Nothing Comes from Nothing

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NOTHING COMES FROM NOTHING

WORKS BY NICHOLAS DANIELSON
I am constantly in a state of investigation and experimentation in order to contribute honest, genuine, and innovative ideas. I create objects to present food, offer conversations, invite touch, and enrich space. The work grows from a deep love for historical communal wares; I am inspired by their humility and unapologetic functionality. With inspiration comes adaptation. I touch clay with sensitivity and momentum in order to imagine and design pieces that integrate strength and softness. My work explores the boundaries of function, and the relationship between object and viewer—finding balance between the utility and visual intrigue.

Nicholas Danielson grew up in the Greater Chicago Area where he first attended McHenry County College. Danielson then completed his BFA at Montana State University in Bozeman, Montana in 2012. Following his graduation, he held a short term residency at the Red Lodge Clay Center in Montana. Currently, Danielson is a MFA student studying ceramics at Utah State University in Logan, Utah. During his graduate studies he completed a study abroad program at Hongik University in Seoul, South Korea.
Where do your ideas come from?

Recently it begins with a faint silhouette or form in my head and then I work backwards. Because it’s a craft based medium I am reliant on my skills. So, I will have an ideal form in my head and then I have to backtrack. In order to execute this form I have to ask myself, ‘What do I know how to do? What do I need to learn how to do?’ From the beginning it changes constantly because I’m constantly trying different techniques to execute a form and making the form multiple times. Sometimes the form is a historical example of a functional pot generated through my interpretation as a contemporary artist. Sometimes even just the title of a historical object by an unknown maker can inspire a form.
Many of your pieces reference historical forms or patterns. Why are you drawn to these forms and what compels you to translate them into contemporary objects?

“I think I’m still trying to answer that for myself but because of the way objects are created in our culture there is a very large distance from the humans that created them. I find a lot of inspiration within historical pieces or pieces made before the industrial revolution because of their connection to a maker or craftsperson. Those are things that I connect with a lot because I want to share in that experience. I appreciate works where you can see mistakes or embellishments. I think that ultimately we all want to know that we are human and that we do make mistakes and that things aren’t perfect. If we’re surrounded by perfect objects it creates this kind of idealistic surrounding that we can’t live up to.”
What are some other examples of historical forms that you reference in your work?

I make a really tall, tiered tray, which started less with historical forms but with a metal a dessert tray. At the same time I was looking at a lot of historical Korean work from the Sillia Dynasty, specifically these really long necked pedestal bowls where the maker cut into the surface. I started thinking about how the dessert trays were probably made from a mold that was meticulously carved but then mass-produced. I also thought about how the Sillia Dynasty pieces were really rough and kind of straight to the point. I tried to interweave those two ideas together by making something with that function but explored a different kind of aesthetic.
Talk about your observations of the contrast between the role of ceramics objects in Korean daily life and your experience of how people think about and use ceramics in the U.S. What do you think the roots of that difference are?

"I think the root of it is that we don’t have a tradition of using functional ceramics. I mean, I grew up with paper plates and thrift store ceramics that were probably from a SEARS. On the other hand, my mother was an antiques dealer so there was still preciousness around “artifacts”. But to my point, I can’t say most people grew up with ceramics except for maybe “fine china” that came out on special occasions. We don’t have a culture of handmade ceramics being integrated into our eating.

So I find it really interesting that so much of our craft is narrative based. It makes me begin to question certain things, like, if you’re not a personality of sorts how is that projected into your work and how does that relate to people wanting your work?

I don’t pretend to understand how people will interact with my work, but I really understand that how I perceive my work is not how anyone else is going to perceive it. That is something I really thought about in Korea. The pottery there was rooted in mere function and here we have a lot of emphasis on surface design. In Korea if there was a set of bowls it was just a set of bowls with a glaze on it. It didn’t need to have social or political commentary and that’s something that I really picked up on. It was a lot about form. I’ve always been a big advocate of form first and then surface."
There is an observable shift in your work since you returned from Korea. The most immediate examples that comes to mind are your lanterns and planters. Talk about this shift and where it springs from and what it is?

I’ve always been someone who is trying to move forward with the medium. I know I want to make objects that have a function but I don’t want to stop at tableware. This lead me to large scale floor planters for instance. I mean, there is an obvious function but it is not overriding the form. That is something that has been continually coming up now; the idea that ‘well of course it has a function but what formal elements do I want to implement?’ With the lanterns there is this romantic domestic thing about them for me. They are their own little spaces and they have heat and warmth and provide a sort of shelter. I like that I can tie those concepts into them and they can still be considered a function object. I guess I’m always trying to find ways to make functional work that isn’t typical of what one thinks of as functional within the canon of pottery.
Something you mention is Korean “buncheong” surface. Can you elaborate on what this process or technique is?

I actually went up in the mountains in Korea to where buncheong originated. From what I understand, in the first 200 years of the Joseon Dynasty people moved into the mountains during wartime and only had access to this really dirty, gritty clay. They would cover it with a white slip and then use a clear glaze over it. They were still doing their best to imitate porcelain somewhat but then it adapted into to their own aesthetic.

I’ve taken a play off of that idea. My clay body is somewhat porous and very coarse, and then I put slip and clear glaze on it. I’m trying to investigate the reaction so I use different materials to get different colors. I want to create a softness to the pieces. I handle the clay in somewhat of a rough manner so they need a couple layers to add softness and I think that slip and glaze achieve that.

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What are your plans for the immediate future? How do you hope to maintain the momentum of graduate school?

"Well, the questions that always run through my head are ‘What do I want my contribution to be?’ and ‘What do I need to do to continue that contribution?’ I want to continue producing work at the level that I’m currently producing and of the same quality. So right now I’m kind of stock piling ideas about situations to prepare myself.

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3. Cups & Bowls
4. Long Serving Tray
5. Feast Bowl
6. Three Tiered Tray
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8. Oval Serving Dish
9. Triangle Offering Tray
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12. Lantern Installation
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14. Surface Detail #2
15. Rectangular Wall Vases
16. Oval Serving Bowl
17. Set of Small Cups
18. Set of Large Cups
19. Three Tiered Tray

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