

Dialogues, #1

(interview by Emmet Byrne)

Stephanie DeArmond

(stephaniedearmond.com)

"Stephanie DeArmond makes ceramic sculpture and installations that combine the honesty of traditional craft and its methods with a sly humor that places her work in a thoroughly contemporary context. Her use of text and illustration betrays an often macabre sense of reality that suggests mundanity may be aggression in disguise." —Diana Kim.

Her current work confuses mediums even further by incorporating typographic forms, in turn blurring the line between traditional vessels, sculptural objects, and even signage. Though she now lives and works in Arnhem, Holland, she has a special affection for Minneapolis and our local ceramics traditions, having lived there for several years.

* * * * *

How did you progress from making more traditional ceramics to working with typography?

When I first began experimenting with typography I was really inspired by the music I was listening to and

the bits of text from those songs that really spoke to me, though I wondered if I was just ripping someone off when I put them in my work. There was a piece by an artist at SooVAC [Gallery] where they wrote out all these song lyrics on paper in tiny handwriting and hung it on the wall. I love that piece so much—it was so beautiful and showed how music informs our lives and even defines us and places us into a specific sub-culture. I think I was trying to talk about those things, too, in my work.

Also, something interesting happens when craft interacts with other creative/pop-cultural forces. Like "beatbox" plus "oil painting" plus "pom poms." I think about how and why different materials and cultural references get placed into this hi/lo hierarchy. There is a lot of humor in looking at that. Like Clement Greenberg vs Snoop (A). Not that one is better than the other. I don't know where Greenberg fits into my work, but I do know where Snoop does. It's like critics and artists getting obsessed with Project Runway.

You have another series that features somewhat cryptic (though totally literal) fragments of text—cups adorned with Minneapolis street names. How did this idea come about?

That series came about mostly because I liked how they sounded (I had never seen streets that were alphabetized for city planning before) and it was a project about recording my own neighborhood. When I moved to Minneapolis I think I was nostalgic for my life there even while I was living it. And now, years later, I still feel that way. I had a friend from Seattle who was excited when he saw the cups because he had grown up on Colfax in Minneapolis thirty plus years ago; he added his own layer to it. The street names were so familiar to people living there and so foreign to me as a new-

comer. Even though it felt strange and different to me, I totally embraced the culture there and it felt like home to me almost immediately. That is why I made the cups with Aldrich, Bryant, Colfax, etc., on them. I hoped other people seeing them got it too and felt like it was a little homage to Minneapolis and the great people living there. I also did some featuring Lyn-Lake with a six pack of beer or Chi-Lake with a gun, but those were more ironic.

When did your use of typography switch from 2D to 3D?

At some point everyone kept telling me to integrate form more with the surface decoration I was working with, and I became interested in how different objects can function as frames, like shelves framing a ceramic object, or a cabinet serving as a frame for a body of work. The ceramic form can serve as a frame also. I started cutting letterforms out of the middle of vessels, then experimenting with how a lid could reference a letterform, and several objects can form a sentence, like the classic diptych or triptych idea. I like a lot of historical painting so that seems obvious as a reference point. I look at drawings I made years ago, and I saw that I also used text a lot in early drawings before I met and married a graphic designer, so maybe our interests converged. Way back then, I was drawn to artists like Jack Pierson (B) and Jenny Holzer (C) and their use of



text. So yes, finally I dropped the vessel aspect of the work and made letterforms. I see these pieces as sculptural objects more than signage or being just about language. In fact, I can even imagine them as vessels referencing historical ceramics, because of how they are made, as hand-built hollow objects.

How did you start using the floral decals?

I didn't like a lot of surfaces that glazes could offer my work—I wanted a clean look that could reference royal china or commercially-made objects instead of granola-type chunky tableware, so a lot of glazes didn't appeal to me. Some really interesting work was being made by just rejecting glazes (and clay) completely, like Ayumi Horie's (D) plaster work or maybe John Byrd, who was mixing different materials together. But I wanted to add another element to my surfaces—somehow the decals just resonated with me. I like how they are appropriated and found imagery.

Where do your typographic choices come from?

I am attracted to ornamental type, and I like it most when the type becomes so abstracted and hidden that it almost disappears in the decoration. That has been a big source for me, from illustrated manuscripts that were hand-painted to graffiti references. I always loved how

Margaret Kilgallen (E) could reference an old-tyme circus from the 1800s and contemporary street art/tagging at the same time, not to mention creating these iconic female characters that can do anything.

What's next?

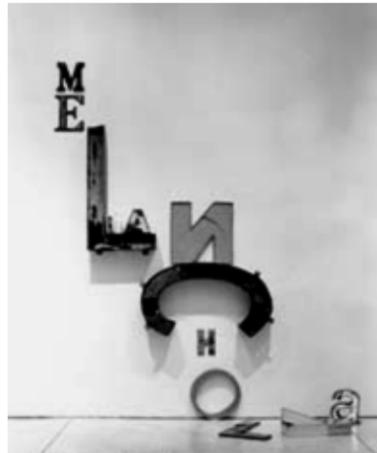
I need to just keep making things and see what happens next. The letters are so time-consuming, and I don't want them to get too didactic and repetitive, so I just need time to mix it up.



(A)



(C)



(B)



(D)



(E)

Credit goes to whoever took these pictures.