Contemplative Interiors: Ceramics and Furniture

Alla Myzelev
Kala Stein
James Johnson

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CONTEMPLATIVE INTERIORS

CERAMICS AND FURNITURE

JAMES JOHNSON AND KALA STEIN

FEBRUARY 6, 2019-MARCH 15, 2019

Exhibit Curator: Alla Myzelev

LOCKHART GALLERY

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT GENESEO
GENESEO, NEW YORK
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Foreword

Stacey Robertson

Contemplative Interiors celebrates functional art through the work of James Johnson and Kala Stein. This magnificent exhibition invites us to reflect upon craft, beauty, space, material, and nature. It also inspires us to engage in integrative learning—an intellectual and personal journey at the heart of higher education. Professor Alla Myzelev in collaboration with two undergraduate Art History majors, Rachel Mihlstin and Abigail Anderson, designed and implemented this exhibition. They provide us with an opportunity to contemplate our assumptions about the meaning of art and imagine new ways of embracing creativity in our own lives.

In bringing together the work of furniture maker and sculptor James Johnson and ceramicist Kala Stein, Contemplative Interiors synthesizes different types of art and asks us to make connections as we engage with the works. How do Stein’s ceramics and Johnson’s furniture act as inspiring works of art and also functional objects we might find in our homes? How do Johnson’s and Stein’s work speak to one another? What do they tell us about our natural surroundings? The history of craft? The philosophy of beauty? The politics of museums? What can we learn from Johnson’s commitment to simplicity and Stein’s ideas about “the dignity of labor” as expressed through their art? In bringing these examples of functional art into conversation with one another, we are able to ask new questions and synthesize multiple bodies of knowledge.

As we ponder the meaning of the works, we might also consider how our learning relates to other situations. How can we think differently about museums that privilege paintings and sculptures over more functional crafts? How does our own campus engage with art? How do we think about art in our own personal spaces? What objects have importance in our life history and why? How are our artistic preferences influenced by politics? How might we utilize our knowledge of functional art to impact our purchasing choices? How might we curate our spaces differently to inspire simplicity, beauty, and functionality?

As artists, Johnson and Stein offer new avenues for us to think more intentionally about a variety of issues related to the politics of art and the meaning of personal space. Both recognize that their work serves multiple purposes—and, ideally, inspires us through beauty even as they provide us with functionality in our homes and workplaces. As Johnson states, the ideal customer is someone who falls in love with the pieces, “who engages with them and spends time with them.” Thus, a table becomes more than a place to write—it a choice about beauty, about material, about environment. Stein’s art celebrates the meaning of labor and she hopes that her customers are gratified as they live with her pieces of art, no matter the function they might play.

Contemplative Interiors offers us an opportunity to learn, reflect, and apply deeper meaning to art and craft in our own lives. In a time of increasing complexity, technological transformations, environmental challenges, and uncertainty, this exhibition asks us to ponder simplicity, balance, and beauty, in all aspects of our lives.
James Johnson is a furniture maker, a sculptor and a woodburner. His work reflects and merges American, Scandinavian, and Japanese influences with the American tradition of shaker furniture and Art and Craft sensibilities. He received BFA from the College of Saint Rose in Albany, NY in 2001 and MFA from Rutgers University in 2005. When making furniture James is primarily interested in highlighting the natural beauty of the material and making objects that are both simple and functional. His work is exhibited locally and nationally. James works with commercial and residential clients with the goal of bringing calm, serenity and inspiration to his clients’ lifestyle. His work ethic and approach to materials expresses his profound respect for simplicity and balance.
Kala Stein (b.1979, USA) is an artist and designer noted for innovative molding and casting techniques. Her work explores dynamic systems and sustainable practices within the intersection of design, production, and the handmade. Kala exhibits her work widely and works with private clients on custom designs for the home and hospitality industry. She recently received research support through a National Endowment for the Arts Grant (2017) with her collective. Kala’s training includes MFA Ceramics from the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University (2009), BFA Ceramics, SUNY New Paltz (2002); Moravian Pottery & Tile Works (2002-2005, PA); apprenticeship with Donna Polse-no & Richard Hensley (2005-2007, VA). She taught ceramics at Alfred University for five years and at various universities and art centers across New York and California. Kala lives and works in Sonoma, California where she is the Director of Ceramics & Arts at Sonoma Community Center, and frequently visits her camp in the Finger Lakes region of New York.
In 1993 British artist Rachel Whiteread decided to create a cast of an entire terrace house slated for demolition in East London. House, as the sculpture was called, became the centre of the culture wars between those in support of gentrification of the area and those who wanted to preserve the fragile social fabric of the working class neighborhood. What I am interested in here is not so much the history of this work of art and the circumstances of its creation but the idea that it brought forward, namely the meaning of the house. Both symbolically and literally, Whiteread exposed that particular house to the public. By creating a cast of the unfurnished house, stripped of all interior decor, she made it into a minimalist artwork. Yet, if one looked very closely, one could see that the work was not entirely minimalist and generic. Among the overall gray cement, one could find traces of wall paper, wall colors, and newspapers that betrayed the individuality of its inhabitants. The work then posed a series of important questions: What are we willing to show to the public? What happens when our private lives are exposed? The subsequent outcry of the media about House demonstrated how uncomfortable it is for the nation, city, area and the individual to be deprived of the right to have an interior. House, still makes us contemplate the topic of minimalist interiors and what constitutes inhabited space.

Interiors come in different shapes and sizes. One can think of interior as a place of protection, cover, or seclusion. In everyday life we often talk about the interior of a house, of a place that provides not only cover but also a place to rest and gather our thoughts. Contemplative Interiors exhibition hopes to expand our understanding of interiority as a strategy of living. What does it mean to be surrounded by things that are both contemplative and functional? What happens when the domestic interior becomes an exhibition in an art gallery? Can craft objects belong to both domestic interiors and an art gallery? This introduction will look at the works of Kala Stein and James Johnson, whose work, I argue, continue the tradition of modern craft in the early twenty-first century. Johnson and Stein are inspired by modern masters who tried to create sparse, simple, and minimalist-looking
objects. Yet both also draw inspiration from many other sources like their education, work experience, and mentors in the end creating objects that possess a subdued and restrained understanding of history. Both Stein and Johnson create objects that are domestic in their nature. Stein’s work includes trays, plates, bookends, and vases while Johnson’s work usually features functional furniture: dressers, coffee tables, sideboards, etc. The work of both artists is deeply rooted in the tradition of the American Studio Craft Movement. The movement itself grew out of the extended modernist movement propagated by institutions like Bauhaus in Europe that believed in the intersection of good design and improvement of human and aesthetic values. During and after WWII, the designers at the forefront of the movement, such as Josef and Anni Albers, immigrated to the United States and started teaching in larger art institutions. This led to the rise in popularity of combining design, architecture, and craft in the USA.

American Studio Craft Movement then became the movement of mainly those who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s. These craftspeople both adhered to the minimalist aesthetic and believed in creating high quality handmade objects, providing contrast to mass produced, low-quality products sold in the large box stores. Some of these makers followed the minimalist aesthetic of international style in architecture and sculpture. The movement became an important milestone in creating the connection between craft and art market. The work of Johnson and Stein demonstrates interesting tension between studio craft stylistics, e.g. attention to detail, high level of professionalism, minimalist aesthetic, and simple geometric design. Furthermore Johnson and Stein’s work shows self-awareness and self-realization of representing tradition, but also embracing an aesthetic highly suitable for contemporary life. In this tension their contemplative nature is seen most clearly when juxtaposed against the neutrality of the gallery white walls.

In the case of Stein’s and Johnson’s works, interiority can be imagined as a series of nesting objects not unlike the babushka doll: Stein’s work can be inside the work produced by Johnson which in turn can be interiorized by a house or a gallery. Each subsequent interior becomes exterior in turn—it provides shelter and is sheltered itself. Thus, it is also important to think about what architectural interiors house the work and how different interiors provide varying contexts to our understanding of the work.

Separating the context from the work is important because the works themselves are rooted in two interrelated traditions of art and craft. When artists, craft makers, critics, and historians talk about separation between art and craft they usually cite the Enlightenment as a period when for the first time arts and crafts were distinguished on the basis of their aesthetics versus functionality. Art, it was argued, should imbue pure pleasure, unadulterated by the functionality of the object. Only when the piece transcends the mundane concerns of everyday, can it be really enjoyed for its purely artistic merits, argued a philosopher of the Enlightenment. Thus paintings and decorative sculpture were considered to be more important as artistic endeavors, as opposed to more craft-based objects such as carpets, chairs, plates, and others. This trend of separation continued in Europe and the
United States until the second half of the 19th century, when British artists and philosophers such as John Ruskin and William Morris started their defense of craft work being equal to art. They argued that the enjoyment of the objects—both in its making and usage—lies in the honesty of construction and masterful use of the materials. Responding to the increased mechanization of the production of household objects, the leaders of the Arts and Crafts movement (as it became known) argued for the equality of arts and crafts on the basis that both provided aesthetic enjoyment. William Morris was especially influential in this regard. An artist, architect, philosopher and craftsperson, he created the company William Morris and Co. to produce handmade craft objects for the consumption of the middle classes. While the movement was very successful and spread from England to Europe, especially to Germany, Austria, and the United States, the separation and hierarchy between art and craft remained. For example the craft of furniture making, textiles, and ceramics was always present in the architectural avant-gardes of the early twentieth century from Art Nouveau to Bauhaus, but it was always relegated to the rear. It was the architects, sculptors, and artists that were mainly considered in the discussion of visual arts and innovations. As a result of this history, most of the important, newly-established European and American museums featured mainly artists. Craft makers were relegated to craft shows, bazaars, and showrooms of retail establishments. With the advent of the American Studio Craft Movement, the separation between art and craft became even more complex when considering the robust Do-It-Yourself craft category that included amateur craft makers practising as a hobby, though some with great skill.

The products that came out of the studios of the professional crafts people existed in between: they did not belong with the amateur crafts, nor were they accepted as art. In the 1960s and 1970s, there were numerous opportunities to incorporate crafts into the domain for contemporary art, yet the separation persisted. Since the 1980s, many contemporary artists use crafts while many studio craftspeople experiment with art and design. Bruce Metcalf, for example, talks about two prevailing lines of practice for people who have formal craft education: craftsperson-businessman and craftsperson-artist. According to Metcalf, more business-oriented craftspeople tend to work with design and mass production, while the art-leaning craftspeople create more one-of-a-kind objects that compete against mass-produced objects through high quality of work, material, and design. Yet, work created by Johnson and Stein demonstrate that business, craft and art can productively co-exist.

This dichotomy between art and craft has continued on and persists to this day. We still think of objects that we use in the domestic interior, such as chairs, as craft items in spite of the fact that some chairs could be discussed as works of art. Interestingly, the same objects exhibited in a gallery seem less craft and more art. The objects in the exhibition Contemplative Interiors: Furniture and Ceramics ask the viewer to think about why context matters. By being situated between art and craft and between domestic and public, they force us to think about the role of craft and functional objects in a world with rigidly structured hierarchies.
of art and craft. In this sense, Johnson’s and Stein’s works do not play into the dichotomy of art and craft but exist in both realms. They bring domestic connotations of the hearth, meals, and relaxation into the Lockhart Gallery which is itself a residential space adapted to be an art gallery. At the same time, if used at home, their connotations to Studio Craft make the users think of creativity and artistic inspirations of its makers.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard once talked about the idea of a house as “imagination augmented by the values of reality”. The idea of the domestic interior as a place where we conceive of our world, where the outside world is reflected back to us through a prism of safety and enclosure. The interiors of a house then are spaces where our understanding of the world is crystalized, where we return at night to reflect upon our lives and activities of the day. While many authors have talked about the house in a metaphorical or realistic sense, Bachelard’s understanding of the poetics of the house as a space is especially relevant to the work of Johnson and Stein. Bachelard understands domestic interiors as not places that could or should be described, but as places that transcend the simple physicality of objects so as to understand the essential qualities of one’s house. The real poetics of the space reside in the feeling created by the contents of the dwelling. The interchange between modernist lines and the warmth of colors and materials contributes to the object’s potential to be more than just well-designed. These works help their makers, viewers, and owners reflect on the nature of the craft-making itself.

Bibliography


Interview with James Johnson
by Alla Myzelev (August 7, 2018)

Alla Myzelev: James Johnson, you consider yourself a furniture maker, but you were not always doing that as I understand. You came to furniture-making from a different discipline, from a different position. So how did you feel your education influenced your work?

James Johnson: My background is in fine art, in sculpture, so I came to furniture after graduate school initially out of more practical reasons. I am as much influenced by sculptors and fine art history as I am by furniture makers and the history of furniture.

AM: Is that the reason why your art is both artistic and functional?

JJ: Yes, I look at the pieces as much as sculptures as I do functional pieces of furniture.

AM: How does it feel to see these pieces in a gallery setting?

JJ: This is the first time I have been able to see them in the gallery setting. However, with my background I’m used to showing work in a gallery setting so the gallery setting itself isn’t anything that’s new to me. One of the things that I like about the gallery setting is that is removes any kind of context, so each piece can be considered individually, and I think viewers are more inclined to view them beyond just functional pieces, so more expressive or conceptual content.

AM: More conceptual or sculptural?

JJ: More sculptural than conceptual. These aren’t overly conceptual pieces. There are ideas behind them but they’re more formal sculptures, formal pieces than they are conceptual pieces.

AM: In this sense, who are the people who influenced your work?

JJ: It’s a continuation for me from sculpture into furniture. I do not see it as a split. And initially as a sculptor my three major influences were Constantin Brancusi (I see a lot of his influence in my furniture as far as breaking and stacking of bases, of parts, and how things are separated), Isamu Noguchi, who I see a lot of in some of my more monolithic pieces, and Martin Puryear, who was the most influential for me as a sculptor. I really enjoy his process of making forms that combine subtractive and additive elements so that something would look carved or shaped from a subtractive method but is really an additive, a construction. And those forms, they are not truly minimal. With minimalism and minimalist pieces they are aloof. There are no narratives or emotive connection to the pieces. But with Puryear, the work is more personal and approachable.
[In terms of] furniture makers, originally, I was making shaker furniture, so I really like the ideas behind shaker furniture. There is a creative side to me and a very logical and practical side, and the shaker really brought that out, combined with the fact that there’s no “decorative elements” to shaker work, which is really something that I found a kinship with. Moving forward I was looking a lot at James Krenov. I like his use of space and making cabinets that were nontraditional. And these occasional pieces, these accent pieces, were something that could be really expressive, and I really responded to the scale of the work. The human scale of that interaction and the way that it worked, that interplay between the viewer or user and the piece itself. And then the other artist that I was really influenced by is George Nakashima and I really admired his use of modern bases with the natural, organic element of live-edge pieces that he had. It was different for me and they really had a nice presence to them. They didn’t seem rustic, they had a refinement, but when you viewed them in a domestic setting it really brought nature and elements of the outside world into your living space. I like that connection between man and nature, living in that space, and bringing that feeling of being connected with nature as opposed to being separate from nature, either go against nature or with nature, and I really like that tension of his work. I am always looking at various artists and everybody seeps in a little bit here and there, but those are the main ones for me.

**AM:** You seem to be thinking in terms more theoretical or more idealistic about understanding your furniture. In this sense who would be your ideal customer?

**JJ:** I think the ideal customer for me would be the same as the ideal viewer. I really want someone who enjoys the pieces, who engages with them and spends time with them, not somebody who looks at the piece, identifies it as what it is or what its function is, says it’s nice and moves on. Anyone that has that sensibility to really engage with the pieces is my ideal viewer and are actually my customers. Those are the people that purchase the pieces. These pieces aren’t made for those who need furniture out of the necessity, they are things that you have to fall in love with, they are things you have to have.

**AM:** Do you ever think about the context of the work, in terms of once it goes into someone’s home? How does it feel to go back and see the work in someone’s home?

**JJ:** I don’t often see furniture in somebody else's home. I do live with a number of pieces of my own. But what I really like, when I deliver the pieces, is to walk into the space for the first time and see where [the buyer] is going to put it, if they have considered where to put it. They’ve made room for it in their lives, they are anticipating it, not “oh, just throw it over there in the corner, we’ll figure out where to put it.” It is almost like bringing home a newborn; there’s all this preparation ahead of time, and everyone is excited, and it fits. The work, in my view, always fits, and I
find that a lot of the people who purchase the pieces have a sensibility of their aesthetic. I would walk into a house and see work by all sorts of different artists; this is not just a regular run-of-the-mill interior and this is not their first time buying a custom piece or a handmade piece that sticks out like a sore thumb. And I’ve come to expect it now, but initially it was very surprising to me: how it seems to fit and how they have accommodated for the new addition to the family. That is really satisfying for me to see: that I know it’s in good hands, I know it’s fine.

**AM:** When your work is sold commercially, what are some of the challenges in finding a market? Is it different from finding a market for a painter or sculptor?

**JJ:** I really don’t think there is much of a difference for painting and sculpture versus furniture, although the functional aspect of the furniture makes the purchase a little bit more practical. But I’m closer to the market of a painter or a sculptor or an artist, a traditional artist, than I am to a furniture manufacturer in terms of both my audience and market. The pieces aren’t cheap. They aren’t built to be disposable or expendable. Finding a market has always been a challenge for almost any artist. You rely heavily on word of mouth, going to shows, and just seeing the work in person. I think the pieces have a compelling nature to them when they are viewed in person that really doesn’t translate in photos. Partially that might be scale. It might be due to seeing solid work right in front of you. There’s no stain on it.

It’s not a cherry, walnut, or maple finish. It’s not a color, like how a lot of furniture is. It’s actual hardwood with a warmth and a depth to the surface. It’s very real and raw. And for some people it’s the first time they have seen furniture that has various colors in it and they think it is stain. I have pieces that are made out of sapele, which is like a ribboned mahogany, and first thing that a lot of people ask me is, “Oh, I love that, what color stain is that?” And I say, “No that’s the natural color of the wood.” And they say, “Get out of here!” They just had an experience.

So, when I’m looking at the market in those terms it’s something that is slowly growing, and I rely heavily on returning customers and building up a relationship with the people I have done business for and have made work for in the past. And that part is always very satisfying because it is not just a cold transaction, there is a kind of relationship that builds, and it
is always nice to know they have a good home. It’s always nice to have people come back that are very happy with my pieces and look for me at shows. It has been wonderful, but it has always been a challenge and it will probably continue to be.

AM: I want to talk about the process, how do you decide what you are going to do? How do you decide what materials you are going to use?

JJ: I do make some custom work, custom work is completely different in its process. The design aspect, the materials, all of those decisions are made early on in the process. The finished piece or the making of a piece is more a matter of execution; it’s more doing it right and doing it well. The other part of my work that I really consider my work are spec pieces: pieces that are built on speculation for shows with no particular buyer in mind. And these are the pieces that I really enjoy the most in terms of the process. When I was making sculpture, I used to work somewhat intuitively. Meaning I would have a vague idea of what I wanted to make in terms of a form. I would have a variety of sketches and then I would just try different things. I would make a part and then I would add parts and remove parts, put up things temporarily, look at them, react to them. I really like that aspect of making. And when it came to making spec pieces this process of making became second nature. This is what I would return to. This is how I would make things. And what I really like about that process is early on, the piece starts to become something, and I have a general idea of what I would like it to be. But the piece helps to dictate and format how it is going to end up being and there is almost a relationship between me and the piece—what I want the piece to do and what the piece wants to do, and how it looks. And a lot of it has to do with just trial and error and playing around with things. A lot of times the pieces resolve themselves by accident, by just pure chance, and I don’t ever rule that out. I recognize it for what it is. Isamu Noguchi said “you can either decide what you want to do and make it, or you can make something and decide what you’ve done,” and that really sums up the process. The custom
work is you figure out what you want to do and do it, but the spec work is “well let’s just play around and see what we come up with,” and that is the part that I really like.

**AM:** So how do you know when you are finished? When this process is complete?

**JJ:** For custom work, that’s pretty cut and dry. You come up with an idea, you flush it out and then you execute it. It is done when the final coat is dry. For the spec work, sometimes you do not know, sometimes I will be working on the piece and I want it to have a certain sense or presence. I want it to be airy or I want it to be viewed more monolithically. I want something that separates and has tension between parts. It is almost like a gesture of the piece and once that gesture feels complete then I leave it and I walk away. And I always want to walk away not fully understanding the piece. Where it kind of challenges me as a viewer and leaves me something to come back to and figure out.

**AM:** Aside from art influences, are there any other influences on your work and your practice?

**JJ:** Sculpture was a real good way to figure out who I was, and I was in my twenties, out of school, and I didn’t have a good sense of who I was or what I wanted to do, and I wrestled with all the big questions that everyone asks themselves when they are young and going through school. Sculpture and art was a wonderful way for me to figure myself out. And that process is never finished, and it also encompasses various disciplines outside of art. My interest in philosophy, in religion, in science. I’ve spent lots of time recently learning about the Zen practice. Of disconnection between the human and nature, the identity of self, the myth of self, and one’s connection to the universe. It is something that is working its way slowly into the work, kind of in a “surfacey” way. My pieces are just meant to be calming, tranquil pieces that have a presence, that are quiet. They are not noisy. They are not screaming for attention. But now I anticipate that they’ll become a little less surfacey and more intellectual as I progress. I don’t consider myself a practitioner of Zen but the theories of Zen Buddhism have been influential as of late.

Photo Credit: James Johnson
AM: What is your favorite thing about being a maker?

JJ: My favorite thing about being a maker is the process of making. It’s something that I find really satisfying. It challenges me on a variety of different levels. It challenges me physically, what I am capable of doing, what my hands are capable of making, and using tools. But it also challenges my problem solving skills; all this exploring, and painting yourself into a corner means you have to work your way out of it. It also challenges me creatively and conceptually—how I view the work and how I come to make the work, and conceive the work. Besides making, the act of making, what I really do like about being a maker is living with the pieces once I’ve made them. It is always satisfying to drop off a piece and see how excited the customer is. It makes you feel very good. But it doesn’t compare to being able to have these pieces in my house, to interact with them on a daily basis. They become fixtures, they become part of my “family” if you will. Also they really change the way I move through my space and the appreciation for the work. The daily rituals of life, like the dresser and getting dressed in the morning. Something that is visually appealing, that’s easy to use, that you know makes sense: this thing that has this beauty and presence to it. That is always one of the best things about making it. And it doesn’t have to be me making them. I get the same satisfaction from artist’s work that I have in my life, and I think that’s important. One of the best parts of having things made by makers is that you bring a little bit of the maker into your life.
Interview with Kala Stein

by Alla Myzelev (October 2018)

Alla Myzelev: How did you come to ceramics and how do you feel your education has influenced your process?

Kala Stein: As a child I was always artistic and interested in making things so I never considered that being an artist was a choice. Creativity has always been a part of my identity, what I was good at and what I enjoyed. I started out in graphic design as an undergraduate at SUNY New Paltz. That lasted about two years until I took a ceramics course and I connected with the process of working with clay. A large part of my response to the material was because of the collective labor that was necessary and the sense of community that grows out of the collective experience. Because I grew up on a farm and grew up outdoors, working with clay and all of the processes provided a familiarity from childhood and was not too different than growing food or tending to animals.

My parents were back-to-the-landers and my father was a builder, a ferrier at one point, so I grew up with an understanding of how things work, how to use tools, and plan for a project. This was DIY before DIY was a thing. The dignity I find in labor is very real for me, the fulfillment through making objects to live with and use gives me a second round of gratification when people use my pieces or live with them in their homes.

My background in graphic design has been valuable for me to market my work and to mock up patterning and layout in my studio practice. In terms of my education influencing my process, I screen printed a lot in undergrad and this bridged my graphic design background with ceramics. I worked for my professor at the time, Uruguayan artist Rimer Cardilloe had a public mural commission for the State University of New York, New Paltz Campus made by screen printing imagery on pre-fired tile. We processed and fired all of the tiles over the course of two years. My ceramics teacher in undergrad was porcelain master Mary Roehm who taught me how to work with the nuances of material, and how to push the limits. I primarily work with porcelain unless a different material is required for a project.

Between my undergraduate and and graduate school, I worked for two years at the Moravian Pottery & Tile Works in Doylestown, Pennsylvania which is a museum/factory that produces medieval style tile. I did hand pressed medieval style tile in a pre-industrial manner. I considered this job part of my education and although technically this was employment, I learned about the craft of the earthenware material
and technique, modes of production and studio flow for production.

**AM**: The tiles were made based on the medieval tradition?

**KS**: We made replicas of tiles that were made in the late 1800s and early 1900s and those tiles were based off of medieval European tile designs. Henry Mercer, who was the founder of Moravian Pottery & Tile Works was an anthropologist who wanted to preserve pre-industrial trades. He did this through collecting and creating the Mercer Museum and then establishing the Moravian Pottery & Tile Works. The tiles could be considered Medieval in part because of the techniques and pre-industrial technology we used but primarily it was the designs including themes like coats of arms, fleur de lis, seasons, zodiacs, and Latin phrases that linked back to medieval and neo-medieval traditional design themes.

After working at Moravian Pottery & Tile Works, I committed to a two-year apprenticeship with Donna Polseno and Richard Hensley in Floyd County, Virginia. They are a married couple, both potters, each with an independent body of work. I assisted them in their studios and this experience provided me the support and time to really develop my voice as an artist. My work for Rick and Donna included slip casting Donna’s functional work, helping with mold-making, glaze mixing, firing, and sales. The opportunity to work with two full-time potters gave me valuable exposure to what the life of an artist could look like living in a rural area. They lived and had their pottery right off of the Blue Ridge Parkway with a self-serve gallery situation where people could pull off the Parkway and purchase some pottery by putting the money in the locked box. They had been there since the 1970s and there’s a romantic, utopian idea around that type of life as an artist but also a practicality as well.

**AM**: Making art is an integral part of your life; you live that life and that’s it.

**KS**: Yes, being an artist is a lifestyle, it’s a way of being. It can be really tough and it can be really sweet. My experience of learning through an apprenticeship was immensely influential in terms of developing a strong studio practice and a cohesive body of work to apply to grad school with. Living so close with Rick and Donna, and their community also gave me the support and network to continue my work and inspiration of what life could look like for me in the future.

From there I moved back to New York and went to graduate school at the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University. Alfred is a strong program in part because of the size of the program including the facilities and six full time faculty in ceramics. I worked with Ann Currier, Linda Sikora, Wayne Hiby, John Gill, Andrea Gill, and Walter McConnell who were the core faculty at the time (2007-2009). The intensity of a two year graduate program was invigorating and my peers in grad school are still a significant part of my life. After graduating, I taught at Alfred for five
years as visiting faculty and Director of the Cohen Gallery. And that was a part of my education as well, learning to teach, trying different ways of teaching, learning from my students and colleagues.

AM: Who were the artists that influenced your style and your way of working?

KS: While in graduate school, we had a Swiss visiting artist, Philippe Barde. He took commercial plaster molds, cut them up, and then rebuilt them before casting. This technique resonated with me and influenced my approach to mold making because it related to construction, deconstruction, and the architecture of the mold. I developed this approach into a systematic strategy for my studio practice while at Alfred and the first couple years after graduating when I had my studio there. The Bauhaus movement, the aesthetic and the concept, has also been influential to my approach to making and what I am doing with Tom Schmidt, Seth Payne, and Mat Karas. We’ve formed a collective that grew out of the Alfred years and from time to time work alongside each other.

AM: I wonder how you feel about cubism and an approach to art. Was the original movement, spearheaded by Braque and Picasso, an inspiration to you?

KS: Yes, I would say there is a Cubist sensibility in my work, although I do not intentionally align myself with that movement or those artists. I respond to Cubism because it cracked the art world open to new possibilities of abstract representation. Perhaps somehow, unconsciously, I am influenced by Cubism because it came before me, but probably more likely I am influenced by the Modernist work that came after Cubism. I certainly respond to Marcel Duchamp’s Nude Descending a Staircase, probably one of the most famous Cubist paintings, showing a figure repeated through time and space.

© Association Marcel Duchamp / ADAGP, Paris / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York 2018

The vibrational repetition, muted palette, and planar representation are some attributes in my own work. I think my work oscillates between constructed and deconstructed as I break down and then rebuild form through molding processes and systems. In some instances, the mold itself is
cut and fragmented to detach it from the initial seamless model, the original form.

**AM:** Do you think of the finished product as a time and space development, as a process through time?

**KS:** The Promenade Series was designed in a way where the same shape is repeated multiple times within the same vessel but after that I repeat the forms in space as well. In the installation, in ‘real’ space is where the concept of time and movement is apparent. One vessel may give a suggestion of temporal or spatial dimension, however, when I multiply the units into a larger piece, that is where a suggestion of the infinite field occurs.

**AM:** Your work is both very artistic but also very functional. How does it feel to see your work in an art gallery versus a commercial gallery, shop, or show?

**KS:** I always like seeing my work in a gallery or in a place where there is plenty of space around it, allowing attention to focus on the work. Within these minimal spaces, there is an allowance for the viewer to spend more time with individual pieces without the distraction of clutter. On an operational level, galleries tend to have less focus on consumerism and instead are a platform to support artist’s investigations through a body of work. A gift shop situation doesn’t lend itself very well to displaying my work because of the typical crowdedness, but I am honored to be represented by many smaller shops and galleries in order for my work to reach a diverse public. In this situation, of course, there is a commercial focus and smaller, more sellable work is likely to be represented in the shop. These spaces function differently and exist for different reasons.

Every year, I make a number of commission pieces for permanent installations. These pieces are typically designed for the walls in restaurants or hotels. I know that they will stay there for a long period of time and will be highly visible as the public comes and goes. The permanence and accessibility of these projects is ideal for longevity and reach. I have a wall piece, a 15 foot representation of the Aquarius constellation in the Jeremy Hotel on Sunset Boulevard in North Hollywood that I finished in May 2017. It is installed on a wall adjacent to a glass facade that is parallel with the sidewalk. Very highly visible!

**AM:** Following up on that, who is your ideal audience or your ideal customer?

**KS:** I want my pieces to go into beautiful places and be in good company with other well-designed or hand-crafted objects. I often look through high-end design magazines and imagine my pieces in one of those featured homes with abundant natural light, handmade furniture, and not too much clutter. So my ideal audience would be someone with a curated home, with a reverence for good art, design, and architecture.

But when it comes down to it, my ideal customer is someone who wants to live with my work, someone who responds to
the work to the extent that they purchase it to take it home with them. I don’t discriminate—this audience is comprised of my family, friends, students, and collectors.

I do appreciate it when my work appeals to those who are informed about ceramics and craft processes because I think the technical aspects of designing and making ceramics is part of the value of the work itself. In this case, the work is a welcome mat to have a meaningful conversation and engage with others.

**AM:** How does it feel to see your work in someone’s home? I think about Art Nouveau designers and architects who were very particular about how they want their work to be seen; for example, how the décor and furniture are supposed match architecture. Do you ever come in and mentally reshape the decor?

**KS:** I love seeing my work in homes because that means someone loved it so much that they purchased it or it was gifted. To see how the pieces are being used or how they are displayed within the home can be interesting insight into their way of thinking—sometimes curious and unexpected. For instance, my mother has one of my porcelain vases in her entry that she uses for a sunglasses holder—one arm of the glasses hook over the lip of the vase and it can hold three or four pairs of glasses. Totally unexpected, but it functions! I appreciate the playfulness of improvisation and use when the pieces are in the home and perhaps not as precious as if they were in a gallery.

The opportunity to curate a whole home is ideal but more likely unrealistic. With our home in Canadice, NY, I had the opportunity to do this with my husband, Tyler. We designed and built a small home on the hill with intention in every choice and attention to every detail. Materials were harvested, reclaimed, and sourced with aesthetics, resilience, and cost in mind. Overall it has a minimalist aesthetic but with a focus on inherent qualities of the materials. This is an ideal home for my work to be in—plenty of natural light, white walls, dark grey mottled concrete floors, reclaimed fir beams, locally harvested poplar, hand crafted furniture mixed in with heirloom antiques and collectables.

I am really good at mentally designing and rearranging! Yes, I sometimes do want to rearrange decor and move things around, even in a hotel room where the lighting may be off or a chair could be in a more functional location. I love objects: I am a collector and a maker, but more and more I really appreciate a more sparse and minimal space. It provides peace and serenity. Less is more.

**AM:** Your work is sold commercially. What are some of the challenges of being an artist but also a business person, of being in the market and selling your work?

**KS:** My studio practice has multiple functions and I have always believed that I would be more successful with a diverse portfolio of offerings. This approach has provided me with a wide range of experiences and projects. I categorize my studio
practices into three spheres: investigative/experimental works designed and made by me usually shown in galleries; customer-driven commission works usually for permanent, public installation; and production work, designed by me, made in my studio with the support of an assistant for wholesale clients or retail shops.

Because my practice is diverse it is always changing based on the project. With this comes challenges with time management, calculating expenses, and the learning curve of new systems, tools, and materials. It keeps me on my toes and challenges my craft. Self-representation is another challenge that comes along with the autonomy of being a studio artist and being self-employed. One can only do so much, and if the main objective is to be in the studio, then it is necessary to seek out help in the other realms of the business such as marketing and finances. The DIY culture and tech (mobile credit card swipers, website templates, etc.) is appealing to save money but more and more I want to hire these things out. When I outsource for business support I think of it as investing in my own business since I know I can redirect those hours to creative activities. With the customer-driven work, I don’t have a lot of artistic license in terms of the final aesthetic because the work is commissioned for spaces that are tightly designed and curated. But with restrictions it is often easier to make the work, to get started with a clear objective in mind. Additionally, money is a motivating factor and essentially this work is sold before the process of making begins.

Kala Stein, Double Black Slider Sequence, 2014, Photo Credit: Brian Oglesbee

The work I make for gallery exhibitions is prompted by the opportunity to show the work. I take these opportunities to design a new body of work with a new investigation and the core. This is both intimidating and satisfying because I put pressure on myself...
that each next body of work needs to be better than what came before it and it is uncharted territory.

**AM:** We have talked a little bit about your process. Can you tell me about the main premise of your process? Is there something in the process of making that you carry from beginning to end, from the time you learned to now?

**KS:** I would say an attention to detail, the craft, has always been an underlying attribute in my work. Can the main premise of my process be the process itself? The process of creating molds and slip casting certainly drives my work for many reasons. There is a playfulness in pulling molds and casting, even more play when the molds can be rearranged and constructed each time they are used. There is a rhythm in the studio when I am casting that can create a nice flow. Ultimately, I want to push the limits of the material and challenge myself, evolving my skills with each project.

There is a tightness that comes from the minimalist aesthetic and sometimes that virtue seems to overshadow the fact that it is a handmade piece. With my patterned work, I am making vector files using [Adobe] Illustrator and then importing that into a CNC mill that mills out the pattern in wood. Then I make a plaster mold of that, before finally using the plaster mold with clay. Investigation and experimentation with new tools, technology, and ideas are motivating factors and when there is discovery or a breakthrough, the reward is tremendous. I think I am addicted to the rush and excitement of new experiences so I create opportunities for new and exciting things to occur in my studio practice. I am just beginning to incorporate digital fabrication into my pieces, but I don’t have easy access to the machines.

**AM:** Where do you get access to the machines?

**KS:** I found a small business in Santa Rosa, which is an hour away from where I live, that specializes in milling and CNC. The services are not cheap, but I don’t mind outsourcing to them because of the professional quality of work and conceptually, I think of it as a collaboration of sorts.

It is another way for me to get out of my studio, find new processes, and modes of craft. It keeps things interesting and finding a good fabricator is like getting a whole new toolbox and set of skills. The experience of outsourcing is not only about what they are capable of, but it is a relationship that needs to have good chemistry and communication to work.

**AM:** How do you know that a piece is complete?

**KS:** Well, with ceramics there is not a whole lot of opportunity to work infinitely on a piece because I am making individual objects that are fired. Typically, I will fire two to three times and then that is the end of it. I will do a bisque firing, a glaze firing, and then maybe an overglaze luster or overglaze detail firing. The technique of mold making is not a process that makes spontaneous decision making very easy because
you are making models and molds and letting things dry for days in between so it is a long drawn-out process.

The reveal of the first cast always brings an element of surprise. Seeing the new form, I evaluate it and respond by making adjustments to the next cast. I can alter the mold, make a new mold part, and integrate that in. Sometimes I change the piece to a certain extent, by cutting away parts of the piece or adding something to it. But, the clay that is used for slip casting does not have a lot of workability after it comes out of the mold, so I am a bit limited.

**AM:** I imagine with furniture there is a lot more flexibility.

**KS:** Yes, because of the water element of clay, there is a small window of time that allows certain changes in the form to be made. Because my work is primarily focused on form, the wet state is when most of the decision making happens. When considering my pieces with appliqué on it, often I look at the pieces like a blank canvas and then I add the tiny shapes on top of the surface. I have to step back from the piece to get a better sense of the composition before I can call it finished. The judgement comes from a visceral feeling, the evaluation is a sensibility that comes from years of making work and knowing when it feels right.

**AM:** Do you have a business name?

**KS:** My DBA (doing business as) in New York is Spring Valley Clay Works.

**AM:** How did you come up with that?

**KS:** I established it at the time I developed the Finger Lakes tile.

Spring Valley is where I grew up, Spring Water, New York in a valley. My mom’s place is called Spring Valley Farm and then ‘clay works’ suggests “anything is possible with clay” and that clay is functional. I put those two together to make up the name. I mostly use Kala Stein or Kala Stein Design to better represent my brand as an artist. I stay away from using the word potter, because I consider myself a designer, an artist, and an educator. Those are the hats that I wear and a title like ‘artist’ or ‘ceramist’ is more appropriate because it is more inclusive of what I do. Pottery and potter conjure images of stoneware pottery for most people. There is nothing wrong with that, but it is not what I make.

**AM:** In your mind, what is the difference between a potter and a ceramist?
KS: Potters make everything vessel oriented, utilitarian vessels for serving and containing. I consider potters to have a vast repertoire including tea pots, serving bowls to mugs. Ceramist is a little bit broader. A potter would be a ceramist, a tile-maker would be a ceramist. The potter is more specific. Ceramic is the material whereas the pottery is the objects produced.

AM: This is very interesting because as an art historian I have hierarchical thinking. For example, I look at the ceramic artists as someone who is very educated, like you, and probably has a graduate degree and does ceramics either functional or non-functional pieces, but always art related. To me a potter does more functional crafts.

KS: Someone who I worked with at the tile works where we only made tile called himself a potter and we had that discussion of “why are you calling yourself a potter?” and he did not see the difference because he was working with clay. I referred to us as tile makers because really that is what we did but then the museum referred to us as ceramists.

AM: Tile makers seem to be kind of narrow.

KS: It’s always good to be as specific as possible. Many people confuse how to use the words ceramics, clay, pottery, porcelain.

AM: I think it is great to think about those borderlines and see where the definitions intersect. My last question is what is your favorite part of being a maker and a ceramics artist?

KS: I love creating things with my hands and I feel like I need to do that in order to be happy. For my quality of life, I need to be in the studio making something, looking forward, being challenged. I feel the imbalance if I have not been working in the studio. It grounds me. But I also love that it connects me to other makers, other ceramists, furniture makers, painters, poets, creatives. I like the community of artists, and more or less think they are interesting people who are choosing to live a certain way. It’s not easy and it’s not straightforward so that says something about their character.
George Nakashima (1905-1990): An American furniture maker during the twentieth century. He is considered the father of the American craft movement which was a movement that focused on the way furniture was designed forever. Nakashima is famous for his woodworking pieces that had a free flowing aesthetic and brought elite decor to American homes.

Slip Casting: Slip is clay mixed with water and has a consistency similar to heavy cream. Slip casting is when slip is poured into a mold that is two halves held together by rubber bands, the mold has a hole to pour the clay into. The clay will then start to dry on the walls of the mold, so one must keep pouring the slip to make the walls thicker. Once the clay is dry, in some cases excess slip is poured out, the two halves are taken off.

Modular Molds: The desired shape is formed from a mold that concaves the specific object being made. A popular material that modular molds are made out of is silicone and clay is used to form the shape. These can also be call slump and hump molds.

Bauhaus: A German art school that was open from 1919 to 1933 and is famous for fusing art and industry. Bauhaus is German for “House of Building” and is closely associated with graphic design. Walter Adolph Georg Gropius (1883-1969) was the founder of Bauhaus along with others, Gropius was a German architect and is considered a master of modern architecture. The manifesto of Bauhaus was to grow away from buying mass produced furniture to buying art that was also functional.

CNC cutting: A computer numerical control router is a computer-controlled cutting machine related to the hand-held router used for cutting various hard materials, such as wood, composites, aluminium, steel, plastics, and foams.

Bisque Firing: Bisque firing transforms the object into a porous state for glazing. It allows the potter to do much more decorative work with stains, underglazes, and glazes with a greatly reduced risk of the pot being damaged. Because the bisque firing is brought to temperature much more slowly, bisquing also reduces the chances of pots cracking or exploding in the glaze firing. The slowest firing and kiln temperature increase should be done at the beginning of the process, as the most crucial point is when the chemically combined molecules of water are being removed from the clay.

Glaze Firing: The temperature of this firing process depends on the effect the artist wants from the glaze. If the temperature is too high then the glaze melts, but if it is too low it will not mature. The temperature range for glaze firing affect the luster, the color and the length of time the glaze lasts.

Overglaze Luster: A glaze that goes over the first glaze and can control the incandescence of the ceramic, for example one could add a pearl or gold overglaze. An overglaze is also called an enamel.

Overglaze Detail Firing: The last of a series of firing where the colored decoration is applied on top of all other glazes and then fixed in a second firing at a relatively low temperature. The colors fuse on to the glaze, so the detailing becomes lasting.
James Johnson. Standing Clock. 76"H x 16"W x 16"D. Oak and Sapele.

Photo credit: Abigail G. Anderson
James Johnson. Side Board II.
34"H x 54"W x 16"D.
Maple and Sapele

Photo credit:
Abigail G. Anderson
James Johnson. Lamp Table with Drawer. 76"H x 18"W x 28"D. Oak and Sapele
James Johnson. Storage Cabinet. 36"H x 24"W x 16"D. Oak and Sapele
James Johnson. Bench.
18”H x 32”W x 16”D.
Walnut

Photo credit: Abigail G. Anderson
James Johnson.
Three Drawer Dresser.
36"H x 48"W x 16"D.
Cherry and Walnut
James Johnson.
Coffee Table with Drawer.
18”H x 36”W x 18”D. Cherry
James Johnson. Hall / Sofa Table. 36"H x 54"W x 16"D.
Oak, Walnut, Stainless Steel
Work by Kala Stein

Kala Stein. Tectonic Vase, Slip Cast Porcelain with Precious Metal Luster, 5" X 3" X 8", 2017
Kala Stein. (2) Wine Cups, Slip Cast Porcelain with Precious Metal Luster, 2018,
3" x 3" x 3.5",
(midnight blue)
Kala Stein. (4) Wine Cups, Slip Cast Porcelain with Precious Metal Luster, 2018, 3" x 3" x 3.5", (grey)
Kala Stein. (2) Wine Cups, Slip Cast Porcelain with Precious Metal Luster, 2018, 3” x 3” x 3.5”, (black)
Kala Stein. (12) Mugs, Slip Cast Porcelain with Precious Metal Luster, 2018, 4" x 4" x 4", (mango)
Kala Stein. (4) Juice Cups, Slip Cast Porcelain with Precious Metal Luster, 2018, 3.25" x 3.25" x 4", (grey)
Kala Stein. Tectonic Vase, Slip Cast
Porcelain with Precious Metal Luster,
8” X 3” X 11”,
2017
Contemplative Interiors

Ceramics and Furniture

February 6, 2019-March 15, 2019

Lockhart Gallery

Photos by: SUNY Geneseo Office of Communication and Marketing