

Marty Trammell

Cats and Clay:

Wheel-Thrown Ceramic Furniture for People and Cats

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Artist Statement

How can we create harmony with the cats who share our homes? Although we can't communicate with words, how we shape our shared environment can go a long way toward making our cats feel safe, comfortable, and respected in our homes. I want my items to be appealing to cats and people and perform unique functions for each. Through my experience fostering cats and kittens, I've learned a lot about what our feline companions want and need in a space. I've created the kinds of pieces that we tend to have in our homes like tables and shelves and modified their designs to offer safe spaces for cats.

Material choice and craft are important to this work. I avoid materials commonly used in cat furniture, like carpet and rope, which are hard to clean and some people find unappealing. Instead, I use wheel-thrown ceramics, paired with wood and fabric. This has allowed me to find a different way of thinking about and making functional ceramics outside of traditional pottery, and to combine multiple disciplines of craft into something exciting and new.

Thesis Proposal

Clay Cabinets: Furniture as Functional Ceramics

I enjoy making things intended to be used within the home, which create a personal connection with the user. In ceramics that is often accomplished by making pottery for food or drinks. Making these types of vessels is an important part of my practice, and I don't want to leave it behind. Instead, I want to expand into other kinds of functional objects. I have recently found myself shifting my response to a material need from "can I buy this?" to "can I make this?". Often "can I make this?" becomes "can I make this from clay?"

This has led me to wonder what associations ceramics carry and what could be achieved by making functional objects other than pottery out of clay. Could these objects be more sustainable? Could I create connections between different craft mediums or techniques? How can the existing connotations of ceramics be used towards my goals, and in what ways may they need to be subverted?

Ceramics have been used for making vessels for food or drink since at least 9000 BC¹. Because of this long history, ceramic artists and craftspeople address functionality in their work by working with traditional pottery forms. They do this by either highlighting function through making pots intended for use, or subverting the functionality of these objects like the

¹ ceramique.org, "Ceramic Products Timeline: How Uses of Ceramic Products Evolved by Time," *Ceramique* (blog), July 3, 2017, <https://www.ceramique.org/ceramic-products-timeline/>.

deconstructed pots of Michael Boroniec². Pottery is far from the only thing that could be considered functional ceramics, however, as ceramic materials touch nearly every part of our lives. They are used in countless industries such as construction, electronics, and plumbing among other things³. Still, pottery remains one of the only types of functional ceramics to be made in a craft context. I have found several examples of artists expanding on functional craft ceramics by making furniture from clay including Hun-Chung Lee whose ceramic benches and tables utilize traditional Korean glazes and reference the south Korean landscape⁴ and Kelsie Rudolph who makes ceramic furniture using pinched textures and brightly colored glazes⁵.

For this project, I want to make two to three pieces of furniture out of clay. I will make a free-standing cabinet, as well as a coffee table and/or a side table. Because ceramics involves a lot of hands-off time for drying and firing, I think that it is a good idea to work on more than one piece at a time and have pieces at different stages of the process. This will also give me more flexibility in case of any casualties in the kiln. These pieces will be full-sized and able to fulfill their intended functions. They should also be durable enough to stand up to use and outlive a cheaply manufactured piece of furniture. Although these pieces are ultimately intended to exist within a home, because the idea of functionality is so important to the work, I

² Michael Boroniec, "Michael Boroniec - Sculptor & Designer - Artworks," accessed October 8, 2021, <https://mboroniec.com/artworks-1>.

³ ceramique.org, "Ceramic Products Timeline."

⁴ SEOMI, "LEE HUN CHUNG" (SEOMI International Contemporary Design/Art, n.d.), <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52c60fffe4b02bfda115dffc/t/55cce3f6e4b07457fdfe00b6/1439491062159/complete+lee+presentation.pdf>.

⁵ Kelsie Rudolph, "FURNITURE," Kelsie Rudolph, accessed October 8, 2021, <https://www.kelsierudolph.com/portfolio>.

would like to display them in a way that allows for the audience to touch and use the furniture so that they could get an idea of what it would be like to live with the furniture.

I think that furniture is well-suited to this exploration because it carries some of the same associations with comfort and home that pottery does, but it has different applications. Because of financial limitations, I tend to buy cheaply manufactured furniture from big box stores. In my experience, this kind of furniture tends to break relatively quickly, and I feel less connected to it than I do to the handmade items in my home. I want to make well-crafted and long-lasting furniture using the medium that I find most exciting. This would also give me the opportunity to learn about other types of craft, such as woodworking, and create a dialogue between these crafts and ceramics.

The primary material I will be working with is clay. I plan to use various ceramics techniques such as building with slabs of clay and throwing on the potter's wheel to create my furniture pieces. I will also borrow some techniques, like wood joinery, from traditional furniture-making and translate them into clay. I will finish the pieces in glazes that reference traditional pottery glazes and atmospheric kiln effects. I want to do this to emphasize the use of ceramics, not try to disguise it as another material. I would like to make these pieces in the most sustainable way that is feasible to me because I want to minimize any negative climate impact that is created in the making of the work. Therefore, I plan to utilize techniques to lower emissions from the firing process. This will mean using electric firings instead of gas firings when possible. Alternatively, I will fire to a lower temperature in the gas kiln and will attempt to

achieve more efficient combustion in my firings⁶. I plan to test various glazes so that I can utilize more sustainable firings without sacrificing the appearance that I want.

I will also use other materials in my pieces such as wood, metal, and glass. I do not want to completely limit my use of materials to ceramics. I want the use of ceramics to expand my ability to make objects, not to unduly complicate the making by trying to force clay do something for which it is ill-suited. This may mean using metal for hinges, and glass in the door of the cabinet. I may use some wood in the construction of the pieces or to make items that interact with the furniture.

In summary, I plan to investigate what can be achieved by expanding functional ceramics in the context of craft to include more than pottery. I will do this by making several furniture pieces including a freestanding cabinet, a coffee table, and/or a side table. I will primarily work with clay and glaze, using other materials such as wood, metal, and glass as needed. By doing this, I hope to create meaningful and long-lasting furniture while being mindful of sustainability and finding new ways of combining woodworking and ceramics techniques.

⁶ J.J. Lukaca, "Doing Our Part: Increasing Sustainability in Ceramic Manufacturing: The Ceramic Industry Continues to Develop Processes and Technologies to Reduce Both Fuel Consumption and C[O.Sub.2] Generation," *Ceramic Industry* 165, no. 10 (October 2015): 28+.

Abstract

Humans have been sharing their homes with cats for a very long time, and generally, we cohabitate very well, but sometimes our needs or desires for living spaces don't completely line up with those of our feline companions. With my ceramic furniture, I strive to value cats and humans equally in my designs and create pieces that allow the needs of both species to be met harmoniously. Unlike typical cat furniture, my pieces are also easy to clean and don't use materials that some people find unattractive like carpet, cardboard, or rope.

When I first proposed this project, I knew that I wanted to make an unconventional kind of functional ceramics. I had goals in mind, like minimizing environmental impact and combining different forms of craft, but I was lacking a specific focus beyond that. Adding the goal of meeting the needs of both cats and humans in my work gave me an exciting challenge. I pulled inspiration from fostering cats and kittens, as well as traditional pottery techniques and surfaces to create these furniture pieces.

Thesis Oral

Hi everyone, thanks so much for coming to my thesis defense! I'm Marty Trammell, and I'm really excited to be showing you my work from this year. These are my I've always loved cats, but since moving to Portland three years ago, my partner and I have been fostering cats and kittens in our apartment, and I've been giving medical care to other people's foster cats.

I also really enjoy making functional ceramics, usually in the form of pottery like mugs or dinnerware. Specifically, I enjoy making things meant to be used. I'm excited by craft traditions and handmade objects that are used in everyday life. I also love the process of throwing on the wheel and during my time at PNCA, I have been pushing my limits in technique and scale in ceramics, and wanted to continue to do this with my thesis work.

I've brought these two interests together in this work to create my ceramic cat furniture. I'm using some of the materials, techniques, and surfaces of traditional ceramics to create a new kind of functional ceramics that equally values the needs of both cats and people.

When I proposed this project last semester, I knew that I wanted to push the boundaries of functional ceramics by making furniture from clay, but I didn't really have a specific angle. I had several areas of focus, like minimizing environmental impact and combining different forms of craft, but mostly I was focused on techniques and surfaces rather than on meeting a specific need. I hit a bit of a roadblock with my struggle to find direction and was pretty burnt out by the end of last semester. In my frustration, found myself returning again and again to the idea of making furniture for cats. At first, it was a bit of a joke, as making furniture for cats seemed

less serious and consequential than making human-centered furniture. But as I kept thinking about it, I found that there was a lot that was exciting and energizing about the idea. In my life, I try to value and respect animals as much as possible. I'm vegan and I spend a lot of time doing animal rescue work, so these ethics impact my daily life quite a bit. Why shouldn't my art lend the same kind of importance to animals? That being said, I still definitely see the humor in this work, and that was part of what made it such a refreshing shift when I decided to go down this route.

Once I started thinking seriously about making ceramic furniture for cats, my worlds came together and everything started to feel like research. Most of the people on Instagram either have something to do with ceramics or cats, so I was finding inspiration from both of those angles.

I also started looking back to books I'd read and trainings I'd done for my volunteer work with cats for ideas about what cats need to feel comfortable in a space. Particularly helpful resources were the Socialization training from Cat Adoption Team about how to help cats feel comfortable around people, and content and books from Hannah Shaw AKA Kitten Lady and Jackson Galaxy who is a cat behaviorist with a TV show called "My Cat From Hell".

The consensus seems to be, and this matched what I've experienced working with cats, that cats like to have lots of places to hide, preferably with more than one access point. They don't like large open spaces, but prefer to travel from one safe space to another. They also like vertical territory which enables them to claim their own spaces within a household.

Clay also feels like a very logical choice for making furniture for cats, because unlike the material typically used to make furniture for cat, like carpet and jute, glazed ceramics can be easily sanitized, which is useful in any home, but especially important in the context of fostering where I'm often caring for sick, very young, or old cats and need to be able to fully sanitize my space regularly.

I understand that not everyone with cats has the same needs as me, and I want this work to be viable for other people as well. One problem that I've identified is the aesthetics of traditional cat furniture. Cats and people have different needs in their living spaces, but often people don't want their homes to look like cats live there. Sometimes this mismatch of needs and desires between cats and people can go as far as to cause behavioral problems in cats who aren't having their needs met. If you've ever watched the tv show "My Cat From Hell" from Jackson Galaxy, you'll know that sometimes a change in habitat, through furniture or layout, can be the key to healing strained relationships between cats and other cats, or cats and people. He calls this "catifying" your space.

I certainly understand some people's distaste for the look of cat furniture. In my research, I've found some really inspiring designs for cat furniture. One blog in particular, HausPanther, has been a good resource in seeing what other people are doing in cat-related design. But even high-end and well-designed cat furniture tends to be made of the same materials, like carpet and rope scratching posts, which some people are definitely averse to. It has been my goal to give people a way to catify their homes with furniture items that meet their needs, both aesthetic and practical, as well as their cats'. Since these furniture pieces double as human furniture items that most people have in their homes, these pieces allow for

catifying without taking up extra space, which is very valuable if you live in a small apartment like me.

Once I landed on the idea of making ceramic furniture for cats and people, I found myself needing to shift the methods I was using to make my furniture pieces. Before, I was primarily working with hand-building techniques to mimic patterns found in wood working. While I really enjoyed these explorations, the pieces I ended up making required more structural stability than I was able to achieve this way.

The pieces you see here, the stool, side table, coffee table, and the shelves are all made on the wheel using a process that combines traditional wheel throwing with coil building allowing me to make pieces larger than I could by throwing all in one piece. I was also happy to shift back to wheel throwing because it is really satisfying for me and it's the thing that made me fall in love with ceramics in the first place. To throw pieces this big, had to make custom bats to be able to make create the cylindrical forms that I could manipulate to create these furniture items. I also had to take into account the size of the kilns that I had available, which is why some pieces, like this coffee table, use a modular design. This design has other advantages too though and is much easier to move around.

I wanted to take advantage of the surfaces that can be achieved on ceramics, which is one of the really exciting things about making ceramic furniture. In my early research into people making ceramic furniture, I found an artist, Hun-Chung Lee, who utilizes traditional Korean glazes on his ceramic furniture pieces. On reflection, I think that this is part of why I was so attracted to his work.

I am also inspired by traditional pottery glazes and I love the idea of using glazes that are familiar from craft pottery and giving using them on a new type of object. When it comes to these glazes, learned a lot from reading articles by Stephen Hill, a potter who has over the last several decades found ways to achieve surfaces that look like those found in atmospheric firing methods like wood, soda, and ash firings at a lower temperature and in gas firings. While I'm not trying to mimic these effects exactly, his writing inspired my application glazes by spraying and I've been using his recipe for a strontium crystal matte glaze as a base for all of my other glazes. It changes the texture and color of glazes layered over it and causes these microcrystalline effects that you can see here. I'm also using various glaze recipes from a book by John Britt and a fake ash glaze from my friend James Houghton.

A challenge that I've encountered in the making of this work is the time-intensive nature of ceramics, especially since each of these pieces requires an extra slow firing in its own kiln. Due to the nature of shrinkage and warping in the kiln, I had to wait until the pieces were glaze fired to make the wood and fabric elements. I was also limited in my wood choices by what wood is toxic to cats. Unfortunately, there is a lot of conflicting information about the kinds of wood that are safe for cats, but I ultimately landed on maple as an option that is less toxic than most of my other options.

I chose to keep the tabletops removable and attached these tabs to act as a flange and hold them in place. I had multiple reasons for doing this. For one it makes them easier to clean. It also allowed me to put a storage compartment into the stool and keeps the coffee table easy to move.

Finally, I sewed cushions for the furniture. To keep in line with my initial goal of minimizing environmental impact, I started by collecting second-hand fabric and attempted to dye it to a color that worked with my glazes, but after several rounds of dyeing, I was only making the color worse and ended up needing to buy new fabric to work with. This was also in part due to the limited time I had to finish the wood and fabric elements after firing the ceramics.

The environmental impact of this work is something that I tried to minimize as much as possible, but did end up needing to make sacrifices on several times throughout my process. In addition to the situation with the fabric, I had intended to use as much reclaimed clay as possible. For the first part of the semester, I didn't buy any new clay at all, but when the school's clay mixer broke, I had to resort to buying new clay to finish my work. These environmental considerations are something that I'll continue to think about and find solutions as I continue this work in the future.

I do think that it's worth mentioning that while this work is in a gallery space now, it's really intended to be seen in a home environment

Overall, I think that I've been fairly successful in my goals of designing and crafting furniture pieces that equally value the needs of people and cats. I think that I've found some exciting surfaces and developed techniques that I'll continue to use for a long time. I would love to keep working on further developing my ceramic cat furniture.

I definitely think that I have room for refinement in my wood and fabric work. I would also like to design more pieces that work for cats who like to climb up high.

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