperature of the kiln and the mid-range glazes draw out the underglaze from the inlaid images and create an unpredictable downward flow, obscuring the image, much like a faded memory.

the author *Nicole Aquillano maintains a full-time ceramics studio practice in Boston, Massachusetts. To see more of her work, visit nicoleaquillano.com.*



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4 Home table setting, to 13¼ in. (34 cm) in diameter, slip-cast porcelain, underglaze mishima decoration, glaze, fired to cone 10, 2014. **5** Bridge whiskey cups, 3¼ in. (8 cm) in height, slip-cast porcelain, underglaze mishima decoration, glaze, fired to cone 10, 2014.