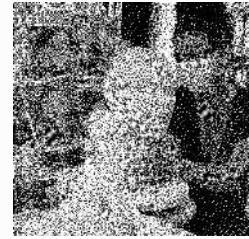




## *Wild Porcelain*

Artist Collaboration by **Michelle Erickson**

WORD COUNT:1,236



In February 2020, my partner Robert Hunter and I flew across the country to visit the Legion of Honor at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. The trip followed an intriguing invitation by curator Martin Chapman to respond to the Bowles Porcelain Gallery with my ceramic art—it would also mark our last flight to date. Upon our return the world changed, and the project and life in general was filled with uncertainty. Nonetheless, a seed had been planted as I saw a dynamic connection between the Bowles collection of eighteenth-century British porcelain and my own ceramic practice. I was compelled by the technical challenge of designing and manufacturing these decadent and delicate porcelain tablewares and equally inspired by the unlikely place this premier assemblage calls home on the hilltop of the Bay City overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge.

I was born and raised in the colonial triangle of Virginia, an area known for American history. My full appreciation of that history began, however, when my interest in clay as a medium collided with the region's rich resource of archeological ceramics. Fragments of clay vessels, from ancient Indigenous homesites to colonial sites of exploration, invasion, and settlement that have been excavated by archeologists from the earth beneath my feet, in the place where I grew up. Drawing on process and context, I create contemporary narratives in clay through the art of recreation, connecting twenty-first-century issues to the entrenched legacies of colonialism.

*Wild Porcelain* is one of three exhibition projects I had in 2020 that ran parallel to the unfolding pandemic, a selection of whose works are the covers for this special issue of *British Art Studies* (figs. 1–6). As deep social, political, and environmental inequities became radically exposed, themes that have been a career-long focus for me took on heightened meaning. In the traveling exhibition, *Another Crossing: Artists Revisit the Mayflower Voyage* hosted by the Fuller Craft Museum, MA, guest curator Glenn Adamson invited ten artists to respond to the 400th anniversary of the *Mayflower's* journey across the Atlantic in 1620. The Protestant pilgrimage to escape religious persecution landed in Patuxent, the ancient home of the Wampanoag people, a history best known as the romanticized story of the first Thanksgiving. *Another Crossing* challenges this narrative to address the British migration and invasion that brought catastrophic effects on the Indigenous people of this land, and speaks to complex generational struggles and aspirations since the founding of the permanent English settlement of Plymouth. The show had been scheduled to open in fall 2019 at The Box in the sister city of Plymouth, UK, and return across the Atlantic to Fuller Craft Museum. Then COVID-19 hit and there was a palpable sense of history repeating itself. The 1620 landing of the *Mayflower* in Plymouth was preceded by the 1619 pandemic, devastating the Wampanoag people leaving the shores of Patuxent abandoned and vulnerable. By May 2020, the anniversary opening at Fuller Craft Museum was postponed as

the country and the world were feeling the effects of COVID-19. Perhaps most poignantly, Native communities still subjected to the legacies of colonialism were once again facing disproportionate hardship and loss in America.



Figure 1

Michelle Erickson, *Shell Dish and Helios Dish*, 2021, 3D scanned printed, molded and slipcast porcelain with lifecast lobster and antler and ceramic transfer prints, width 8 in. 3D scanning and printing done in collaboration with Dr Bernard Means at the Virtual Curation Lab, Virginia Commonwealth University. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 2

Michelle Erickson, *Wild Tweets*, 2021, high temperature wood-fired indigenous North Carolina porcelain, height 8 in. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 3

Michelle Erickson, *Cauldron*, from the series *Ply-MYTH*, 2019, wheel thrown with lifecast shell and industrial artifacts, made from indigenous North Carolina woodfired stoneware with copper wash, 16 × 19.5 in. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).

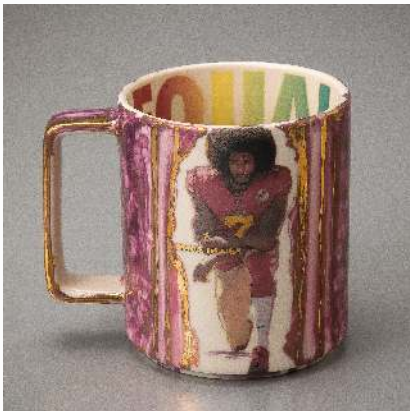


Figure 4

Michelle Erickson, *Remember*, from the *MADE IN USA* series, 2020, commercial Starbucks "MADE IN USA" mug with artist's ceramic transfer designs and gold and pink luster enamel, height: 4.5 in. Collection of the Chipstone Foundation. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 5

Michelle Erickson, *Remember*, from the *MADE IN USA* series, 2020, commercial Starbucks "MADE IN USA" mug with artist's ceramic transfer designs and gold and pink luster enamel, height: 4.5 in. Collection of the Chipstone Foundation. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 6

Michelle Erickson, *Trump Esq. QUID PRO QUO*, from the *MADE IN USA* series, 2018, commercial Starbucks "MADE IN USA" mug with artist's ceramic transfer print and luster enamel decoration, height: 4.5 in. Collection of a Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).

The group exhibition *American Clay: Modern Potters, Traditional Pots* opened on 7 January 2021, also at Fuller Craft Museum, the day after the insurrection at the United States Capitol on

6 January. Curator Steven Earp had brought together American potters with a mastery in “traditional” Western ceramic techniques. The events of 2020—the murder of George Floyd, the summer of protests for Black lives, the defacing and removal of Civil War monuments, the “Proud Boys stand back and stand by” call to arms by a sitting president, and even the unprecedented act of a British Royal couple renouncing the crown—coincided with my series of protest pieces. *MADE IN USA*, *Trumped up China*, *The Party’s Over*, *Remember Them*, and *MUGXIT* that continue the “tradition” of ceramics used to communicate ideas, advocate social justice, and propagate political change.

San Francisco is a city of incredible wealth, economic power, and societal influence, in contrast to its underlying social and economic disparities further exposed during the pandemic. *Wild Porcelain* draws on place through the lens of the beautifully appointed collection of eighteenth-century naturalistic porcelains which were marketed to Britain’s social elite. These luxury wares were used in elaborate dining rituals and mirrored the desire to domesticate the unpredictable natural world. Boxes and tureens of ever-fresh fruits and vegetables and nestling pigeons forever defy their fate of becoming the delicacy held within. Serving dishes incorporate fanciful foliage in relief while others realistically depict flowers and insects safely bringing nature into homes and onto elite eighteenth-century dining tables. I experimented with the artful process of period porcelain manufacture to address specific concerns of the twenty-first-century Bay Area.

Drawing on the iconic Transamerica Pyramid building in San Francisco and symbols of the world’s largest tech companies “nested” in the Bay Area, the work *Transangel* references the impact of wealth disparity and the unfettered power and influence of technology corporations over our collective and personal lives—from anti-democratic propaganda to the devaluation of our children’s self-worth (figs. 7–10). The name “Transamerica” itself inspired the concept of *Transangel*, evoking the struggles of American LGBTQ equality at the origin point of Gay civil rights.



Figure 7

Michelle Erickson, *Preparatory sketches and source material for Transangel*, 2020. Digital image courtesy of the artist (all rights reserved).



Figure 8

Michelle Erickson, *Transangel*, 2021, 3D printed models from original artwork and 3D scans, molded slip-cast porcelain underglaze metallic oxides overglaze enamel and ceramic transfers, height 24 in. 3D scanning and printing done in collaboration with Dr Bernard Means at the Virtual Curation Lab, Virginia Commonwealth University. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 9

Michelle Erickson, *Transangel*, 2021, 3D printed models from original artwork and 3D scans, molded slip-cast porcelain underglaze metallic oxides overglaze enamel and ceramic transfers, height 24 in. 3D scanning and printing done in collaboration with Dr Bernard Means at the Virtual Curation Lab, Virginia Commonwealth University. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 10

Michelle Erickson, *Transangel* (detail), 2021, 3D printed models from original artwork and 3D scans, molded slip-cast porcelain underglaze metallic oxides overglaze enamel and ceramic transfers, height 24 in. 3D scanning and printing done in collaboration with Dr Bernard Means at the Virtual Curation Lab, Virginia Commonwealth University. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).

I reimagined the intimate scale and domestic function of vessels in the Bowles collection to address gun violence, fossil fuel geopolitics, and the undue corporate power and influence of big tech that has found its way into our lives. In *Head of a Child*, the subject becomes the existential threat to our most precious resource: our children. My portrait bust of child climate activist Greta Thunberg during her historic address to the UN in 2019 references an eighteenth-century example, *Head of a Laughing Child* designed by the French sculptor Louis-François Roubiliac and produced at the Chelsea porcelain factory (figs. 11–14). In stark contrast to Roubiliac's carefree and precocious depiction of youth, here the weight of the survival of her generation and generations to come consumes Thunberg's expression. This piece was in progress prior to the invitation by the Legion of Honor but its inclusion and relevance in the exhibition was reinforced when curator Martin Chapman asked if I knew about the giant four-story mural portrait of the Swedish activist in downtown San Francisco. I didn't. The exhibition *Wild Porcelain* explores the challenges San Francisco faces as universal to this historic moment.





Figure 11

Michelle Erickson, *Head of a Child*, 2021, artist original thrown, hand-modeled porcelain and black earthenware, 14.5 in. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Figure 12

Louis-François Roubiliac, *The Head of a Laughing Child*, circa 1746-49, soft paste porcelain, slip cast, 19.7 × 16.7 cm. Chelsea porcelain factory. Collection of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (C.37-2019). Digital image courtesy of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).



Figure 13

Michelle Erickson fabricating *Head of a Child*, 2020. Digital image courtesy of Michelle Erickson (all rights reserved).



Figure 14

Michelle Erickson, *Woodfired maquettes for inclusion in the exhibition Wild Porcelain*, 3D scanned, recoded, and printed models molded in plaster and slip cast in indigenous NC porcelaneous clay. Wood fired in collaboration with David Steumpfle, Seagrove, NC. Collection of the artist. Digital image courtesy of the artist / Photograph by Robert Hunter (all rights reserved).



Several works in the exhibition made use of the twenty-first-century technology of 3D scanning, printing, and design. For this I relied on my ongoing collaboration with Dr. Bernard Means at Virginia Commonwealth University's Virtual Curation Lab. Whether recoding and altering my original artwork, capturing my own hand in a glove holding a replica condor skull, merging a 3D model of the Transamerica building with a Civil War gravestone, or reducing the scale of a ten-foot BP gas station sign into eight-inch models for delicate porcelain boxes and dishes, the uniquely twenty-first-century technology was irreplaceable. The physical language of 3D printing itself creates patterns intrinsic to the intricate structural network of the printing process. It is usually removed from printed models and is quickly being engineered out of the technology as an unwanted byproduct but I try to enhance and even exploit this surface as it is impossible to achieve in any other way and represents a distinct fingerprint of this technological moment."

### **About the author**

Michelle Erickson has a BFA from the College of William and Mary and is an independent ceramic artist and scholar. Internationally recognized for her mastery of colonial-era ceramic techniques, her pieces reinvent ceramic history to create twenty-first-century social, political, and environmental narratives. Her ceramic art is represented in major museums including the Museum of Art and Design, New York, the Seattle Art Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Ms. Erickson's rediscovery of historical ceramic techniques is widely published and her contemporary art is profiled in numerous national and international publications. She has lectured at such institutions as the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Milwaukee Art Museum, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. She has designed and produced ceramics for major motion pictures such as *The Patriot*, and HBO's miniseries *John Adams*.

## Imprint

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