

Earth as Canvas: Immortalizing Family Narratives in Clay

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Abstract

Losing oneself in a story is a cathartic experience: listening, reading, watching, and telling are all forms of release and connection. However, the viewer conventionally experiences narratives once-removed, as images on a screen, as words or drawings on flat pieces of paper. The viewer and the story do not exist on the same plane. A notable exception to this two-dimensional tendency is the rich history of using clay as a canvas upon which to paint stories and myths. When integrated with a three-dimensional form, a story can exist in the same physical environment as the viewer, and the distances between viewer, storyteller, and story become less divisive. By challenging the tradition of preserving stories in two dimensions, the experience of narrative can become more intimate, more immersive, more interactive. Clay's seemingly paradoxical qualities of permanence and transmutability can more tactilely and permanently capture the evolution of a family's memories, stories, and language in interactive, three-dimensional ceramic objects. While wet, clay is malleable and changes over time as it is shaped, just as memories and stories change each time they are recalled or retold; after firing, ceramics become intimate, daily-use objects that can withstand the test of time, so that family stories can live on within the objects generations after the original storyteller has passed. The drawing style developed for this body of work is a contemporary remix of historical styles of drawing on ceramics, influenced by modern animation and illustration aesthetics; this style serves to provide space in the contemporary world for two precious traditions that modern values have labeled outmoded: ceramics and the stories of older generations. In *Earth as Canvas: Immortalizing Family Narratives in Clay*, family stories are preserved in and on ceramic vessels. Most of the pieces are functional, or suggest functionality, to encourage daily use and intimacy between the piece and the user. Ideally, each time an object that embodies a story is used, the user will recall both the story and their memory or imagined persona of the storyteller, fostering intergenerational connections and an art-as-object, object-as-art appreciation.

1. Introduction

As the world continues to change more and more rapidly, ideas and technologies are becoming outdated at a faster rate and are left behind with the passing of each generation. Quotidian communication, relationships, and object design are now focused on efficiency, precision, and utilizing the latest technologies (e.g. texting, dating websites, 3D printing). These technologies facilitate cultural exchanges and ease information access, but at what cost? In America, children and adults alike now spend more time than ever looking at screens, "interacting" in virtual environments and becoming less involved in the physical world. In fact, one of the most accessible types of virtual socialization, video gaming, has been proven to increase social phobia and social withdrawal, which decreases a person's interaction with the physical world and engagement with friends and family members. An additional concern for these new modes of communication and non-physical interactions is that the histories of individuals from older generations, who do not engage as much with these new technologies, will have their stories lost to time and change. Younger generations will not be able to access the wisdoms of family members who came before them.

It is crucial to look ahead to the future and embrace technological advances, but in that choice, the modern world devalues intergenerational connections and forsakes an appreciation for slowing down, for handmade imperfections, for the tactile nature of our physical existence, for understanding all the stories of the people who came before us. Can traditional object-making methods become relevant and valued once more? Can a collection of handmade objects provide a narrative environment that stimulates multi-generational social interaction, story-sharing, and engagement in the physical world?

Although the ways we interact with both objects and other people are evolving, one tradition has withstood centuries in most cultures: people using food-- and the vessels that food is held in-- to engender community gatherings and face-to-face socializations. My family is not exempt from this tradition; our family gatherings have always been places where storytelling, food, and utilitarian clay vessels intersect. Why not integrate the stories into the objects, so that the stories can live on long after the storytellers?

With this body of work, my aim is to present a physical, durable, mythologized collection of my family's personal stories. I will recreate cherished domestic objects-- objects that are traditionally passed down as heirlooms such as dishes, tea sets, growlers, cups, etc.-- to embody nostalgic stories that I've gathered from relatives and then reimagined inside the fantastical landscape of my own writing. With clay, I will transform my family's stories into whimsical objects and environments that allow the audience to become physically immersed in an atmosphere created by image and form.

This collection will explore the preservation of stories and dreams on canvases of earth, the relationship between the temporal qualities of clay and oral storytelling, how handmade objects can engage the modern viewer, and how the weathering of ceramic objects over time mirrors fluctuations in memory. The stylized illustrations that wrap around the forms will be reminiscent of pictures from cartoons and animations, to be more accessible and engaging to the contemporary world. By making personal stories into physical objects for others to hold and touch, I hope to foster an emotional connection between myself as an artist, the original storyteller, the art object, and the viewer. These teapots, these cups, these links of clay all capture stories of personal joy and trauma that will outlast their creator and continue to evolve each time someone interacts with them.

2. Research: Narrative Images and A History of Drawing on Earth

For thousands of years, artists have been painting stories on surfaces of earth. Some of the oldest discovered cave paintings are in Chauvet Cave in southern France, with radiocarbon dates showing initial human occupation 35,000 years ago. These paintings depict beautifully stylized renderings of daily life, including animals such as rhinos, panthers, bears, and horses; the ancient artists painted scenes from their lives, and modern viewers can understand their stories from the imagery left behind. As humans settled and cultures developed over time, using earth as a canvas became even more sophisticated; first, earthenware vessels became essential for daily life, but soon utilitarian clay forms developed into an outlet for aesthetic excellence.

Few examples of decorated clay surfaces are more widely recognized than the black- and red-figure style of ancient Athenian pottery. The imagery on these Greek vessels displays both mythological and mundane motifs, and were used for both utilitarian and ceremonial occasions. The vessels invite the user to explore the dimensionality of the form, to see all facets of the scene that unfolds upon the object's surface.



(Figure 1) Attributed to the Amasis Painter, *Terracotta Kylix (drinking cup)*, 540 BCE, Greek, Attic, terracotta; black-figure. <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1989.281.62/>

Nearly every culture that developed ceramic vessels also developed unique styles of decorating those vessels. In Mayan civilization, “ceramics became the canvases [for] artists to create scenes of myths, often dedicated to their patrons with hieroglyphic texts.” “Codex-style” vessels, like the drinking cup in figure #, are recognized as such for being decorated with calligraphic lines that are similar to those found in the few surviving Maya texts. In fact, because ceramics are more enduring than paper, the imagery on codex-style vessels are key in supplementing researchers’ understandings of Mayan culture. Since “only four Maya codices have survived from what was certainly a large corpus, these codex-style vessels afford a glimpse into the rich world of painted narratives and complex Maya mythologies.” If this civilization had relied solely text- and paper-based record-keeping, we likely wouldn’t know nearly as much about them. On these vessels, “the painting is so detailed that it must be appreciated at close viewing; the beholder is invited to turn the cylindrical vessel around to make different parts of the scene appear.” Because the story wraps around the whole form, it engages the viewer or user more dynamically than a painting hanging on a wall.

Although these Mayan vessels are intricately decorated, many of them were intended for daily use: “Ceramic vessels nourished in both life and death: they held food and drink for daily life, but also offerings in dedicatory caches and burials.” People of varying standings and in various social contexts (both mundane and ceremonial) were meant to touch and use these vessels that were decorated with generational wisdom and centuries of mythological histories.



(Figure 2) *Vessel, Mythological Scene*, 7th-8th century, Mesoamerica, Maya, ceramic.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/314217>

The Moche, a Peruvian civilization contemporary to the Maya, also developed intricate ceramic surfaces to preserve their stories and incorporate mythologies into everyday life and death: “decorated vessels were an integral part of household-level rituals, meetings, and other status-building activities like feasts, where they were displayed, used, accidentally broken.” The forms and scenes of each piece were chosen with the vessel’s function in mind; “some categories of vessels, as well as depictions of some religious themes, were exclusively destined for burial with the dead or for use in elite ritual performances. However, a great variety of vessels, many of them identical to those found in graves, were destined for domestic use.”



(Figure 3) *Confronting Figures Bottle*, 4th-7th century, Peru, Moche, ceramic.
<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310522>

3. Conceptual Context: In Defense of Clay and Material as Extended Metaphor

Why draw on clay instead of paper? This is a question I have faced many times over the course of my research and development of this body of work, a question I have conjured many defenses for. First, I must counter: why draw on paper? Why is paper the conventional surface for a drawing to be made on? After all, paper deteriorates relatively quickly, discolors without proper treatment, and cannot physically engage the viewer in the way a touchable object can. Narrative ceramic objects are more dynamic in a variety of ways: at a small scale, the viewer is able to intimately caress the story and incorporate it into their life; at a large scale, the viewer must physically engage in the story, walking around the entire object to “read” the timeline of the narrative.

Adding narrative drawings to clay surfaces works as an analogy: a story is about memories, as is clay. Both clay and stories are dependent on the passage of time and have transformative, transmutable qualities: wet clay, fired ceramic vessels, and stories all change over time, usually, slowly, and hopefully, gracefully. Of course, wet clay is easily transformed by molding, carving, and throwing on the wheel. Likewise, each time a story is told, it changes depending on the teller, the listeners, and the environment. Even fired clay is forever altered each time it is touched; although a fired vessel may not appear to change instantly, years and years of use will inevitably alter it as time passes.

For example, a Japanese teapot for green tea, *kyusu*, is often left unglazed on the inside, so that over time, the raw clay absorbs the flavor of the tea each time it is used. After enough repetition, a *kyusu* can brew a pot of tea by adding hot water alone. Every ceramic object, whether glazed or unglazed, changes with each use and each touch--perhaps not visually, or immediately, but changes nonetheless. As functional ceramic objects sustain daily use, oils from hands and food slowly and subtly leave their impressions over time, just as each time a story is shared, it is remembered and told slightly differently based on the setting, audience, and state of mind of the teller.

Despite the fact that ceramic objects evolve as time passes, they have proven more durable than other modes of record-keeping, such as words on paper. The fact that archaeologists can study ceramics from centuries ago demonstrates the permanence of this medium. So too does the tradition of oral storytelling prove its perpetuity. Take, for example, the Indigenous North American cultures that relied solely on oral communication to record years upon years of history. Oral storytelling is “the means by which knowledge is reproduced, preserved and conveyed from generation to generation. Oral traditions form the foundation of Aboriginal societies, connecting speaker and listener in communal experience and uniting past and present in memory.” In this body of work, I aim to combine my family’s

personal tradition of oral storytelling with ceramic objects to tactilely connect current and past family members with future generations.

4. Method

The idea for this project was engendered by the first creative nonfiction writing course I took. In this course, I wrote pieces about my personal history in the style of magical realism, incorporating fantastical elements into my otherwise truthful recollections; this stylistic choice allowed me more creative freedom with language and text-based imagery. I wanted to share these stories with others, but in a way that was more accessible and visual.

Once I discovered that I could draw on the ceramics I was already making, the first images I painted onto clay forms were scenes and motifs from these mythologized autobiographical pieces. However, as this body of work expanded, so did its content and concept. Inspirations for pieces expanded beyond my own life and into the memories of family members who deeply influence me, as story-sharing has been a highlight of my upbringing. At family gatherings and whenever I visit home, personal anecdotes are the basis of how we communicate and connect with one another. I began wondering how my parents' and grandparents' stories will survive after they die. Where will their stories go? Their stories will live on in my memory, but perhaps that is not enough. How can I share my families stories with others, act as a conduit between the teller and the listener, when the teller is gone?

My great-grandpa, Pop-Pop, is 98 years old, and I never know when the last time I talk to him will be. He has so many stories to tell from his life, and one our mutual favorites is a story from when he was just a kid. In the off season, the Barnum and Bailey Circus would set up camp down the street from where he lived. The animals would need to be exercised every day, and so the circus folk would parade the lions, and giraffes, and elephants, and all the other wild animals down the road. All the while, Pop-Pop and the other neighborhood kids would sit together on one of their porches and watch the spectacle go by. Pop-Pop tells this story in such a way that his nostalgia becomes palpable, and I can feel how much the world has changed since his childhood.

I designed a set of cups based on this story: each cup has a circus animal wrapped around it, warping the figure in the way a memory warps over time and through retellings. The cups will be presented all in a row, the way I imagine the animals were walked down the street, with the cup with a caricature of my grandpa as a kid on the end, chasing after the animals in excitement. The intention is that with each use, the cups will transport the user and let them become a part of the story.



(Figure 4) Kalee Calhoun, *The Lion Next Door (Cup Series)*, 2018, porcelain and underglaze. Artist's own image.

Growing up, I have especially shown an interest in stories from my parents' youths. One story that I've asked to hear nearly every year is the tale of how they met. I love hearing about how my parents were at my age, and have developed my own idealized, fictional versions of them in my version of the story. I wanted to visualize these personas on a functional form that my parents could use, so I made a teapot and integrated their imagined forms onto the surfaces. I paid special attention to cater the two dimensional shapes to the three dimensional form. The loss of angular

joints in the human figures mirrors the voluptuous curves of the teapot, while the voluminous hair of my mother and record in my dad's hand mimics the bulbous silhouette of the spout. Each figure wraps around the teapot but has its own dedicated side, to reflect the idea that each story has more than one perspective-- in this case, the story has two perspectives, and is slightly different depending on which of my parents tells it.



(Figure 5) Kalee Calhoun, *Before I Was Here*, 2018, stoneware and underglaze. Artist's own image.

The majority of my work is functional, as utilitarian ceramics support the intersection of food and stories-- the two things I am most nostalgic about-- and are consistently present during family gatherings. Throughout the process of this thesis, I've been thinking about how functional ceramics can act as a sort of social hub. People gather around food-- and the ceramic vessels that hold the food--not only to nourish the body, but also to socialize and share tales with friends and family. The socializing is activity based; the interactions between two or more people and between those people and functional ceramic objects end when the food is gone, when the cup or bowl is set down on the table. Can ceramic objects be designed in such a way that they would essentially extend these social interactions and the user's interaction with the object? I have a difficult time reaching out to others when unprompted-- could the design of functional objects ease this tension and provide an activity to stimulate story-sharing among friends and family?

This train of thought led me to design a prototype for a cup and flask set. It was a set of four cups and one flask, with a matching holder. The cups and flask had convex bases, and so could not be set down on a flat surface like a table. Instead, if users wished to set down their cups, they must use the holder in which the cups fit. Essentially, this design was intended to increase the interaction between the user and the ceramic objects, and also the likelihood of interaction between multiple users of the ceramic set, with the cup holder acting as a central "hub" for user-object and user-user interaction. This design, therefore, was supposed to encourage story-sharing between multiple users. The flask and cup set was going to be decorated with images from a story of social anxiety and isolation from my childhood, but the prototype ended up failing due to construction issues.

Instead, with the same goal of creating objects to stimulate socialization, I designed a more straightforward growler and cup set aimed to facilitate conversations with my dad. My relationship with my dad has always been less tumultuous than with my mom, and as I've gotten older, I've found myself wanting to strengthen my friendship with my father and learn more about what his life was like before having a family, who is beyond being my parent. He is very passionate about beer, and it is novel now that I am at an age where I can share a drink and conversation with him-- so I decided to make a personalized ceramics set designed for this specific social interaction. The growler and cups are decorated with hands that loop around one another, representing the difficulties of connecting with a parent and the transitional period of becoming genuine friends with a family member. The hands are painted in black and make different gestures, referencing the variety of communication and storytelling modes: body language and hand gestures while speaking, using shadow puppets to represent a narrative, reaching out to a loved one to offer a helping hand in times of need, etc.



(Figure 6) Kalee Calhoun, *Shadow Puppets in Our Drinks (Growler)*, 2018, stoneware and underglaze. Artist's own image.

After starting this project and interviewing family members to collect stories, I discovered that I was unwittingly continuing a Calhoun family tradition of story preservation. After talking with my paternal grandmother, I learned that both she, her mother, and her cousins and siblings have all kept records of family stories. In fact, my grandma had found her mother's diary several years ago, and it was full of recollections of her childhood. I used material from this diary to inspire a series of poems in which I re-imagined my great-grandmother's upbringing, and then translated these stories into images on large ceramic vessels. These large pots were made using the same methods used by the craftspeople of 4th century BCE Greece: thrown in sections on the wheel, connected rim-to-rim, and finally decorated. One of these pieces, *Great-Grandma Mary Finds the Runaway Goslings!* (Figure 7) combines several of her childhood stories into one contiguous circular scene in a cartoon style. This vessel is more monumental and less intimate in scale and form to reflect the ceremonial aspect of re-interpreting stories from several generations ago. My interpretations of these stories are far removed from the original teller and have nearly transformed into fantasy and myth in my imagination, and I wanted this distance to be reflected in scale and imagery. The older the tale, the more closely it is connected to death; stories from family members I didn't get the chance to meet are captured in forms that are more tributary and funerary than intended for daily use, yet become contemporarily relevant through my stylized drawings.



(Figure 7) Kalee Calhoun, *Great-Grandma Mary Finds the Runaway Goslings!*, 2018, stoneware and underglaze. Artist's own image.

Although the majority of this collection focuses on functional pottery, I also chose to experiment with the more formal aspects of materiality as an analogy for my concept. I made a series consisting of ceramic tiles and pen and ink drawings to capture dreams and memories, and explore how their permanence relates to the materials upon which they are recorded. Although dreams don't occur in reality, they are still stored in the brain as memories and can be shared just as any other story can. However, memories of dreams usually fade more quickly than memories of real-life occurrences. In *Last Night, This Morning, Centuries From Now, I Will Cry Upon Waking* (Figure 8), I recorded images from my dreams as pen and ink drawings on paper. Paper is an impermanent material, decomposing more quickly than ceramics, just as dreams fade faster than reality. These pen and ink drawings are interspersed with ceramic tiles of the same size. The tiles are decorated with motifs from personal stories based in reality, representing the relative permanence of my actual experiences and the likelihood that my own stories will be carried into the future.



(Figure 8) Kalee Calhoun, Drawing from Series: *Last Night, This Morning, Centuries From Now, I Will Cry Upon Waking*, 2018, pen and ink. Artist's own image.

The second more conceptual series I worked on also focuses on material as a metaphor. As previously established, clay is soft and receptive to change when wet, but it later solidifies-- so I discovered a way to use clay to make something that retains articulation after firing, the way words and stories continue to change and expand after being written or spoken. Fabric is a material with transformative, mobile qualities, and so I challenged myself to make a structure from clay that could mimic the articulate nature of fabric, and of words. The only way to force clay to remain articulate after being fired is to make a larger structure of many smaller individual pieces. By making individual links of clay coils and joining them together much like chainmail, the structure retained mobility after vitrification. These pieces are meant to be touched and used to the same degree as my functional ceramics. When these sculptures are picked up and moved around, they form different shapes and tell different stories-- the pieces literally make sounds as they move, the ceramics loops gently clinking against one another. The clay itself speaks to the person who interacts with it, and the viewer can interpret the story as they like, just as my own family members, generations from now, will personally interpret the histories I've preserved in these ceramics.



(Figure 9) Kalee Calhoun, *Move Me and Listen to My Story*, 2017, porcelain. Artist's own image.

5. Contemporary Influences

During the development of this body of work, it has been just as crucial to look at three-dimensional ceramic artists as two-dimensional illustrators and printmakers. Both the Art Nouveau movement and contemporary folk-style illustrations have strongly influenced the imagery present in this work; these two styles of illustration exemplify visual storytelling while also toeing the border of decorative arts, which is crucial to the history of ceramics. Folk-style illustration is quite effective at expressing narrative, as it employs clean linework and a simplified palette to create easily accessible imagery.

For example, the mixed-media artist and illustrator Anne-Laure Charlier marries highly narrative, folk-style drawings and functional ceramic forms. She uses a limited range of colors-- usually red and black on stark white porcelain-- and whimsical motifs like fish, birds, and hat-wearing children, which alludes to storybook illustrations. These objects become characters in and of themselves, and their deceptive simplicity invites people to touch and use them daily. Similarly, Elyse-Krista AnnaMarie Mische uses folk-style illustrations to share stories from a fictional, fantastical world that she has created herself. She expresses an interest in ideas that intersect with the focuses of my own work, such as memories, environments, and stories. In her artist statement, Mische claims that she is “influenced by exchanging life experiences and stories with others... and by the preservation of history and memories of the past. [Her] processes are fueled by... observing and interacting with environments and people around [her] to understand how we value, view, and preserve time.”



(Figure 10) Anne-Laure Charlier, *Untitled*, 2017, assorted porcelain wares.
<http://annelaurecharlier.blogspot.fr/p/fantaisie-utilitaire.html>



(Figure 11) AnnaMarie Mische, *Metamorphose*, 2017, pen, ink, watercolor, mica watercolor.
<http://lifepropaganda.com/new-drawings/>

Additionally, in developing my own drawing style, I have looked at an abundance of two dimensional artists; since screen-based storytelling is now ubiquitous, drawing inspiration from this medium helps a historical medium like ceramics remain relevant. Furthermore, the medium of animation is inherently narrativist, and looking at animation styles to influence my own work has helped me successfully transpose the formal qualities of storytelling into the new medium of clay. Furthermore, the sensibilities of two dimensional animations, such as their conciseness of line and color, can be naturally incorporated into three-dimensional objects. The simplification of forms and values helps clarify movement, express the narrative passage of time, and can successfully be wrapped around a physical form without detracting from its silhouette.

Late Night Work Group, a collective of international animators, exemplifies the style of animation I am influenced by. In particular, the styles of Charles Huettner, Alex Grigg, and Dave Prosser embody the aesthetics I draw inspiration

from. Each frame puts the acting character in the center of the composition, eliminating any chance for narrative confusion; their lines and colors are minimalistic and effective.



(Figure 12) Alex Griggs, still from *Loopdeloop*, 2016. <http://www.alexgrigg.com/portfolio/tower-block-loopdeloop>



(Figure 13) Charles Huettner, animation still, 2016. <http://charleshuettner.tumblr.com/>

As for contemporary three-dimensional artists, the works of Grayson Perry and Lukas Easton are highly applicable. Lukas Easton's work is comprised of enormous urn-like vessels that have been entirely covered in carvings. He chooses a topic for each vessel, and then carves low-relief images into the clay surfaces. Each piece contains an overwhelming amount of visual information, which is the opposite of my natural style, but looking at his work has been crucial because he really celebrates the medium of clay by exclusively carving the imagery; each of his pieces undoubtedly tells a story. Likewise, Grayson Perry entirely covers his ceramic vessels with layers of images. He often pairs together unexpected visuals, going for shock value and not necessarily valuing a narrative cohesion. Nonetheless, viewers will naturally imagine a narrative when faced with such imagery, despite the artist's intentions.



(Figure 14) Grayson Perry, *The Rosetta Vase*, earthenware and underglaze, 2011.
http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?partid=1&assetid=1213762001&objectid=3464588

Yoko Sekino-Bové's work is similar, but relies even more on hand-painted images and text than decals and transfers, and appears more usable. Her work incorporates text with image, presenting commonplace sayings in tandem with funny characters. All three of these ceramic artists use a three-dimensional form to engage the viewer in narrative imagery, and I looked to their expertise while developing my own body of work.



(Figure 15) Yoko Sekino-Bové, *Wonton Wisdom (left), Moon Cycle (right)*, 2016, porcelain and underglaze. <http://www.yokosekinobove.com/genuine-fake-china-seires-images/rhq0j0pzyeptbqv3rl9z3bfqcdbd>

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, clay is the ideal medium for preserving personal family histories. In *Earth As Canvas: Immortalizing Family Narratives in Clay*, the medium is used to link the past, present, and future by referencing both historical traditions and contemporary aesthetics. The chosen medium of ceramics further supports my concept by its innate qualities: its mutability reflects the transformation of stories and memories over time, while its durability accomplishes this project's goal of sending my family's stories into the future. It is my ardent hope that the ceramics that comprise this collection of work will be passed down as heirlooms to the future generations of my family, and my memories will be passed down along with them.

7. Acknowledgements

Thank you to the University of North Carolina at Asheville's Department of Art and Art History for awarding several scholarships so that I could attend workshops that would not have otherwise been possible. Thank you to my workshop instructors Kevin Crowe, Fong Choo, Doug Peltzman and Adam Field for improving my craftsmanship more quickly than I could have imagined. Finally, I would like to express a special thanks to Megan Wolfe for her unyielding support and encouragement throughout this entire process.

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