

GINA ETRA STICK

LIMITLESS MEANINGS

by Heidi McKenzie



Gina Etra Stick is somewhat of an enigma. She has been working full time as a ceramic artist for the past three years—a nanosecond relatively with respect to a career—yet she has burst onto the international stage showing at Sculptural Objects Functional Art and Design (SOFA) and FORM Miami (held during Miami Artweek); having been garlanded with innumerable prizes, awards, and distinctions. Full disclosure, Stick’s work is generally not my cup of tea: I am an abstract minimalist come neo-modernist. For me, it is all about the conceptual. Stick’s aesthetic might be characterized using a series of polar opposites to my own: it is functional, primarily vessels made in deference to the ritual of daily use; it is highly-patterned, full of symbols and ornate decorative design. It is, in Stick’s own words, “non-conceptual art”—that is, it is meant to make the beholder not think. I will return to this designation, because it is crucial in understanding Stick’s modus operandi. Regardless of the chasms that separate our aesthetic treatise, when I first laid eyes on the digital images from Stick’s inaugural solo exhibition, “Ritual Objects of Everyday Life: Hand-painted Porcelain” that showed at the Mary E. Black Gallery in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in the summer of 2017, something inside me knew I had to engage with this work. I literally felt called to illuminate this artist’s work for a wider readership. This article is, in part, my way of unpacking the inherent paradox in my attraction to her oeuvre, as well as an imparting of our discussion about her work, her values, her sense of self, spirit, and way of seeing and being with the world, that is intimately enfolded in her creative output.

Floating Seamlessly

The circuitous route by which Stick committed to clay professionally in her mid-60s is a story worth the telling. Stick was born in Queens, New York, and grew up in New Rochelle, New York. Her father was a Romanian-Polish immigrant, and her mother was born in Boston to Russian immigrant parents. Her father was a prosperous leather manufacturer and an untrained designer. She and her cousins often appropriated the leather factory as their personal playground. Stick trained as a classical pianist for eleven years.

Self-reflexively, Stick recalls that her father’s artistic interests invariably fueled her own at a young age by osmosis. Her father was an amateur classical guitar player; opera used to waft from the radio or the record player. He was raised an Orthodox Jew, and was an atheist, yet unaccountably, Stick reminisces, “there were just a lot of Buddhas hanging around the house. We never talked about them, they were just there.” Her father’s hobbies included sculpting Gundhara Bodhisattva (a Bodhisattva is a person on the mahayana spiritual path (Zen is an example), where the practice is to dedicate oneself to helping others before oneself. The practice cultivates wisdom and compassion. Gundhara Bodhisattva figures originated in the region of Gundhara (earlier Gandhara)) in modern day Pakistan.

Stick found her way to Buddhism by the age of 19. She entered university during the heyday of anti-war activism in the US against the Vietnam War. She had excelled in drawing in high school, yet she enrolled in molecular biology at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. It was there, at the age of 19, where she met the single most important influencer of her life, Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, a renowned Tibetan Buddhist meditation master whose core teaching was the power of secular spirituality, the vehicle being culture. He is credited with bringing Tibetan Buddhism to the West. Stick took a leave of absence from college to study Buddhism with Trungpa in Boulder, Colorado, where he had founded Naropa University, attracting such talents as Allen Ginsberg, Meredith Monk, and Gregory Bateson. Stick and Trungpa began working together in a design capacity as he recognized an affinity with Buddhist principles of space and energy in her drawings. This developed into an apprenticeship and collaborative relationship, with Stick serving as a lead creative designer.

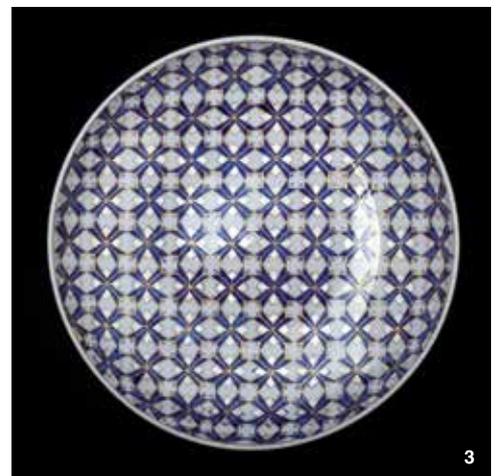
Stick returned to college in 1973 and completed a degree in studio art at the University of Colorado. After finishing her degree, she co-founded Centre Design Studio, a full-scale graphics, architecture, and architectural interior design firm. She



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Opposite Bourbon bottle, *Woven* series, 9 in. (23 cm) in height, Jingdezhen porcelain, gucai overglaze, 2017. **1** Porcelain plate with flower medallions, 10½ in. (27 cm) in diameter, gucai, and fencai overglaze, 2017. **2** *Joyful to be a Chrysanthemum*, 20 in. (51 cm) in diameter, Jingdezhen porcelain, gucai overglaze, 2017. **3** *Quinhua Warrior*, 11¼ in. (29 cm) in diameter, porcelain, quinhua, 24k German gold, silver, 2017.

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then worked as a jewelry designer, and after taking a course with Betty Woodman, set up her own kiln and dabbled in ceramics.

In addition to her other accomplishments across a variety of creative fields and media, she had worked in stained glass while at Brandeis University and ended up establishing herself as a stained-glass artist. Stick floated seamlessly between artistic media, explaining, “to be creative it doesn’t matter what you do. It’s very flexible. I see different disciplines as continuous, not disconnected.”²¹

A pivotal creative awakening in Stick’s life occurred during a high-school trip to Greece. While gazing at the ancient ruins of Delphi, something inside her shifted, and she became aware of what she later articulated as *genius loci*, the latent palpable spiritual energy of the land and architecture. The power of that moment kindled a life-long interest in the potential innate quality of art and design to transcend mere physical material or commodification, and propelled her into her second degree in architecture.

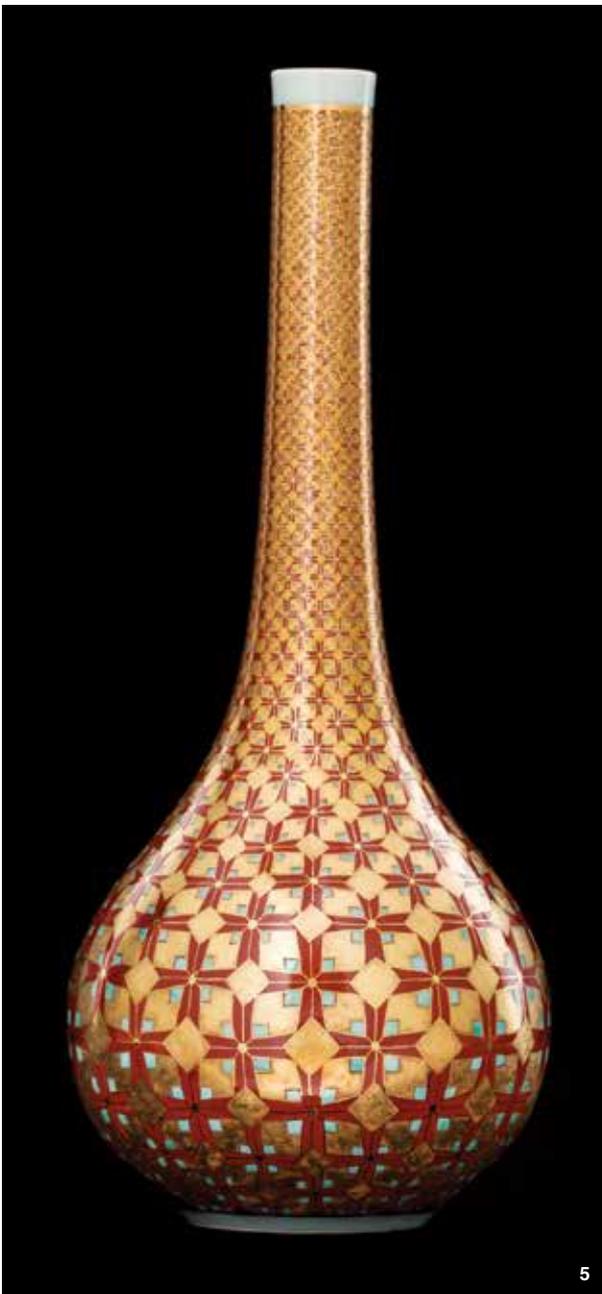
A Way Back to Clay

Fast forward 30 years, and Stick found her way back to clay. Not surprisingly, her point of entry was porcelain, guided by the auspicious coincidence of her Asian cultural and spiritual context. By the late 1990s, Stick had enrolled in the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (NSCAD) in Halifax, and found mentorship with ceramic artists Joan Bruneau and Walter Ostrom. Ostrom had undertaken an exchange with Jackson Li, the founder of Sanbao Ceramic Art Institute on the outskirts of China’s porcelain capital, Jingdezhen. Stick made her first pilgrimage to Sanbao in 2001, returning for residencies in 2009 and 2016, all of which were facilitated by Li Wenyong, Sanbao’s longtime executive director. It was there that she studied with Kong Lao Shi, Liu Le Jun, Liu Jiang Hui, Luo Xiao Tao, and Wang Zi Long and was exposed to the foundational techniques that she employs in her craft: blue-and-white *quinhua* (also spelled *qinghua*) underglaze; *gucai*, *fencai*, and *xincai* traditional Chinese overglaze enamel; gold, silver, and copper lusters; as well as celadon carving. She took a few workshops, picked up the basic skills, and is essentially self-taught in her application of these ancient Chinese techniques.

A cursory glance through her work may give the impression that what they are seeing is actual traditional Chinese ceramics. However, upon inspection, the patterns, symbols, and imagery are clearly anything but Chinese. It is in effect the authentic expression of Stick’s original design. Stick explains, “the imagery in my work is original and iconographical and based on my training and study of literal or non-theistic symbolism.” Iconography refers to images with symbolic meaning and resonance. She cites as examples the crossed arrowhead icon that appears on the *Warrior Plate* and *Luminosity Porcelain Vase* and is meant to signify bravery; and the flower medallion that appears on several pieces, which is an idealized flower signifying intrinsic goodness that relates to an awakened heart. At another level, the peony is associated with the feminine, whereas the chrysanthemum is associated with the masculine. The *Vase with Flower Medallion* is an original icon that signifies basic or fundamental goodness. Stick applies Roman and German gold to her work—silver and gold signify the sun and moon, which translate cross-culturally as signifiers of masculine and feminine.

Let Perception Take Hold

With respect to the Eastern aspect of her work, Stick describes it as “not about content, but about communication of sacredness.”²² She hesitates to describe her work as spiritually based, emphasizing that there is nothing



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about her work that relates to the baggage associated with religion. Rather, akin to her moment of awakening in Delphi, the work aspires to the principle of luminosity—where the “rubbing together of form and emptiness” renders the space that pattern occupies alive, “saturated with energy.”³ It is in this way that her work seeks to be perceptual versus conceptual, i.e. non-conceptual. It is about stopping the mind from thinking and allowing the viewer’s perception to take hold of the present moment. Ultimately it is about provoking wakefulness by crafting a vessel, a physical object, with spiritual presence.

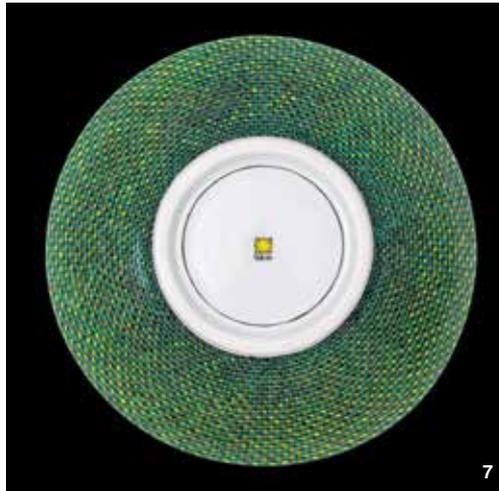
Stick can spend up to three weeks hand painting her intricate patterns on one piece, and subsequently each work is fired multiple times, often as many as six firings at varying temperatures specific to the media. It is highly contemplative work, not unlike a meditation, which is a significant part of Stick’s personal daily routine. The labor-intensive patterns are informed by Stick’s experience and interest in jewelry, brocade, and graphic design. Their symbolic resonance is derived from everyday objects, cultural icons, the natural world, and from spiritual traditions. Her patterns may be original, adapted, or borrowed from historical designs. Stick explains that her background patterning often evokes space in counterpoint to image—where space possesses energy. She uses pattern

and image to invoke feeling; a certain emotional quality she intentionally imbues and hopes will translate to the viewer. In the *Warrior Porcelain* plate, the arrowhead icon signifies human bravery. For Stick, the individual symbols are not as important as the totality. She elaborates, “appearing in some work is an adaptation of an overlapping circle, which is a design I consider to be in the public domain as occurring cross culturally in the art of Asia, Native American ceramics, European design, and contemporary carpets, wallpapers, packaging, etc.”⁴

For myself, a favorite is *Joyful to be a Chrysanthemum*. What strikes me is the symmetry between this piece and the messiness of life: the largest flower spills over the edges, and the three flowers together seem to have a randomness in their arrangement and relationship to one another, and yet there is a connectivity between each blossom, held together by a stylized rhythmic grid. Whereas in *Quinhua Warrior*, the plate is consumed by pattern. It is like a microcosm of a mandala. I could get lost in its peaceful gray pathways and gilded corridors. The blue underglaze is not the commonly used cobalt wash, it is a traditional material that is more like a paste, and requires hours of grinding



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4 *Warrior Porcelain Plate*, 13 3/8 in. (34 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown porcelain, gucai overglaze, 24k Roman and German gold, copper luster, 2015. 5 *Luminosity Vase*, Jingdezhen porcelain, celadon, gucai overglaze, 24k Roman and German gold, 2017. 6 Plate with flower medallions, 14 in. (36 cm) in diameter, Jingdezhen porcelain, fanhong red, gucai, and fencai overglaze, Chinese gold, 2017. 7 *Woven Deep Porcelain Plate* (bottom), showing painting detail. 8 Vase with flower medallion, 14 3/4 in. (37 cm) in height, press-molded Jingdezhen porcelain, gucai overglaze, 24k Roman and German gold, 2017. All pieces are porcelain, fired to cone 10 in a gas kiln in reduction with additional lower-temperature firings for overglazes and lusters in an electric kiln. All photos: Marvin Moore.

in preparation. It is featured in the blue-and-white underglaze swirl of what one might imagine to be the stylized tail of a dragon. The pattern on another piece, *Dragon Tail*, holds the beginning and the end of the waves of the ocean. The multiplicity of meanings is limitless. To cite an over used truism, “the art is truly in the eye of the beholder.” To cite an under used truism, one coined by the artist herself, “Life is art, and art is life. Craft is art in everyday life.”⁵ This credo seems to aptly sum up the ethos of the work that is rapidly placing Gina Etra Stick on the radars of ceramic collectors around the world.

the author Heidi McKenzie is an artist, author, and curator living in Toronto, Canada. Learn more at <http://heidimckenzie.ca>.

1 Artist’s statement from author’s interview with the artist, January 31, 2017.

2 Ibid.

3 Artist’s statement/context titled “Design Principles that Guide the Work,” from the 2017 exhibition “Ritual Objects of Everyday Life,” at Mary E. Black Gallery, Centre for Craft Nova Scotia, in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

4 Email correspondence between author and artist, March, 2018.

5 Ibid.

Developing an Intricate Surface by Gina Etra Stick

Crucial to developing the surface of my work is developing an icon. An icon is an image with symbolic resonance. The idea is to distill down a feeling or principle into its simplest expression. My tradition works with literal or non-theistic symbolism in which the symbol does not stand for something else, but “captures alive” a principle, communicating it directly, on the spot. This arrowhead icon signifies bravery.

Prior to applying overglaze, I form pieces on the wheel or handbuild them, apply traditional Chinese quinhua underglazes to the greenware, bisque fire them, apply a celadon or clear gloss glaze, and fire them to cone 10 in reduction. The firings for the overglaze decoration are listed here in order from one through five. All happen after the bisque and glaze firings and are to lower temperatures appropriate for lusters and overglazes.

To begin the compositions on the surface, I visualize and lay out the piece with consideration to design, scale, orientation, media, and the logistics of painting and firing (1).

I apply traditional Chinese overglazes (gucai, fencai, and xincai). On the piece shown here, the first coat is of youhong red overglaze pigment (2). The first firing of the surface decoration is done upon completion of all design elements that include this pigment.

After the first firing, a second coat of youhong red overglaze is applied and black lines are completed (3). The piece is ready for firing number two.

Next, I paint on the first coat of 24-karat Roman gold (4), which is warmer in color than German gold. The pigment goes on black but will come out of the kiln a brilliant gold. After application of this coat is complete, the piece goes in for the third firing. Figure 5 shows the completed Roman gold application. After the third firing, I hand paint 24-karat German gold outlines with a fine brush over the unpolished, fired Roman gold background (5, 6). The German gold is pre-mixed in liquid form with a medium, is easier for line work, and fires polished.

After a second coat of Roman 24-karat gold background and 24-karat German gold lines are completed (6), the piece is fired a fourth time (7).

The final step is to add water-based overglaze enamels, and the piece is ready for firing number five. Figure 8 shows a detail of the *Luminosity Vase* complete with water-based overglaze enamel application.

Figures 9 and 10 show the overglaze enamel decoration process on a plate, starting with outlines of the motifs, and progressing to filling in the gradations of color.



