

# Artistic Ambivalence in Clay



Artistic Ambivalence in Clay:  
Portraits of Pottery, Ceramics, and Gender

By

Courtney Lee Weida

**CAMBRIDGE  
SCHOLARS**

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P U B L I S H I N G

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I dedicate this book to the artists involved in my study for their openness, dedication, and brilliance during our shared process: Maureen Burns-Bowie, Esta Carnahan, Ellen Day, Cara Gay Driscoll, Dolores Dunning, Heidi Fahrenbacher, DeBorah Goletz, Lynn Goodman, Joan Hardin, Beth Heit, Tsehai Johnson, Kate Malone, Norma Messing, Elspeth Owen, and Mary Trainor. I also dedicate this book to its earliest supporters: my mother, Dr. Alexandria Mariel Weida and to my sisters, Professor Jaime Chris Weida and Alistair Leslie Weida. Many thanks to my partner, Matthew Eaton Farr – who extended boundless humor, wisdom, and love during my dissertation process and subsequent revisions for this book.

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“Since wanted to be a writer, tried to find own voice. Couldn't. But still loved to write. Loved to play with language. Language was material like clay . . . Loved to play with verbal material, build up slums and mansions, demolish banks and half-rotten buildings, even buildings she herself had constructed into never-before-seen, even unseeable jewels.”

—Kathy Acker

“At the risk of engaging in the same pattern of self-protective ambivalence that I have noted in other artists/writers, . . . I . . . enjoy, indeed, thrive on the complexity of dual practice.”

—Mira Schor

“Life leads us at a certain moment to step beyond the dualisms to which we have been educated.”

—M. C. Richards

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## PREFACE

My earliest and fondest memories were of working with cool, muddy clay at home and within art class at school. Nearly all of my childhood experiences with art were immersed in clay, and inseparable from the processes of learning and teaching that surrounded and informed making. Like many of my colleagues in the ceramic arts, I fell in love with the richness, responsiveness, and variability of the clay medium. So too like my education colleagues, I was very interested in how others taught me and how I began to educate myself about art-making. As a university student, I became fascinated with the histories of other ceramic artists in different times and places. I also began looking for women artists like myself and to puzzle over how the symbols and mythologies surrounding women ceramicists are prominent as “earth mothers” and pottery makers, yet individual names and biographies often were missing. If the artist can be seen as a sort of storyteller, the research story I will tell here centers on the lives and works of a sample of remarkable women in contemporary ceramics.

In this book, I examine gendered experiences and artistic identities of fifteen contemporary female ceramic artists. The foregrounding literature reviewed as the basis for this study included biographies of female ceramic artists in the United States, texts of gender studies and art history, and a range of related resources within ceramic archaeology. This study employs an interpretive lens of ambivalence as gendered context. Within gender studies, the concept of ambivalence characterizes the nuance, contradiction, tension, and dualism associated with women’s works and women’s lives. This research, then, particularly analyzes ambivalences within contemporary artistic experiences of gender (e.g. being treated in a particular way as a woman artist) as well as artistic responses relating to gender via interviews with research subjects (e.g. creating artwork in dialogue with gender issues).

This study is qualitative, involving two stages of interviews with research participants and analysis of their artworks. My research is influenced by feminist research approaches in terms of concerns about reciprocity and representation. I have specifically focused upon portraiture methodology, an arts research method emphasizing careful documentation in research, detailed interpretative description of data, and the co-construction of the research text in collaboration with subjects. This study identifies ambivalence within artistic, literary and verbal documents of

contemporary women ceramic artists, interspersed with occasional reflection on my own role and voice as researcher.

The depth of artistic experience and identity illuminated by this research has rich implications for gender studies and art education. Some relevant findings to be taken into account within the teaching of ceramics and the study of its history include subtle and unexpected persistence of gendered associations with technology, binaries of gender identity in symbols and traditions of ceramics, and subtle sexism surrounding ceramics learning experiences.

This research also prioritizes women's work in ceramics as an often neglected set of perspectives, arguing that an ambivalent vision of art allows us to move beyond the dualisms of maleness and femaleness toward multiplicities within a continuum of gendered experiences and practices in ceramics. As an artist and educator, this study has not only been central in my professional work, but also has touched upon my lived experience of personal questions in conversations with other artists. I invite readers to also explore the depths of artistic ambivalences in ceramics and gender, and look forward to continuing this conversation.

—Courtney Lee Weida  
New York, August 2011



# CHAPTER ONE

## LOCATING CERAMICS, WOMEN, AND AMBIVALENCE

### **Introduction: Ceramics From an Art Education Lens**

"The relationships between ceramics and feminism are fruitful avenues for further investigation . . . because of the longevity, pervasiveness and complexity of women's engagement with this area of cultural activity."  
—Cheryl Buckley, 2001, in *Feminist Visual Culture*. p. 183.

I have long been obsessed with questions and ideas about clay in the hands of women. A great deal of my work in the ceramics studio has come to reflect this, both in tone and technique. My research habits follow this thread as well, with pages of notes on the tendencies shared among women potters and ceramists of different temporal and geographical realms. Over the past few years, I have delved into books and articles touching on women and ceramics (often delighting when I find clay fingerprints pointing to the same passages where my own eyes linger). I have been researching the narratives of other females in my field in order to understand more about an often uncharted area of research, and also to satisfy a deeper and more personal need to help reclaim “a tradition of women artists with whom [we] live in continuum” (Becker, 1996; p. 222). To focus on gender and feminism is a personal choice that my experiences as a woman, a ceramicist, a student, and a teacher have led me to make. Feminist inquiry raises many provocative questions within ceramics.

How do gender issues impact the ways in which we tell histories of ceramics, and how do they relate to present perspectives of artists working in the clay medium? In my experiences as a student, and then as a teacher and artist, I have noticed that the roles of women in clay arts can be perplexing. On the one hand, literature from archaeology, art history, and gender studies suggests that women were the first makers of clay objects, and that females are often associated with nature, earth, and domesticity or the home (features commonly linked with clay as a material). Simultaneously, there is also documentation of women's exclusion from

glaze and kiln technologies, profit and credit for their own ceramic work, and acknowledgement as leaders of the field of studio ceramics (Poesch, 1984). Historical conceptions persist, including perceptions of ceramics as “an exclusively female activity” or “‘naturalized’ activity linked to females” (Vincentelli, 2000; p. 15). Vincentelli (2003) also noted the common belief that women were the first potters (p. 9), and Janette Knowles (1997) observed in her dissertation on the women of the American Art Pottery Movement that men have dominated texts of art history as well as art education histories. Within such historical research, I perceived a tension between the ways in which womanhood is broadly linked with ceramics, and yet individual women may be excluded from it. This chapter outlines the complex interplay of women, gender, and femininity in ceramics methods and materials.

Trends in art historical canons often favor biography in celebration of the individual and mystical qualities of men’s artistic genius, while on the other hand use biography to trap women’s works of art within a more simplistic analysis of identity and creativity (Salomon, 1991). In the field of ceramics, women’s work may be further marginalized within connotations of the clay itself, as a soft, craft material. In my observations as a student and my own experience as a maker, I felt unease between the feminine qualities of clay as a material and the roles assigned to a female maker of clay objects. The nature of gendered exclusions in ceramics along with the “femininity” and feminine quality of the clay medium creates a unique set of experiences for women ceramicists. This research is grounded in such gendered tensions, and investigates how women ceramicists describe and/or negotiate gender issues as they practice and document their craft and artistic experiences. I have considered texts and artworks by and about women in ceramics literature, and subsequently interviewed women ceramicists in order to comparatively explore those various tensions surrounding gender and ceramics.

My literature review of ceramics and gender examines ways in which women ceramicists may experience a sense of internal conflict surrounding several topics, including but not limited to: associations of the body in pottery, concepts of gendered touch in the ceramics process, and notions of heritability in ceramics learning. In a sort of dialogue with the work and words of contemporary makers like Magdalene Odundo, Kate Malone, Tracey Heyes, and Jane Peiser, I have questioned how women ceramic artists may often react to historical perceptions and social conventions variously. I found that women makers can reclaim and revise a variety of roles and practices. For example, Tracey Heyes adopts craft traditions of sewing as subject matter and technique by creating pillow forms in clay,

and yet the sculptures she makes are hard, nonfunctional objects. Attention to nuances of history and symbolism inspires the viewer to think about tensions and dualisms of hardness and softness, and of sculpting and sewing. Artists may express and navigate dualism by consciously embracing techniques and ideas that may be associated with women, femininity, and/or domesticity, yet responding to these relationships on their own terms.

Following my analysis of the literature (and inspired by personal and anecdotal artistic experiences), I also interviewed fifteen female ceramic artists to learn more about contemporary women ceramicists' beliefs and experiences concerning gender and ceramics. This research aimed to investigate additional tensions within women ceramicists' beliefs and experiences, as told by those artists themselves. Within the interview data, I have located numerous references to subject matters and art processes perceived as "feminine" or female conventions. The women in this study discussed a variety of their own nuanced responses to and uses of associations and perceptions of femininity. Their responses during interviews offer nuanced depictions of female bodies in clay, assertions of oppositional success (or "proving" oneself) in ceramics, and commitment to membership in female ceramics communities. Participants stressed dualism and contradiction within their own experiences and artistic responses to femaleness in artmaking and as an artistic subject. Their collective responses also contain contrasts between lengthy narratives versus several concise and clipped answers to issues of gender in ceramics. Both the nuanced descriptions and the short responses offer rich implications for speech and silence as negotiations of complex experiences.

As I attempted to apply my readings in gender and women's studies to ceramics literature and my own ethnographic research, I frequently noted the word *ambivalence* as a refrain or trend in several different texts. I was struck by the concept of ambivalence as particularly descriptive of the tensions and contradictions in social associations with women, women's bodies, pottery, and clay itself. I borrow the concept of ambivalence from feminist curriculum theorist Mary-Ellen Jacobs (1998) within her writings on aesthetics philosopher Maxine Greene. The definition of ambivalence as a feminist concept and/or descriptive term that often applies to the gendered experiences of women stems from *A Light in Dark Times* (1998), a text that discusses Maxine Greene's poetics and predicaments of women's experiences and women's art work. Jacobs' writing in this text locates ambivalence as a tension of opposites: "self and other, male and female, appearance and reality," that allows a unique strength and duality

(p. 186). I found that similar binaries (subject/object, self/other, and male/female) are challenged within writings of feminist ethnography (Cole, 1995). Additional feminist scholarship addresses ambivalence and tensions within oneself as researcher (Behar, 1997), within the experience of female artists like Judy Chicago (Rabinovitz, 2001), and in the practice of maintaining an approach of ambivalence (Lather, 1991; Lather, 2007). My research expands upon ambivalence, by comparing ambivalent experiences and responses within the works and writings of selected female ceramicists. Ambivalence, in my observations, often manifests as a sort of verbal balance: “yes and no” or “yes, but...” and “well, on the other hand.” I was drawn to ambivalence as a descriptor because it often illuminated both the literature and interview portions of this research.

There is ambivalence within artistic, literary and verbal accounts or documents of contemporary women ceramic artists, including their reports of being taken less seriously than male ceramicists alongside assertions that being a female artist holds no special meaning. I also noted ambivalence in their complex use of feminine symbols, subjects, and techniques (e.g. goddesses, nature, the female body; burnishing and decorating), and their divided approaches to female/feminist communality in ceramic art. My research attempts to explore tensions of gender identity in ceramics and the ways in which women experience and approach these tensions, as illuminated by their artworks, writings, and interviews. I have examined ambivalence within artistic experiences of gender (e.g. discrimination, stereotyping) as well as artistic responses relating to gender (e.g. creating artwork in response gender issues). This study not only relates to issues of gender, but also addresses other topics of identity in ceramic art. For instance, the struggles to negotiate tensions and dichotomies surrounding female identity within ceramics parallel crises within the field of ceramics concerning the art versus craft divide.

### **Research Questions: Ambivalence, Art, and Gender Identity**

Several questions inspired me to embark upon this investigation of gender and ceramics. I was particularly concerned with the histories of ceramic art in terms of gender issues and hoped to compare these historical visions with those of contemporary women in my field. My research questions evolved into the following queries that provide the foreground for this research: Given the ways in which female makers and techniques particular to communities of women makers are seen as an integral part of ceramic art history (and yet investigation of gendered relationships and women’s individual artistic experiences are lacking), how does the concept

of ambivalence describe and illuminate tensions of gender within the words and works of women ceramic artists? Specifically:

- (1) In what ways does ambivalence *interplay* with women's artistic identity constructions within/through gendered experiences?
- (2) How does ambivalence *overlay* the complex artistic processes of making ceramics that women describe?
- (3) How does ambivalence *mediate* various tensions, contradictions, revisions, and reversals in the works of contemporary female ceramicists?

### **Limitations of the Study**

As I explored these research questions, I attended to unexpected circumstances that arose throughout the research. Each situational factor that framed this project was characterized by various possibilities and problems. For example, this research consists of two phases of interviews with a specific population: a large group of fifteen women and a smaller subgroup of ten women in contemporary ceramics. I selected research participants for the first set of interviews on the basis of their level of interest in research participation in this area. My additional questions in the secondary interviews were designed to explore gender issues in depth with those artists interested in continuing in the interview process. As is the case with many long-term studies, it may be noted that a larger group of women initially responded, but my sample was limited in that a few participants discontinued contact. Another difficulty of this research emerged from writing about or discussing issues of women and gender. Specifically, there was ambiguity regarding definition and linguistic meaning. Some of the words I use in this research may be defined variously and/or even used interchangeably among other contemporary discourses and literature. For the purposes of this research, I will utilize the following terms and definitions. I have drawn on the biological and social emphasis of Cheshire Calhoun's (2001) article: "Thinking about the plurality of genders," and from definitions I encountered in conversations with artists from this study. Gender-related terms that I will employ in this book include gender, female, femininity, feminism, sex, and women. The following sections detail these terms further:

#### ***Gender***

Within this study, "gender" is used as the most general term for our experiences of who we are in reference to sex identities. Gender is the

most basic and broad category of sex identity, with distinctions of female, femininity, and feminism as subtopics.

### ***Female***

The term “female” is defined as a biological distinction of female sex identity (including a range of such physical characteristics as female sex organs and hormones).

### ***Femininity***

“Feminine” is defined as a socially-constructed and fluid category of descriptions that can be applied to persons and objects (and especially, in this case, aesthetics) in order to designate qualities pertaining to or representing aspects of female gender.

### ***Feminism(s)***

For the purposes of this research, “feminisms” include a range of discourses loosely grouped under an interest in gender issues in contemporary society. I would like to define my own feminist affiliation as one of inquiry and advocacy for women’s works in the arts and education. The women in this study describe various feminisms as well, to be discussed in future chapters.

### ***Sex***

Sex is defined as a biological, reproductive distinction that is located in the body. (The word “female” is utilized as a subcategory of sex.)

### ***Women***

Referring to my research participants, “women” are defined as multiple female persons who are typically of adult age. “Women” as a term may be used interchangeably with “female” in this study, but the term “women” is sometimes employed to imply familiarity and specificity. For example, I began to locate several “female” ceramic artists as I embarked on this research. Later, I interviewed a specific group of fifteen “women” who were known to me. It should be noted that I used the above definitions as a starting point, expecting to derive additional connotations and a fluidity of definitions from the artists themselves (as the reader will see throughout subsequent chapters, and in detail within chapter five.)

### **Focus on Female Sex**

As this research stems from concern about the neglect of issues pertaining to women and the clay medium, it seeks to address females (and not males) in the field of ceramics. It may be noted that I have often been asked if I would be interviewing male ceramic artists. While men may be impacted by some of the same issues and experiences described here, the presence of women as authors, subjects, and artists in the field of ceramics is considered to be lacking. Although experiences of men in ceramics may prove a future topic for equally in-depth and sensitive study, this research addresses a particular need and advocacy goal. Anecdotally, I observed that some of my male peers in art education surveyed groups of men or predominantly male research subjects without being questioned as frequently as I seemed to be in my particular choice to interview only women. As some women in my study have pointed out, an emphasis solely on male artists can be located in galleries and research, and yet has gone unnamed and considered neutral territory. With an openness to and reflection on both sex *and* gender in this research, it is hoped that dialogue and inquiry into these groupings and distinctions can be cultivated from this starting point.

### **Particular Medium, Historical Period, Geography, and Culture**

The medium examined here is ceramics, including both pottery and ceramic sculpture (typically that which relates to gender issues in form, function, subject, or process). The majority of literature surveyed is less than 100 years old. Another researcher in ceramics, Moira Vincentelli, (2000, 2004) has completed comprehensive research of women in ceramics outside the United States. Broadening future research to include women from localities addressed neither here nor in Vincentelli's work may prove another topic for investigation. The interview portion of my research examines the spoken (and in some cases written) responses of contemporary ceramicists in dialogue with or comparison to recent documented history through the literature review. The artists interviewed here are primarily United States artists and English-speaking artists from the United Kingdom and Europe who exhibit their work in the United States. (This is due in part to my own locality as researcher, as well as my primary language proficiency in American English.) Further, it may be noted that several women in this study identify as and/or appear to be Caucasian. While some participants identify as African American/Black, Filipino, Alaskan Native, Indian, and within other cultural affiliations; my

research requests for participation have not yielded a thoroughly diverse group. For this reason, while race and culture are considered in the context of gender in this research, this study cannot be considered exhaustive on the topic of gender and ceramics in the cultural contexts.

## **Theoretical Frameworks of This Research**

As this research is qualitative and is impacted by my own worldview, my perspective as principle investigator serves as both frame and limitation. My own views of ceramics and gender issues are shaped by my experiences as a ceramic artist that produces sensitive, complex, fragile works of sculpture and pottery on a small scale. I have served as a professor of art education and gender studies within art, and as an urban art educator of K-12 students. These teaching experiences have also informed my sense of advocacy for the study of ceramics and gender within academe, K-12 schools, studios, and other educational settings. My readings and teachings in gender studies pertaining to art and ceramics, along with my own experiences and observations of the exclusions of women in my field have inspired me to explore gender within ceramics issues further, and to particularly assert and utilize ambivalence as a lens of studying women's work.

As a ceramic artist and educator, I have sometimes felt that women in ceramics may have particular ways of working with the clay medium that are often overlooked. However, I do not believe that women's work in clay is a singular entity or fixed category. Instead, I found that tendencies to neglect gender may lead us to reinscribe the centrality of male masters in pottery, and also preclude art historical consideration of a variety of women's work. For example, I have heard my own work summarily dismissed as "cute" when working alongside artists creating within more traditionally masculinist paradigms of scale and historically male-exclusive techniques of wheelthrowing and kiln-firing. In response, I began creating a series of clay chairs less than three inches tall in part to express my own difficulty gaining access to professional space, and to symbolically represent exclusionary studio behavior directed towards women. The chairs are impossibly small, and yet they are still symbols of comfort and belonging. I wanted to engage with the artistic concept or ideal of a comfortable and safe space for myself, and for other women artists, but in a personal and problematized manner.

Despite my readings and artistic experiences (or perhaps, because of them), I have lingering reluctance to claim a firm position as a feminist researcher; and I am still seeking to locate, question, and revise my own



views as an educator and artist interested in gender studies. For example, I entered into this research with a focus on symbolic connections between women ceramic artists with mythological goddesses, and between potters and female biological and social processes of giving birth. However, these particular themes did not appear to be central to the gender discussions of the women artists participating in this study. I have thus aimed to be consistently skeptical of my assumptions and interpretations, reflecting upon the research data at length and with some collaboration from the research subjects themselves. I utilize ambivalence as a lens not only in consideration of tensions and dualisms of artists and artworks, but also as an inquiry into my own voice and roles as researcher. Further self-reflections are addressed at some length in chapter three, and throughout chapter five.

### **Assumptions Within This Research**

Reflection on my own research and that of others has led me to realize ways in which all research contains certain ideological assumptions that may be implicit or more concretely addressed. As this research stems from my concern for the advocacy of ceramics and of women's lives and works within ceramic art, I will argue that restoring historical research and contemporary study of women in ceramics and their gendered experiences can serve to inform existing ceramic art history, and influence emerging studio teaching methods. With an interpretative lens of ambivalence arising from the work of Mary-Ellen Jacobs (1998) and my own experiences, I also address how ambivalences within artmaking experiences engage complex negotiations of restrictive binaries pertaining to social expectations within contemporary ceramics. I will suggest various ways in which ambivalence can be framed within the research procedure, balancing tensions described within the interviews and identified through my interpretative process. Finally, I also argue that ambivalence can serve as a critical framework to discuss an array of gender-related stories and art works of women in ceramics, given the wide application of ambivalence in feminist theory addressed other related areas.

I have found that research must begin with particular frameworks, as foundations that can be built upon and/or excavated. While my writing seeks to question the generalizations applied to "women" as a supposedly unified social group, I will assume that a set of experiences of being a female and the social and historical expectations/conventions often assigned to women as a group *do* exist. (This may include the potential to give birth, social expectations of nurturance, experience of sexism/misogyny,

a sense of domestic histories, and other various gender associations as threads.) While these experiences will be identified and discussed, the value of writing about women as a social group that shares a range of possible female experiences is assumed (and will not be justified at great length).

I will also write from an understanding that gender itself exists and can be a major contextual factor in identity development and artistic experience of ceramic artists. Further, I write within a theoretical framework that assumes women artists reflect upon and construct meaning from their gendered experiences as artists *and* as women. As I discuss various experiences of gender, I will not devote a large portion of my arguments to the mere existence or validity of experiences pertaining to gender identity itself within artistic growth and development. Instead, this work also comes from an understanding that women's experiences of gender in ceramics comprise a neglected area of study. This topic is established as foundational to my research. While I will explore a range of gender experiences, this book is not intended as a comprehensive source addressing the existence of neglect of women's studies in ceramics. Instead, I will cite a few summarizing arguments to this effect within my literature review as a basis for this work.

## **Personal Justifications for Research**

My own vision of the gender tensions that women experience in the field of ceramics has been impacted by my education as a female ceramic artist and educator. My particular art education within the studio seems in many ways a set of events and stories that contain common threads of gender, alongside connections of women and clay that are symbolic, mythic, and socially-constructed. One crucial event that seemed to epitomize my experiences of gender within ceramics took place during a community ceramics course in which I was a student. While I enjoyed the course very much, I was troubled by the treatment of a male teaching assistant who questioned me on the validity of gender studies within ceramics. (I had mentioned my research interest in women and ceramics offhandedly when some of the older potters expressed interest in my graduate school pursuits.) During non-lecture portions of the class, the teaching assistant approached me, putting forth a series of questions on gender-related statistics, histories, and personal experiences. As I responded to his inquiries, he tersely interrupted my responses with interjections on his sense of the irrelevance of gender. He also made firm

assertions that there are plenty of esteemed women in ceramics, so it would be unwise for me to pursue this topic further.

While he spoke, I began to realize that the women in the class had stopped working at their wheels and tables and were watching and listening quietly. With some anxiety and frustration, I persisted in my attempts to respond to his questions and challenges by articulating my understanding of the stories and artworks of women artists in ceramics as a neglected area of research. After nearly an hour of his interruptions, I told the teaching assistant (with as much amiability as I could muster) that I was not sure if our conversation was really an exchange of ideas, and that perhaps I needed more time to contemplate and refine my side of the discussion. He persisted in a one-sided debate for a few minutes, until I reiterated my conclusion and he angrily left the studio for the evening. Although I was initially dismayed about his resistance and dismissal of concerns for gender within ceramics education, this very frustration would later become an area of interest for me within various academic and/or artistic communities. It even became almost a disposition or approach.

But at the time, I worried that I had offended the other women in the class, or even misrepresented gender issues in the field. However, I was surprised to find myself physically and emotionally surrounded by others who confided in me about their varied and complex difficulties and celebrations of female experiences in ceramics. Some of the seemingly more quiet women in the class expressed incredibly articulate characterizations of the strength needed for approaching gender issues in conversations across gender and generation. They offered me their understanding and support. Our stories connected, overlapped, and diverged, but we were in some ways unified by our sense of empathetic community and responses to social constructs that alternately restricted and excluded us. We did not share a singular view or experience of being women in our field, but rather sensed a relationship between the ranges and depths of our views and experiences. Once I appreciated some of their experiences and conceptions of gender, I began to see subtleties in their work and in my own that I wanted to explore further. Discourses such as these have shaped and colored my thoughts and my research. They have also nourished me as an artist, a student, and a teacher.

Throughout subtly gendered situations in art and teaching, I have continuously struggled with my own artistic ideas, my literary voice, and my teaching persona as a woman. I found myself wanting to continue to connect with others who experienced struggles and joys around the uncertainties of being a female, a ceramic artist, and an educator. With a growing interest in feminism as equality for women in the form of

representation(s) of art and teaching, I realized that it was the dual influence of works of art along with nourishing artistic/educative verbal connections with other women artists that drove me professionally and personally. The following chapter probes some of the tensions of gender and ceramics from the history of clay that inspired this research.

## CHAPTER TWO

# GENDER ISSUES IN CERAMICS LITERATURE

*Sheets of empty canvas, untouched sheets of clay were laid spread out before me as her body once did.*

—Eddie Vedder, 1991, in Pearl Jam's song, "Black."

### **Introduction: Contexts of Ambivalence**

I grew up with a beautiful but troubling conception of woman as muse as in the popular song lyrics above, and so I turned to pottery as a space where the woman could be creator. Like the muse, the body of the clay and the body of the maker can also be subject to objectification. To analyze tensions surrounding gender in ceramics, this literature review chapter examines histories and works of selected women ceramicists in Western ceramics. In this way, this historical review provides foundational questions and goals for subsequent interviews. In my attempts to locate the myriad social and cultural associations and experiences of artistic identity referenced within the artworks and writings of women ceramicists, I have chosen ambivalence as an interpretative lens for both contemporary and historical analysis. In upcoming chapters, artistic ambivalences are explored through qualitative interviews with research subjects, and contextualized within analysis of their artworks.

By definition, the concept of ambivalence characterizes the nuances, contradictions, tensions, and dualisms associated with women's works and women's lives. It applies to shifts and fluctuations in beliefs and actions: where one is torn between opposite, yet coexisting desires. I found that ambivalence is also resonant with much of the works and words of women artists from the literature review. Women's experiences of ambivalence as addressed here stems from *A Light in Dark Times*, within Mary-Ellen Jacobs' descriptions of female ambivalence as a multiplicity of perspectives and subversivism to the cultural status quo. In this book, Jacobs (1998) asserts ambivalence as a major aspect of female aesthetics (p. 181). The work of my research has been to examine various balances, revisions, and other expressions of ambivalence in ceramic art. As a

foreground to the literature review, I will summarize additional contexts of ambivalences in art and art education within the following section.

### **Ambivalence as Artistic Lens**

From my close reading of literature in ceramic arts, I found that female ceramic artists may experience tensions of opposites within three general themes in the literature addressed here: associations of the body in pottery<sup>1</sup>, concepts of gendered touch in ceramics processes, and notions of heritability in ceramics learning. Within this literature review, ambivalence engages a layering of meanings and responses to dualisms of gender and the clay medium.

Ambivalence itself possesses a vast social history in art and gender studies. Art forms that may be considered craft, such as ceramics, often suffer from ambivalence in status (Greenhalgh, 2002). If ceramics is both art and craft, the field can become marginalized in either case. Central binaries in artistic production and gender posit creativity itself as part of masculinity, while femininity is seen as the negative of the artist (Pollock, 2003). Within a more specific and formally appropriate context of ceramics, Judy Chicago reportedly experienced ambivalence surrounding feminist implications of her works (Rabinovitz, 2001). In *Women, Art, and Society*, Whitney Chadwick (2002) puts forth some useful questions that touch on several of the tensions listed above, including the notion of whether women artists can or should own gender differences as relating to particular images, if the creative process itself can be seen as genderless or androgynous, and some questions of the relationships between craft and art also explored within this research.

Again addressing creativity, and extending the themes of anxiety and discomfort that may accompany ambivalence, Singley and Sweeney (1993) observed that women's history as readers and writers is plagued by the need to overcome anxiety regarding limited gender roles and narrative forms, causing ambivalence. They elaborate that "anxiety, or fear, is at the root of ambivalence; in the best of cases, anxiety about being considered inadequate or trivial; in the worst, of being reviled, persecuted, or even extinguished. In its extreme, anxiety silences, blocks, or kills creativity" (p. 8). With these considerations, I became intrigued by ambivalence as a

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<sup>1</sup> As pottery is defined as wares shaped from clay and ceramics is defined as a range of art objects made from clay (American Heritage Dictionary), I will apply the term pottery primarily to vessels, while ceramics will additionally refer to non-pottery ceramic objects such as ceramic sculpture.