

To Each Their Share



Call and response: The ceramic practice of Carole Epp

Chiho Tokita



"Do I have the right to tell these stories?" Carole is getting ready for a show in Florida and is grappling with the issue of cultural appropriation, thinking about current events that are important to her, but asking herself, are these hers to tell? How does she approach Black Lives Matter and LGBTQ issues in her practice as a "white heterosexual upper-middle class woman" who "cares about everything!"? She is mindful of how telling someone else's story can become taking over their story, and a presumption of speaking about an experience that is not her own. She is a vivacious person who immediately welcomes you into what is going on in her head and the issue she is trying to reconcile. Carole and I had scheduled a time to talk on the phone, wedged between the drop-off and pick-up of her youngest son. Carole Epp has been chosen by Ceramics Monthly and Pottery Making Illustrated as their 2017 Ceramic Artist of the Year, where she is featured in the Ceramic Arts 2017 Yearbook. It seemed only right that we take the opportunity to spotlight her practice on home turf. No doubt to those who know Carole's blog, *Musing About Mud*, her contribution to the wider ceramic community is indisputable. According to Ben Carter, an American potter and the host of a ceramic podcast, *The Tales of a Red Clay Rambler*, it is one of the most visited sites in ceramics. If that were not enough, another project that she recently initiated with Mariko Paterson was *Make and Do*.

Launched in 2016, it started as a web-based collective of Canadian ceramic makers. Still evolving and redefining itself, Carole says it will be rebranded in the upcoming future as a place for more broadly promoting Canadian ceramics, expanding on the idea behind the directory of Canadian ceramics that currently exists. She hopes that it will eventually offer more opportunities for involvement, so stay tuned.

A native of Regina, Saskatchewan, Carole earned a BFA with distinction in ceramics from the University of Regina, studying with Ruth Chambers, Jack Sures and Rory Macdonald. With the original intention of studying painting, she switched to ceramics realizing that she enjoyed making objects. Interested in the way slip casting allowed her to transform common everyday objects, her ceramic practice at that time focused on installation work addressing concern over genetically modified food and the struggles of smaller independent farms against the power of large farm corporations. Moving to Edmonton after graduation, she worked in the contemporary art world for a few years and decided that she wanted to make work that could be approached by a broader audience, to make work that "met people half way." Intrigued by the ideas that Janet DeBoos was exploring within functional ceramics, she went on to earn an MFA at Australian National University, studying with DeBoos and Greg Daly. Returning back to Canada, she and her husband live in

Saskatoon with two young sons. With a studio located in the basement of her home, Carole constructs a practice working within the parameters of a family life, in what can be described as a catch-as-catch-can method. While some artists have a clear singularity of focus in their practice, others incorporate seemingly divergent interests. I was curious about Carole's practice as it explored two distinct bodies of work, and as such, intrigued about the relationship between the two - whether and how they inform each other, and if there was an underlying framework that would explain a connection.

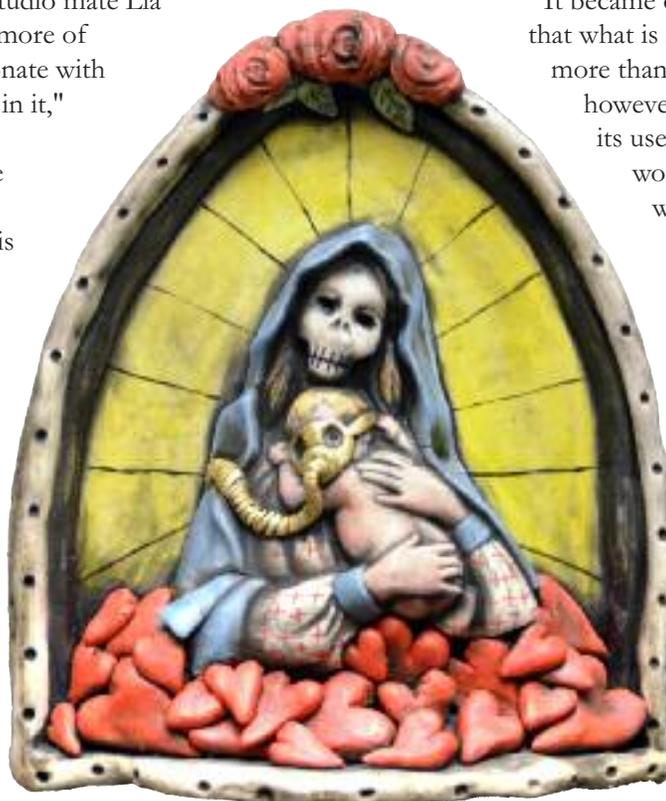
In one series of sculptural work, slip-cast Hummel figurines are recast in vignettes that upon closer examination belie their seemingly sweet exterior. Hummel figurines were manufactured in Germany during the 1930s and are based on pastoral drawings of children by Berta Hummel, which became very popular in the United States after World War II. Seeing the original figurines as "propaganda for idealized humanity," Carole juxtaposes their idyllic content with harsher realities. As social and political commentary, the sculptural body of her practice addresses what is disturbing and dysfunctional about contemporary society. The works are responses to current events and to her own personal narrative, looking at the ways in which suffering exists - the ways we hurt each other and ourselves. Learning during her time at graduate school (thanks to her studio mate Lia Tajcnar) that she needed to put more of herself in the work for it to resonate with others, "to have some humanity in it," her figurative work attempts to address social issues through the lens of her own life rather than presenting itself as a placard. It is the irony of finding the universal through the particular. In *At All Cost*, using the iconic image of the Madonna and Child, the work depicts a blond baby with a gas mask being held by a woman, surrounded by a mound of heart shapes. The work speaks to her experience of parenthood and a maternal desire to "save my son (at the time when she had only one) at all cost" in what is implied

as an inhospitable environment. As well, it speaks to the disheartening disparity in the lives of children, where some are saved while others (the mounds of small red hearts) are not, alluding to issues of privilege. Looking at the work, I read it as a succinct wry statement on maternal martyrdom, engulfed as it were, by (so much) sweetness.

Carole Epp's functional body of work, on the other hand, eschews the world's woes and offer idyllic snapshots of life. As she explains, her functional line was born of wanting to make pots for her first son, and grew from finding an interested audience and market. She found that her functional work offered a refreshingly simple yet equally powerful social value of making people smile. Selling her work at craft fairs, she was intrigued by the reaction that the work elicited from people. As Carole states, she is often amazed by the power of simple acts, acts that may seem trivial but in fact have a deeper effect. She views her functional work, no less than her sculptural figurines, as conceptual. She sees the practice of making handmade objects as an implicit critique of the disposable, consumerism-oriented culture, and as such, a political act. Echoing William Morris, understanding the practice of functional work as a form of social critique, subversion through an embodiment of alternative values, seems to still be a sentiment that is implied by many a functional maker when they speak of the 'handmade.'

It became clear from our conversation that what is meaningful to Carole's practice, more than the objects themselves, however carefully crafted they are, is its use as a tool for dialogue. The work is the medium through which she communicates her values, at times explicitly and at other times more implicitly, but in both, as a way to engage in a conversation about the human condition. As she says, the two distinct bodies of work are in fact "answering the same question," which is in essence, "how can we be better people in this world?"

Chiho Tokita is a Toronto based studio potter.



At All Cost



What Dreams May Come



At That Point It Wasn't About Choice



Dance Me to the End of Love