

NICHOLAS BIVINS MATSUTANI FELLOW

the practice of perfection



Nicholas Bivins makes functional handmade pottery, elegant and sublimely practical. The forms are spare, sleek and visually pared, with single lines of decoration and corner accents of color. Coffee and whiskey sets with trays combine function, design and precise presentation. The trays provide each piece its home. It is an invitation, not a constraint, a beautiful argument for perfection as a daily aesthetic experience.

The squared coffee cups fit the fold of the hand. The corner positioned opposite the handle is precisely where we put our lips to drink. The shape is based on efficient design, delivering the coffee in a “predetermined location, not an anonymous 360-degree curve.” Bivins takes this seriously. To take coursework in computerized imaging during graduate school, he had to convince both the art and mechanical engineering departments to agree. Such determination sets the bar for Bivins’ pursuit of “serving the work in its ultimate purpose.”

Ultimate purpose is an unusual and provocative goal, leading into Bivins’ favorite aspects of design. Design is how it looks and how it works, “a noun and a verb.” Adding inutile features produces

Saturday Morning, 2011
pots: porcelain, glaze, decals
tray: MDF, automotive paint
11" x 15" x 18"

excess, an unsatisfying compilation of nonessentials. Designing for efficiency is designing for what works best. But what is efficiency? A reduction to essentials, where essence is the spirit and the irreducible quality.

Considering efficiency pushed Bivins to question such traditional thinking as the round pot. Bivins enjoyed making utilitarian forms on the potter’s wheel. He sees the wheel tradition, with its millennia of human history, as key in his evolution of utilitarian design. But with digital imaging, everything changed. Now the pots have their source in Bivins’ imagination, as pure form. To make them, Bivins harnesses the complementary functions of the computer and the human brain. Where the computer exceeds in numerical computation, the human mind (excels) in pattern recognition and the intuitive leap to new solutions.¹ Hands-on remains integral for Bivins: “I am a maker. The idea is not finished until I make it.” His process spans the gamut from generating the ideas to slip casting and glazing the work. Bivins defines intimacy in spatial terms: horizon, near and close. “At your hand is near,” he says, “at your nose is intimate.”

Toasting Cups, 2011
pots: porcelain, glaze, decals
tray: MDF, automotive paint
10" x 14" x 10"

The lines on the coffee cups are intricate perspective drawings, each progressively diminishing in size down to the limit of the human visual range. These coded designs move the user from near to intimate. Close reading of the work rewards the user with awareness of its intentional complexity.

An inherent social consciousness and generosity inform Bivins’ intentions. Notably, Bivins says user, a term of the digital age, not customer. The contextual implication is that these objects are needed and will be used. The maker’s responsibility is to deliver the object designed to work best. This attitude is a subversion of art object commodification. Social conditioning associates quality design with wealth and social status, predicated upon the cost of excellence. Bivins overturns these expectations by delivering accessible utilitarian ceramic work, designed to perfection.

¹Cooley, Mike. *From Bruneschelli to CAD/CAM*, pp 197–207. *Design After Modernism*, John Thackara, ed. Thames & Hudson: NY 1988.

