

Experiencing the Connection: A Ceramic Exploration of “One”

Marisa Mahathey
Department of Art & Art History
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
One University Heights
Asheville, NC 28804 USA

Faculty Advisors: Megan Wolfe, Robert Tynes, Jackson Martin

Abstract

The word “one” is representative of wholeness and unity. One is the source of all numbers and an image for divine unity. Through transitioning of beliefs from childhood to adulthood, growing up in a Christian household and searching beyond those teachings, *Experiencing the Connection* discovers the importance of unity by exploring religion and personal truth. The sense of oneness and interconnection has become a personal truth, the essential belief, and symbolizes the series. An inherent intimacy is formed when creating with clay; a potter creates simply with their hands, using no other tool. Working on the potter’s wheel is a conversation, one must not only speak to the clay by guiding it into the shape desired, but one must also listen; being aware of and open to what the clay is saying and then reacting to that is the most important aspect of throwing. The metaphorical conversation that a potter has with clay during the creation process can then be “heard” when viewing a handmade pot. The pot will reveal qualities about the potter: preferences, care, and even imperfections. The immediate intimacy and connection between the clay and the potter provide the foundation for the conversation that produced this series. Through the crafting of jars, unity is created. The jar form has the added component of the lid, creating an essential need for two pieces to fit together. To add further communication between the lid and jar, complementary designs, are carved to be aesthetically pleasing on their own, yet are more powerful when stacked upon or placed with other jars. The unity is then multiplied from one jar and lid to an entire stack or family of jars, making the visual experience, or conversation, more meaningful.

Keywords: Pottery

1. Introduction

Growing up in a Christian household, I attended church every Sunday and youth service every Wednesday. I was the proper Christian girl and the proper preacher’s daughter. Despite these efforts, a true spiritual connection was never attained. Upon entering college, the importance of finding this connection with a higher power began to diminish, instead I was content without feeling any connection. In this exploration and questioning of God and religion, a personal truth has been derived—all things come from one being and one energy, “all things are really one thing,”¹ and “this one thing underlies the seeming variety of things in the world,”² In *The Book of Symbols: Reflections on Archetypal Images*, the symbol “One” is addressed, “One was thought of not as a numeral but as a philosophical idea: as the unity from which all things arise and as the source of all the numbers. Very early on, One became an image for divine unity.”³ Thought of as the source, the philosophical One begins, creates, or gives life to all things. “Angelus Silesius wrote, in the seventeenth century, ‘Just as unity is in every number / thus God is everywhere in everything.’”⁴ Furthermore, if God is this force and this central being that exists in all things, we, (human, animal, and plant), are thus one being; we are united by simply existing. I believe in change: life, death, rebirth and renewal. There is a constant energy in our universe, nothing is ever totally destroyed or created, just changed. Related to this is a poem found in the novel, *The Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler:

“All that you touch
You change

All that you change
Changes you

The only lasting truth
Is change

God
Is change”⁵

We are all connected because we come from the same ground and will go back into this ground. Through death we will be given back to the world and into the ground. Our lives will be given new meaning and purpose, providing new life for plants to grow and animals and humans to feed from. There is so much power in this idea of connection, and it is this relationship that is represented in this series. The jar form inherently requires a strong connection; everything must fit. Further pushing the need for a proper connection, jars are stacked upon one another. Without a focus on union, these pieces would collapse.

2. Conceptual Framework

Religion has been an extremely prominent aspect throughout my life, so naturally it is reflected in my work. As an artist, I make what I know, and in my craft, my hand instinctively reveals aspects of my life. The reflection of my life in this series begins with a background in the Methodist church, the richness of stories, the importance of congregation, the beauty of the architecture and art that surrounded my childhood. It is this richness that is described with the intricate carvings, and it is this congregation and community that are metaphorically represented with my sets of jars. *This is For You* (Figure 1), embodies the image of congregation and the importance of community; the idea that the whole is stronger and more powerful than the individual.

It is this background, however, and the rejection of the Christian God, that influence the need to make this series of jars. Jars are traditionally used for utilitarian purposes—to carry water, store food or even documents. This series of jars, on the other hand, are empty and more importantly, I have no desire to fill them. It is this emptiness that was found in Christianity, never able to satisfy the spiritual self, which is recognized in the void of these jars. Furthermore, it is this emptiness that drives the need to explore another path toward spiritual wholeness and meaning for this series.



Figure 1. Marisa Mahathey, *One*, 2014-2015, Clay, underglaze, 15 x 40 x 6 inches.

My exploration of different religions and thoughts toward wholeness of self and a sense of unity revealed for me that the most intriguing and the deepest sense of connection is found with the religious beliefs of Buddhism, as well

as the psychological theories of Carl Gustav Jung. Both of these views embody the importance of unity, which this series represents.

In *Jung and Chinese Religions: Buddhism and Taoism*, Henghao Liang writes, “Buddhism recognizes the existence of the universe and life, the steadiness of substance and the immortality of the spirit.”⁶ Here Liang discusses the idea of life maintaining an even substance or an even level of energy. We are born into this universe and die, maintaining a steady level of energy. There is a constant energy and our souls and our beings are recycled back into the world. The immortality of the spirit is discussed, arguing that spirit, or soul, is undying and forever. When we die we are literally going back into the ground and giving back to the world. In our death we provide new life and fertility to the ground from which plants grow and animals and insects eat and live.

Liang goes on to explain that, “Buddhism offers a genesis theory and considers that the universe and life were engendered from ‘karmic harmony.’ Karma comes together and things come into being; karma separates and there is no way to produce or destroy things.”⁷ Buddhism asserts that there has always been this level of energy or steadiness of substance and it is when these energies are in harmony that life is created.

The steadiness of substance is obvious when creating with clay. From the earth, the clay is taken. The artist is then able to shape this ball of clay using water, the wheel, and their hands. The amount of clay, or substance, does not change; only its appearance does, allowing the clay to take on a new form.

In *Spirituality and Art Therapy*, Bernie Marek explains his understanding of Buddhism, art, and healing through his work, of over twenty years, as an art therapist. Marek explains that early on he was able to see a connectedness between all things and a relationship between the world of matter and the world of the spirit. He goes on to explain that,

“Everything is alive and connected to everything else in a way that is vital to the world’s existence. We have perceptions and awareness, so that all of this beautiful and powerful world comes within our experience. Everything works together. It is so ordinary, we usually don’t think twice about it. But that ordinary world is sacred and magical when we look again, when we feel it, see it, hear it, open all our senses to its profundity.”⁸

We are all connected by this world and to this world. Through our very existence we are tied to one another. Marek further explains that, “Only by embracing all of ourselves are we able to know the wholeness of the world and our inherent inseparability and interdependence with it.”⁹ Through the practice of knowing ourselves, we are able to know the world. We are reliant on one another, whether we choose to embrace that or be blind to it.

Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), a famous Swiss psychologist, was the founder of analytical psychology. He was strongly focused on archetypal and symbolic theory and claimed that the “unconscious, especially the collective unconscious, is the starting point and purpose of pursuing ultimate spirit or reality.”¹⁰ He was heavily influenced by Chinese philosophy and religions, thus his insightful psychological speculations are very reminiscent of the teachings in these religions.

Jung had an extreme interest in mandalas (Figure 2) and thought that the mandala was a symbol for psychological wholeness. He identified the two main functions of the mandala: “regaining intrinsic psychological order and creating new psychological order.”¹¹ He found that the mandala is able to guide a person into a new psychological wholeness by drawing the person back to a state of intrinsic order and also allowing a new order to be created. “Jung discovered that, as an archetypal image deep in the human psyche, the mandala generated spontaneous reduction of mental confusion and restored mental balance and order.”¹² Naturally, upon reaching this conclusion Jung made the mandala a very important component of psychotherapy.

The use of repetition of pattern is an intriguing feature of the mandala. Appropriating this traditional form, the artwork in *Experiencing the Connection* takes the mandala out of the circle or square format, and applies the concept with patterning down the sides of jars (Figure 5). A traditionally formatted mandala was created for this series (Figure 3). This piece is comprised of broken pieces of failed jars. Taking the failures and frustrations of these old jars and placing them into a mandala provides new order and purpose.

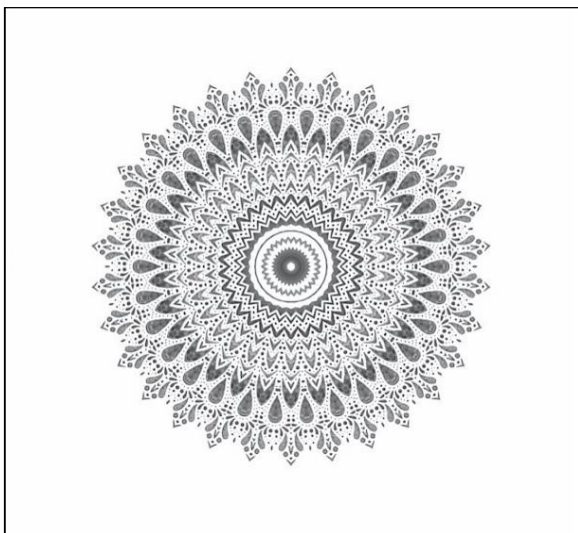


Figure 2. Anna Eidenberg, *Untitled*, 2015,
New media, 8 x 8 inches.
<http://kiefferceramics.com/bio/artist-statement/>



Figure 3, Marisa Mahathey, *New Order*, 2015,
Ceramics, 47 x 47 x 3 inches.

3. Influences

Adam Field is a prominent contemporary ceramicist. Born and raised in Colorado, Field earned his BA in Art from Fort Lewis College. He spent most of 2009 in Icheon, South Korea where he studied traditional Korean pottery techniques under 6th generation Onggi master, Kimm Il Mahn. He currently resides in Helena, Montana where he is a long-term artist-in-residence at The Archie Bray Foundation.

Field's work was very inspiring to this series due to the care and intention in his carving. His line work is crisp and intricate (Figure 4). Field writes, "The surface of my pottery is meticulously carved with intricate designs that borrow from nature and incorporate the human touch. Much of the carving on my work is informed by the pattern languages found in indigenous fiber art, such as Hawaiian tapa, Incan cordage and Zulu basketry."¹³

In the August 2015 issue of *Ceramics Monthly*, Field was a featured artist. The article commented on how Field uses technology, primarily Instagram, to create a community. The author, Lauren Karle, explains "The point of this network is to encourage sharing of information, techniques, and inspirations behind the work."¹⁴ Instagram has become a means of sharing information and also a means for a virtual community. In this era of technology creating a new form of community is possible and become much more frequent. Field says, "we might work alone in the studio, but we need community to grow and to succeed."¹⁵ Being able to communicate with potters across the world allows for a much greater gain of knowledge. Allowing questions, ideas, and inspirations to reach a larger network creates a community. We are able to depend on one another, giving and receiving. The author goes on to write, "Whether virtual or physical, our relationship with our community is reciprocal. We change the community and are in turn changed by it."¹⁶



Figure 4. Adam Field, *Covered Jar*, 2014, Porcelain with carved pattern and celadon glazes, 16 x 10 x 10 inches.
<http://www.adamfieldpottery.com/about/>

Kristen Kieffer is another prominent artist in contemporary ceramics. She earned her BFA from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University in 1995 and went on to earn her MFA in 2001 from Ohio University. Living in north central Massachusetts, Kieffer is a full-time studio potter, workshop presenter, and ceramics instructor. Her work has a broad array of influences that focus on elegance and detail. She brings together connections from the Victorian period, 18th century silver service pieces, Art Nouveau illustrations, and cake fondant.

Her work is elegant while remaining functional, seeking to combine “the splendor of past eras with a modern desire for beauty and utility.”¹⁷ Similar to *Experiencing the Connection*, Kieffer takes the traditionally functional form and makes it elegant and beautiful. She maintains the importance of functionality in her work, while I do not. However, the process and intention are similar. Kieffer states, “I use repetitive pattern and accents to compliment and define form. These external embellishments are smaller, detailed lines and shapes giving strength to the bold lines defining the pot’s shape.”¹⁸ The importance of pattern and repetition is an aspect that is greatly admired in Kieffer’s work (Figure 5). Though different in style, her process is very influential to *Experiencing the Connection*.



Figure 5. Kristen Kieffer, "Small Jar Grouping," 2014, Porcelain, slip, underglaze.
<http://kiefferceramics.com/bio/artist-statement/>

4. Process

Sketched out, thrown, and trimmed, each jar goes through a defining moment to determine what is next. A series of questions is then asked: Does this piece need a pedestal? Is it good enough to stand on its own? Should there be carving or should the piece speak for itself without surface detail? In order to satisfy all these desires and maintain a cohesive body of work, this period of limbo has been narrowed down by creating specific rules and guidelines for this series. By creating certain guidelines, it is easier to maintain a plan and a cohesive body for *Experiencing the Connection*.

Some pieces are called stacked jars, meaning, quite literally, one jar is stacked upon another. These stacks require at least two jars, but are typically comprised of three pieces (Figure 6). These stacked pieces, detailed with intricate carving, stand close to life-size in order to accentuate the power of unity and connection.

The other style of jar created is referred to as a single level jar, simply meaning that it is not stacked (Figure 1). Each single level jar that is thrown with fewer than ten pounds of clay will stand on its own without surface detail, while the single level jars that are larger than ten pounds will require intricate carving. Intended to be shown in groupings or families, the smaller jars demonstrate the power of unity and the importance of a collective whole. These pieces are intended to give the impression of a congregation, as the congregation is arguably the most important aspect of the church.

The process of carving begins firstly, and most importantly, in the sketchbook. The patterning on these jars is primarily influenced by Mehndi designs which are more commonly known as henna. When first stacking jars there was an inherent Islamic architectural quality that was admired. Inspired by this aesthetic, I began borrowing further from this culture by looking into traditional designs and applying them to the jars. In order to allow a personal style and meaning to come out, these designs are referenced, in this series, but are not strictly followed. Rather than trying to portray other cultures and their beliefs, I choose to incorporate my own religious experience. Once a design has been determined, it is time to apply it to the jars. The carving process begins with a pencil and a piece of paper. From the sheet of paper a circle is cut which then provides a guideline for the arches and becomes the foundation of my carving. When carving, a hard leather hard surface is most desirable. Hard leather hard is the state of clay once it has dried to the point of no longer being malleable, but is not yet dry. This stage is most desirable because it allows room for trial and error; being able to draw directly onto the jar without indenting the clay provides another surface to sketch on and figure out details without yet fully committing. Once the design has been roughly sketched onto the jar (Figure 7), the slip trailing began (Figure 8), which leaves a raised line or area, providing more surface levels and a stronger sense of depth. Black and white slip was used in order to create contrast and intensify the pattern. After completing the slip work, the next step is going back over and cleaning up the lines, then carving the details on to the piece (Figure 8 & 9).

Influenced by the mandala symbol, focus is placed on the importance of repetition. Repetition is soothing and enchanting and as Jung explained, a sense of wholeness is achieved with the mandala pattern. While the traditional mandala is rarely used in this series, the pattern of the stacked jars has no beginning or end. The pattern is intentionally drawn in order to connect the arches on each side, providing a never ending pattern. Through pulling the design down each level of a stacked jar, a further and more intrinsic unity is achieved and the pattern solidifies the idea of oneness. Patterning is created and repeated throughout the series of stack jars. Most commonly used are the repetition of the flower to symbolize nature, the repetition of the small arches to symbolize hills, and the repetition of line to symbolize the pathway to which all things are united. In this series of stacked jars, there is an interest in the arch, which is defined as a “curved part of a structure that is over an opening and that supports a wall or other weight above the opening.”¹⁹ Drawn to the arch for what it symbolizes—strength, stability, and support—this becomes a primary focus throughout this body of work. This symbolism is truly what is exemplified in the unity of all that the universe possesses.



Figure 6. Marisa Mahathey, *Archway of Love*, 2015, Phoenix clay, 60"x18"x18".



Figure 7.

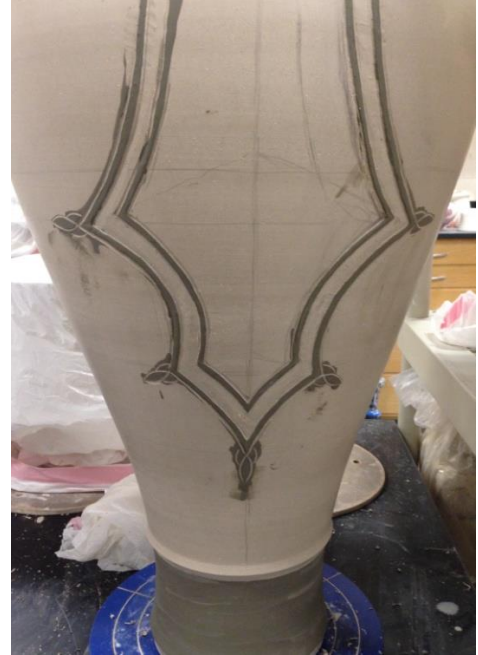


Figure 9.



Figure 8.

Marisa Mahathey, 2015, In progress photographs of *Archway of Love*, Phoenix clay, black slip, 60"x18"x18".

5. Conclusion

By rendering the life cycle in the patterns placed on the stacked jars, connection and unity become ever present. These elements drive my passion for creating jars. The process of making a jar is somewhat tedious, getting the right measurement, trimming to make the lid fit the pot perfectly. The importance of the idea of connection compels me to make these jars. Moreover, I am driven to stack jars to multiply the importance of unity (Figure 5).

Buddhism stresses the importance of meditation, which is a time to concentrate one's heart to one point. Meditation is meant to achieve a clean and tranquil state of mind, free of delusions, trouble, and evil.²⁰ This state of tranquility and time for meditation is achieved while in the studio. When working on the wheel, I am focused on one thought. Bringing the clay into center, I thus bring myself into center, and for a moment in time, I am not focused on the stressors of time, money, or duty; rather I am focused on art and craft. My mind comes to center and I am at peace. Additionally, I achieve the same stillness of mind while carving. Focused only on removing the clay, it is a process of cleaning, smoothing, and perfecting. As I clean and smooth the edges of each line, I smooth over the struggles of my day, and once again I am at peace.

The unity of all things is what drives me as a human being and as an artist. The power that people and the world possess as a whole is so much stronger than what we are individually. "Yet the sense of the deeper connectedness of all things, that 'the multiplicity of the empirical world rests on an underlying unity,' ...can return in maturity when it may be sensed that male and female, spirit and body, inner and outer, conscious and the unconscious, the I and the Thou, are One."²¹ We can achieve peace and calmness when we realize we are One. This body of work is an effort to communicate the awareness of truth to the viewer.

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7. Endnotes

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