

Two links to our work

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/gusstiffpottery/sets/>

<http://stiffyguss.blogspot.com/>

Artist Statement
Stephen Robison and Kathleen Guss

Our direction is focused in both sculpture and utilitarian ceramics. Historical and contemporary use of visual language and utilitarian objects are two main sources for our research. Working within the context of sculpture and the utility of ceramics allows us to communicate more than purely the use of the object. However, the use of the object is often the primary focus. Objects of use and domesticity have a common language, which a large and diverse audience can appreciate and relate to. The sense of humanity that a well thought out handmade object can obtain is not found in objects that can be purchased at Wall Mart or produced by the machines of industry (unless they are created by a designer who understands something more than how fast and cheap they can be produced or how easy the shape will be to ship). Thoughts about the user of objects are often negated for practical reasons and this results in objects that have no life or value of their own but fit very well into our disposable society. A major intent of ours is to create tactile qualities in these objects that offer an intimate relationship with the user and provide the objects with an inherent value that gives them a life of their own. Generating a pleasurable experience when being used and viewed creates new challenges with each object made. Visual balance by using proportional perspectives, physical balance within the weight and pivot points of the piece and the tactile qualities are among the most important issues we address to achieve these goals in our strictly utilitarian pieces. Some of our utilitarian pieces however also function on a conceptual level. For instance recent cups have imagery on them that relates to the chicken heads, as the local people have titled the prostitutes that frequent the highway area around our local chicken production facilities. The county we presently live in has the highest prostitution in the state and the most cases of gonorrhea in the country. Sure this is a strange issue to engage in within the context of a coffee cup, but it is an object that many people can be exposed to outside of the common art audience. The audience we often want to reach with concerns is quite often not the same audience who may contemplate the issues addressed in pieces that may be viewed in a gallery or museum setting. Actually, many people who would be exposed to an object such as a coffee cup may never step foot in a museum or gallery throughout their entire lives. This is one major concern that attracts us to creating such objects. Utilitarian pots have been three-dimensional canvases for quite a long time, actually long before the use of canvas. Ultimately, we want our utilitarian objects to be used.

A main focus outside of our strictly utilitarian work has been work that still uses the vessel format as a platform for other conceptual investigations. Over that last few years one concept that has dominated our work incorporates forms and surfaces related to

diatoms and viruses. We are not as concerned about the viewer using this work, although they can still function as containers, pouring vessels or drinking vessels. We are more concerned with how they view the pieces. The forms and surfaces of the viruses have been a great source for abstraction but what they can do for or do to our world is fascinating and frightening to us. Genetic virology is not always going to be understood by the viewer, or by us for that matter, but we don't find that to be crucial for the work to be appreciated. To some degree the viewer will always bring their own opinions (sometimes educated) to a piece of art and at times we find those insights to be enlightening. Most viewers of this body of work come to it with an idea that is close to what we mean to convey. Of course the intricacies of our concerns about viruses and knowledge about diatoms is not conveyed. There are times we want to direct the audience to try to understand a little about the subject matter. Many comments are related to seeing cells and also sea life influence in the work. Again the audience will bring what they have seen and understand to the work and that is fine with us.

Technical Considerations

Presently we are working with porcelain and stoneware clay bodies. We are using a variety of surface techniques using slips, under glazes, terra sigillata and glazes. We are primarily working with high fire temperatures and using some low temp techniques on top of the high fire surfaces. We have also returned to soda firing and wood firing, having just finished building a new soda kiln and we are now in the middle of building a wood kiln. The kiln quite often is the means to the end and using certain types of firing such as soda, salt and wood firing adds subtleties to the surface of the forms.

The Collaborative Effort

Building techniques are on and off the wheel. We use throwing, altering forms, slump molding and other additive and subtractive techniques. We work together and not one of us really does one thing within the work. We both throw and hand build and work the surface. Stephen does most of the glaze work because of recent allergies which Kathleen has developed associated with cobalt and other metals. The collaboration of ideas and esthetic decisions is a constant.