

A REASONED Approach

by Katey Schultz

Emily Reason's work is based in ritual, history and—well—reason.

"Production pottery is a hard thing to explain," says Emily Reason, now in her second year of residency as a production potter at the Energy Xchange in Burnsville, North Carolina. "There's a rhythm in production that allows me to explore an idea, like working in a series. The creativity shows itself in the shapes of the pots and how I address surface design."

But before Reason even touches the clay, she attunes herself to other rhythms in her life and in the natural world to help set the

stage for her production work. Her ritual begins by going on a long run every morning near her home at the base of the Black Mountains, a spur chain off the Blue Ridge in North Carolina. This ritual informs her pottery as much as any technique she employs. "It's really important for me to have a balance of doing things outside the studio—stuff that's good for my body and good for my brain," she explains. "I can be present with my work when everything else is taken care of. When I'm running, I get into a meditative space. I



Serving bowl, 10 in. (25 cm) in diameter, thrown, carved and dotted porcelain, fired to Cone 10 in reduction, 2007, \$160.

notice the changing tones and colors with the seasons. I notice new flowers blooming. This finds its way directly into my work.”

Most notably, this particular way of seeing the natural world shows itself in the celadon glazes Reason makes in her studio. She tries to make her blue like the sky, green like the grass, turquoise reminiscent of lichen speckled across a rock, and she describes her black as “rich and velvety, like the night.” By using the landfill-methane-gas-fueled kiln at Energy Xchange, Reason reduces her overall impact on the very environment from which she takes such inspiration. The harmony she has achieved between her inspiration and production using green methods nicely parallels themes of harmony from the Sung Dynasty (960–1270 C.E.) pottery of China that Reason studied as a student abroad.

A majority of the artwork that emerged from the Sung culture referenced the classics of the Confucian tradition, serving a moral purpose particularly through the use of monochrome glazes. Such refined tones glazed over nearly flawless forms echoed spiritual teachings of harmony and serenity. Not surprisingly, the pottery was popular among the masses for its functionality, and within the palace for its decorative capabilities.

“I spent the summer of 2001 in China, touring the country, visiting colleges and observing production studios on the large, small and family-run scales,” says Reason. “Their craft has developed over such a long period of time, it’s difficult for an American like me to fathom. I was drawn specifically to porcelain pottery from the Sung Dynasty because their methods for working in porcelain are much different than ours.”

When Reason returned from China to complete her degree at West Virginia University (WVU), her affection and respect for the potter’s lifestyle had deepened. “I learned to be detached from the pots so I could see how, if I just kept working at it, that would make [the work] better. I started to value this process as a learning experience, not a loss.”

While she did earn herself a solo show at Zenclay after graduating, Reason still felt her own voice in clay was yet to emerge. As she explains, “I knew I was committed to functionality, durability and craftsmanship...I thought a lot about the way I use things and how that dictates the size and shape of a pot.”

When the opportunity arose to enroll in a two-month concentration at Penland School of Crafts working solely in porcelain, Reason leapt at the chance. Under the guidance of Silvie Granatelli and Leah Leitson, she experimented more with surface design, using slip trailing, carving and brush-working techniques. “I also had to relearn how to treat the clay since I had never worked with porcelain before,” she recalls. “I stuck with it because I felt the brighter surface of porcelain was going to let me do what I wanted to do with glazes.”

Although she insists she is still an emerging potter, a lot can be said for Reason’s surface design, which relies heavily on repeated carving and dotting techniques that invite the glazes to pool. The overall effect is a smooth, evenly toned form that simultaneously has texture, diversity and invites a certain measure of awe. “Surface design is a process,” Reason contends. “Carving and dots are



Small jar, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, thrown and carved porcelain, fired to Cone 10 in reduction, 2007, \$132. All of Reason’s work is fired in a landfill-methane-gas-fueled kiln in the Craft Studios at Energy Xchange, Burnsville, North Carolina. For more information, see www.energyxchange.org.



Teapot, 8 in. (20 cm) in height, thrown and slip-dotted porcelain, fired to Cone 10 in reduction, 2007, \$135.

meditative for me because the work is repetitive and gives me a sense of creating order.”

Over time, the voice that emerged as Reason’s own paid allegiance to her travels in China and her work as a production potter at WVU through her affinity for elegant forms and her commitment to functional pots. “Now, a lot of my work has started to come together at Energy Xchange, but there’s a long road ahead,” she says. “Potters need a supportive craft community. We are very fortunate at the Energy Xchange because people are so excited about our green methods that they want to support all aspects of the program, including the artists and artwork.”

Energy Xchange began almost ten years ago near the Yancey-Mitchell county line in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Their mission is to demonstrate the responsible use of landfill gas as an energy source for small enterprise in craft and horticulture, and to meet

local energy needs. They do this by harvesting methane gas generated on a 6-acre landfill, becoming the first organization of its kind to use methane for such purposes.

In addition to the Energy Xchange Gallery, Reason sells her work at the Crimson Laurel Gallery (www.crimsonlaurelgallery.com) in Bakersville, North Carolina, at various other galleries across the country, as well as retail and wholesale shows.

For more information about Emily Reason and her work, see www.emilyreason.com.

Be sure to check out the December issue of CM for an article on Energy Xchange, as part of our focus on Sustainability.

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ON THE SURFACE

Reason carves and slip trails her surface designs. The textures she creates are enhanced by the use of celadon glazes. She adorns the pot's surface at the leather-hard stage.

Reason's homemade carving tool was modeled after a tool used to create carved patterns on Chinese Yaoware pottery. The L-shaped blade, set in a bamboo handle, is used to create a pleated pattern of lines. For Reason, carving lines is a rhythmic motion that achieves even, consistent marks. The corner of the L, carves into the leather-hard clay, making the

deepest part of the recessed line. The tool is effective in achieving a line with depth, allowing the glaze to vary as it pools in the deepest part of the line.

Slip-trailing bulbs and plastic bottles, such as hair-dye bottles with variously sized tips are used to create a dotted surface. Using her porcelain slurry, Reason sieves the clay to a yogurt consistency to make a thick slip. Dots of slip are squeezed onto the pot's surface with the bulb, much like decorating a cake. Both the carved lines and sharp tips of the dots are smoothed and softened with a damp sponge.

Salt and pepper shakers, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, thrown, carved and dotted porcelain, fired to Cone 10 in reduction, 2007, \$65; by Emily Reason, Burnsville, North Carolina.

