



Text and Context

Stephanie DeArmond's Letterforms

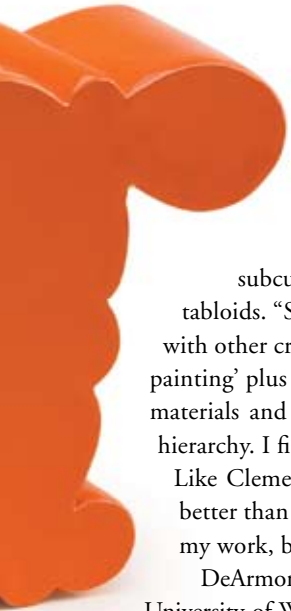
by Molly Hatch

Above: *Best Beast*, 27 in. (68 cm) in length, white earthenware, glaze, 2009.

Stephanie DeArmond's work combines ceramics tradition with the ironic humor of appropriated text and kitsch imagery. Employing a wide range of influences from architecture, pop culture, and art history, DeArmond is at the helm of an alternative craft movement, revitalizing non-traditional materials in the art world. With an audience enamored with her work that ranges from subscribers of *Elle* and *Ready-Made* magazines to the readers of the popular *Design*Sponge* blog, DeArmond's sculptural and functional ceramics are not easily defined by the art-school limitations of sculpture, vessel, and design.

At first glance, DeArmond's crisp letterforms appear to be factory made, cast from a plaster mold. This is in a large part thanks to her pointed reference to the exquisitely ornate 18th century porcelain dinnerware of the French Sèvres and Vincennes factories.

The overt decorative surfaces of DeArmond's work immediately evoke the preciousness of your grandmother's china—often looked at but rarely used. Upon closer inspection, the decals that appeared to belong to a museum class object reveal themselves to be an odd mishmash of kitschy florals purchased on Ebay—no doubt scraps left over from a hobbyist's collection. This is just one of several layers of the high/low contrast in DeArmond's work. Capitalizing on our expectations, the decals create fields of negative space allowing the viewer to read the surprising messages hidden in the detailed script of the letterforms. Drawn to the use of text by such artists as Margaret Killgallen, Jack Pierson, and Jenny Holzer, DeArmond takes advantage of our cultural familiarity with traditional porcelain by using it to humorously parade appropriated text from



subcultures of song lyrics, street signs and supermarket tabloids. “Something interesting happens when craft interacts with other creative/pop-cultural forces. Like ‘beat-box’ plus ‘oil painting’ plus ‘pom-poms.’ I think about how and why different materials and cultural references get placed into this high/low hierarchy. I find a lot of humor playing with that juxtaposition. Like Clement Greenberg versus Snoop Dog (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.”

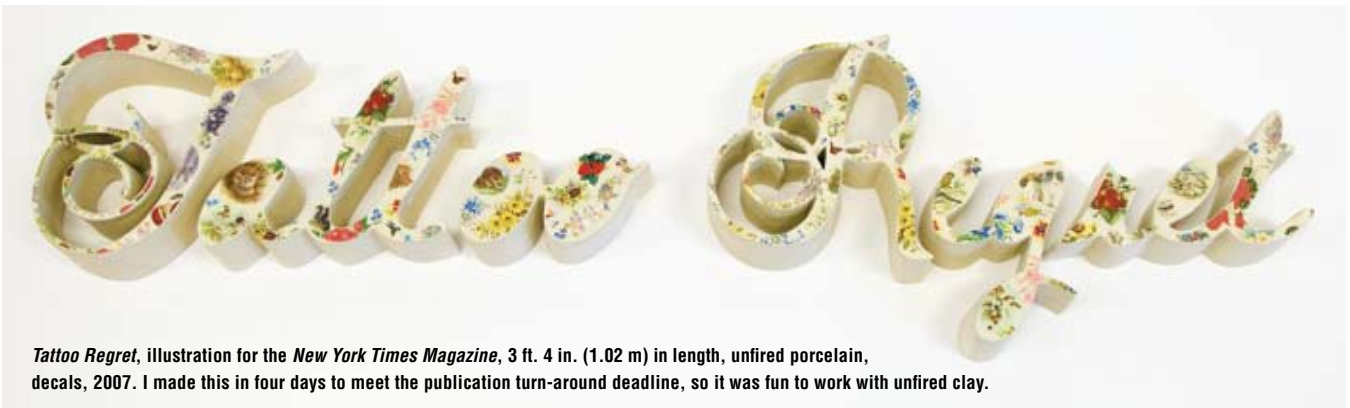
DeArmond came to ceramics as an undergraduate at the University of Washington in Seattle. The strength of the ceramics area, with its focus on sculpture and a strong visiting artist program, gave her a good foundation in handbuilding. DeArmond made an influential move in 2001 to Minneapolis, Minnesota where she worked at Northern Clay Center. Her time there was focused on learning how to throw with porcelain—adding a new skill to her repertoire. She fell in love with porcelain mainly as a material with rebellious potential: “I was looking at a lot of work that was wood-fired or made with dark, earthy colors and for me the work read as very masculine. I wanted to do the opposite, to make super feminine pottery. Some of the [masculine] work [in Minnesota] is thrown loosely on the wheel and very expressive. I wanted simple forms—I wanted something plain. I wanted a clean look that could reference royal china or commercially made objects instead of granola-type chunky tableware. If I could put something subversive in my work, I was interested in that, something that related to my experiences with urban life, something rebellious.” She began hand painting her cups with juxtapositions of text and image. “I thought text made the work more interesting than an image alone. I could show a different level of detail—a different line quality than the images I was making. I thought it made a nice visual contrast. It takes the image out of context and makes it more like a diagram or a drawing, it could be something else, more than just an image.”



Stephanie DeArmond working in her studio.



Flask (*Darling Remember*), 5 in. (13 cm) in length, white earthenware, underglaze, glaze, decals, 2010.



Tattoo Regret, illustration for the *New York Times Magazine*, 3 ft. 4 in. (1.02 m) in length, unfired porcelain, decals, 2007. I made this in four days to meet the publication turn-around deadline, so it was fun to work with unfired clay.

It wasn't until DeArmond attended graduate school at the University of Colorado, Boulder, that she began to think of the text as having potential as a three-dimensional form in its own right. "At some point everyone kept telling me to integrate form more with the surface decoration I was working with. I started cutting letter forms out of the middle of vessels, then experimenting with how a lid could reference a letter form, and several objects can form a sentence, like the classic diptych or triptych idea. Finally I dropped the vessel aspect of the work and made letter forms. I see these pieces as sculptural objects more than being about words or typography. I imagine them as vessels referencing historical ceramics, because of how they are made, as hand-built, hollow objects."

The large scale of DeArmond's letterforms points to a direct lineage from commercial signage, one of her favorite sources for fonts. While in graduate school, the fonts became more decorative, sometimes obscuring the message hidden within. This requires the

viewer to study the text as an object before understanding its content. "I like using really decorative text and subversively hiding a message within it—an unexpected message, another layer of meaning. I am thinking about abstracting type as form even more. I love how a typeface can reference a subculture, like you think of heavy metal or skinny jeans. It is great how type can go from having a really utilitarian function to something just poetic, straight poetry."

Shortly after completing her MFA in 2007, DeArmond's work received a lot of press both online and in print. This visibility of her work led to a solo show and inclusion in several exhibitions. "I like to think of my work in the context of our culture at large. So it was nice that I had exposure in these different venues [Elle, ReadyMade, The New York Times, among others]. It was a nice metaphor for looking at my work through the lens of popular culture outside of an academic context. It's ironic that I'm interested in putting my work in a different context, because it is so



For Margit, 7 in. (18 cm) in height,
white earthenware, glaze, decals, 2010.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

by Stephanie DeArmond



Top: A sculpture of the letter E in progress (shown face down), with leather-hard side-wall slabs shown placed on the front slab. Above: side view of a completed and scraped greenware piece.

After I have created a paper pattern of my design, I flip it over and trace the back of the image with a needle tool onto a prepared and smoothed 1/4-inch-thick wet slab of clay. I flip my pattern so the front of my piece will be flat, lying face down against a ware board. I then cut three-inch strips of clay for the sides of the piece from even wetter slabs of clay, which makes them easier to bend to fit the curves of my pattern. If I am doing a geometric piece, I use leather-hard slabs instead. When the clay slabs have stiffened, I score and slip the side-wall pieces and the face of the piece together. I usually cut the edges of the slabs at a 45° angle so the joint is cleaner, and strengthen the attachments with tiny coils.

Next I have a leather-hard slab ready for the top (back) of the piece. I spray the half-constructed piece down so the top edges of the side-wall slabs are wet and press a sheet of paper onto the piece so it makes an imprint on the paper. After tracing the imprint onto a leather-hard piece of clay with a needle tool, I use an X-Acto blade to cut out the shape. Then I slip and score everything, and flip the back of the piece onto the sides. I press the slabs together with my fingers and a rib, fill any cracks with bits of wet clay, and use a rasp and some silicon carbide sanding screens to scrape away the excess clay until the areas of attachment look clean. I avoid using the sanding screen too much because bits of black silicon carbide can get embedded into the white clay body. I start with the rasp, then the sanding screen, then use a sponge, then a rib to smooth everything. Once smooth, I flip it over between two boards, making a board/fabric/clay/fabric/foam/board sandwich. I flip the piece over onto a piece of foam in case it is not flat on the back, to prevent it from stretching or cracking. I make some pin holes with the needle tool in an inconspicuous place to allow air to escape and dry the work slowly.

ceramic-y in nature. But I think its exciting when contemporary ceramic work shows up in mainstream media. It's an opportunity for new dialog both for insiders and outsiders."

In 2008, DeArmond moved to the Netherlands for two years while her husband completed his masters in graphic design. She found that the European approach to ceramics as a material was more interdisciplinary which resonated with DeArmond. "There was this different aesthetic there, ceramics is part of design. A lot of designers, like Hella Jongerius, work in ceramics but also design couches and other products. Ceramics is part of design—like interior design, product design."

DeArmond and her family recently moved back to Minneapolis, where she has set up a studio. Settling back into American culture, DeArmond wonders how her time in Europe might affect her work. "Every time I move it changes my perspective. It changes the way I see things. You take a little bit of where you have lived with you.

Environment changes your work and who you are as a person. It goes back to memory and idealizing the past. When I make my work I think about embodying joy or happiness. Drawing on happy memories is a natural source because [it makes] you want to keep going, you want to feel good."

Like many of her contemporaries, DeArmond's work is grounded in history and personal experience. Her poetic subversion of the hierarchies of ceramics places her in the middle of a clearly postmodern conversation about craft and its place in the art world. No doubt DeArmond will further establish her studio practice, taking advantage of the glamour of porcelain and highlighting the idiosyncrasies of American subculture.

the author *Molly Hatch is a potter and author living in Florence, Massachusetts. See www.mollyhatch.com.*