

— Michelle Erickson —

PROJECTING A HYPOTHETICAL FUTURE

REFLECTING ON A PROBLEMATIC PAST

by Glen R. Brown



Historical allusion in ceramic form—whether spawned by desire to garner the prestige of predecessors through association (as in Neoclassicism) or by a less-calculated admiration for venerable objects—has nearly always surfaced as emulation. Wedgwood’s Black Basalts strategically channeled 18th-century taste for ancient Apulian pottery toward factory-produced surrogates, Aztec braziers deliberately traded on the mystique of relics from the abandoned city of Teotihuacán, and Qing renditions of Xuande porcelain instilled Ming stature into contemporary production. Far less frequent than this kind of imitation, and confined almost exclusively to the late 20th and early 21st centuries, has been historical allusion in ceramics developed explicitly in the service of cultural critique. While this tendency has become common enough to define a genre of current ceramic art, few ceramic artists can match the nuance and complexity with which it has been practiced by master potter, ceramics researcher, and cultural critic Michelle Erickson.

The catalyst to Erickson’s recent, historically attired commentary on contemporary issues was a 2012 stint as an artist-in-residence at London’s Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A). By chance, the daily opportunity to browse the world’s most extensive collection of decorative art coincided with the pervasive buzz of summer Olympics mania then electrifying the city. The result was an ingenious hybridization in which Erickson’s reflections would link the “proliferation of pattern” in the context of contemporary *Nike Flyknit* athletic shoes to globalization of the English pottery industry in the 18th century. “I was trying to think of a contemporary process of design and manufacture that relates to objects that we all use and have,” she explains. “Our trainers, or tennis shoes, have all these methods of design and manufacture, many in one shoe. My Nike-inspired pieces touch on a lot of social and political issues, like outsourcing and how fashion and design are often dictated by commodities, and they connect those patterns of behavior back to the 18th-century.”

Plans for exploring this historical connection in her work did not fully crystallize until two years after Erickson had returned to the US, when memories of a V&A 18th-century porcelain Vauxhall ewer—a pink, milk-white, and gilt rococo extravagance of leaves and scrolls to which an aquiline-beaked dragon clings weirdly as a handle—surfaced in her *Super Fly Ewer* and *Flyknit Dragon Ewer*. The former, handbuilt with apparent vigor from indigenous Virginia clay, is poised between the rawness and endearing informality of archaic earthenware vessels and the premeditated-primitive Expressionism of modernist Abstract painting and sculpture. But the implicit trans-



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1 *Fly Knit Dragon Ewer*, 12 in. (30 cm) in length, handbuilt, sprig-molded porcelain and black earthenware, 2014. Photo: Robert Hunter. 2 *Flyknit Buddha*, 12 in. (30 cm) in height, Thrown and hand modeled using silicon-rubber, sprig-molded relief taken from Nike 2012 Olympic trainers, 2014. Collection of Lois Wagner. 3 *Fly Face Jugs* group, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, made using indigenous North Carolina clays and kaolin and fired in collaboration with master wood-fire potter David Stuempfle, 2014.

historical bond between these two suggestions of primordial making, one guileless and the other very much guided, is less significant in an aesthetic sense than it is with respect to the persistence of utility as a trait of human-made objects across time. *Super Fly Ewer* is a vessel, after all. Despite the constantly changing flow of fashion that can make a style even out of artlessness (so the piece seems to imply), many of the kinds of “objects that we all use and have” today are clear descendants of the first commodities made by the hands of prehistory.

But *Super Fly Ewer* conveys more than a condensed history of the vessel or an encapsulation of art history from prehistoric to Rococo to Modernist aesthetics. While Erickson’s fingers shaped the gestural body of the vessel from a coil-built form, the dragon that constitutes the handle incorporated sprigged elements pressed in silicone molds of a toy octopus and the nubs of a Nike shoe sole. Conjuring associations with a modern industry of inexpensive, mass-manufactured goods, the toy-octopus reference in *Super Fly Ewer* seems to contemporize and de-exoticize the Western vision of China that inspired the Vauxhall ewer’s 18th-century chinoiserie dragon, while the reference to a Nike shoe not only invokes ideas about fashion and commodity but also alludes to the historical exportation of Western models of Industrial-Revolution production, marketing, and distribution to Asia, where the majority of Nike’s factories are located today. In a related work, *Flyknit Buddha*, Erickson comments on the phenomenon of corporate outsourcing

as a means of exploiting cheap labor and the effects of this practice on economies. Sporting a cap of shoe-sole sprigs crowned with a Nike symbol, a robust Buddha in the style of a Georgian chinoiserie teapot eschews the mudras for a better grip on a ragged eagle.

Super Fly Ewer’s porcelain counterpart in *Flyknit Dragon Ewer* repeats certain physical elements of the former (the sprigged-composite-dragon handle and the ewer form) as well as the references to modern industrialized Asia (red characters stating “Made in China”). At the same time, the *Flyknit Dragon Ewer* recalls the objet d’art production of England’s 18th-century porcelain industry, reflecting Erickson’s assertion that “it’s the sensibility of early ceramics that inspires me, that captures my imagination. Sometimes that boils down to a specific technique or combination of techniques that are close to impossible. *Flyknit Dragon Ewer* is all about that. The handle was built one sprig at a time in such a delicate process that making the jug was like holding an eggshell.”

The curious elegance of the resulting ewer and its intricate multipartite handle, heightened by trails of gold luster against the purity of white porcelain, is vital to the sense of incongruence conveyed by the piece as a whole, which consists of not just vessel but stand as well; not just a sculpture but also its plinth. In this case the latter is of black earthenware, molded into the impression of a tire-tread brazier bearing chunks of glowing coal. “It’s a backdrop of our culture, which includes a lot of industrial material: patterns and images from things



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that we come in contact with on a daily basis as a part of our consumption and lifestyle,” Erickson explains. “It’s also a statement about foot power as opposed to fossil-fuel power. I think in general that it has that edge of the monster of industrialization that directs every facet of our lives, and it refers to the sustainability of a corporation like Nike that produces an enormous number of things that have a cost for lives that are very much outside of our focus as consumers.”

Implications of a hidden and exploited workforce sustaining the production of commodities would resurface in a 2015 group of three *Fly Face Jugs* recalling the Southern folk pottery tradition but also incorporating references to Nike athletic shoes. Prompted by a conversation with David Stuenkel at the North Carolina Potters Conference and a subsequent invitation from him to include some of her pieces in one of his two annual firings, Erickson deliberately imprinted implications of contemporary material culture into the face of tradition, creating teeth, lips, eyelids and eyebrows from her Nike sprigs. “Modern material culture is burdened by a history of colonialism and the long-standing use of basically slave labor, unpaid labor,” she asserts. “The industries that created many of these things were able to do so in quantity and at low costs only because there was an oppressed labor force. Face jugs were originally slave made, and once I’d visualized that in my mind’s eye I realized that the meaning behind what I was doing was quite strong: that these were about more than just using Nike parts to make features on face jugs.”

Realizing that the material culture of previous ages is often evidence of insidious power relations endemic to past social systems and that it can also embody traces of the callousness toward human life that has too often accompanied the pursuit of expanding profit margins, Erickson explored an unprecedented avenue in her work. For 30 years an artist and researcher engaged in rediscovery of lost ceramic techniques in slipware, salt-glazed white wares, and other types of English and American pottery, she strategically reversed her perspective. Rather than scrutinizing the past for secrets enconced within its material traces, she instead projected her thought toward an imagined future in which today’s material culture will serve as evidence of long dead attitudes about human expendability in the name of corporate profit.

In this “wishful-thinking world” Erickson’s *Ormolu Guns* represent a future political topography in which arms manufacturers and their lobbyists no longer exercise inordinate influence over legislation that endorses violence, decreases public safety, and encourages malevolence in the social sphere. The guns—one rendered in porcelain and the other cast in Virginia earthenware slip in molds taken from an air-rifle-model AR 15—seem rust-choked relics of antiquity, as innocuous as corroded, verdigris-encrusted Roman spearheads. “They’re commentary on gun culture in America.” Erickson explains, “and the proliferation of weapons and munitions in the rest of the world: a widespread effect of failure to address a dangerous attitude. I



4 *Ormolu Guns*, 31 in. (79 cm) in height, porcelain and indigenous Virginia earthenwares, 2015. Photo: Gavin Ashworth NY. Collection of Nicholas Schorsch Jr. 5 *American Pickle: Black & White*, 16 in. (40 cm) in height, porcelain and black porcelain, slip-cast, press-molded, and handbuilt from castings of bullets taken from AR 15 rifle natural shells. 6 *Superfly Dragon Ewer*, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, handbuilt and sprig-molded indigenous Virginia clays, 2014. Photo: Robert Hunter.

put them on display in ormolu settings as relics that no longer function: archaic things, like the Confederate flag; things that belong in a museum in a post weaponized world.”

Whether projecting a hypothetical future or reflecting on a problematic past, Erickson’s allusions to ceramics and history are clearly more than musings about a specific medium, investigations of lost techniques, or commentaries on aesthetics, universal or otherwise. They are mainstays of a carefully crafted method, an effective strategy in the practice of culturally critical contemporary art.

A solo exhibition of Michelle Erickson’s work was on view at the Wilton House Museum in Richmond, Virginia. To learn more, check out www.michelleericksonceramics.com.

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Subscribers can watch videos of Erickson’s process from her V&A Museum residency at <http://ceramicartsdaily.org/ceramics-monthly/subscriber-extras>.

