

ANDREW MARTIN'S

AQUATIC AESTHETIC

by Glen R. Brown



Rotunda (bowl), 12 in. (30 cm)
in diameter, marbled, slip-cast
porcelain with glaze, fired to cone 10.

Beneath surfaces slick and glassy, tide pool worlds teem with mossy bryozoans, undulating branches of rockweed, and ribbons of sea algae that lift and swirl in a slow and stately motion. Bits of bright color flash in piscine fashion among the more shadowy forms. Rays of light shift and sparkle across the smooth depths as waters swell then begin their inevitable retreat, drawing the leaves and tendrils of a fragile plant life into unctuous streaks across gleaming surfaces. Over walls like polished marble, splotches of color ooze and disperse in inky trailings amid the loops and spirals of dissolving cursive lines. All seems caught in a syrupy current that flows in lazy accordance with gravity or under the slow but irresistible influence of a tide. Here, in the service of ceramist Andrew Martin's aquatic aesthetic, glaze achieves the epitome of that viscous dripping, pooling, flowing, and glistening attraction that has few rivals in any medium.

From how distant a past can an artist's sources of influence continue to exert their subtle persuasions over practice? If twenty-five years have not extinguished the spark that was Martin's first epiphany as a ceramist, then his newest works can trace their bloodline all the way back to the Mediterranean, and specifically to the sun-splashed island of Crete, where a young MFA student eagerly peered at Minoan pottery in museum vitrines. After a first semester at Alfred University in the fall of 1982—a period of starts and stops that left him in quest of a more personal direction—Martin decided to pass the winter break by escaping to Greece. He also recalls that while an undergraduate at the Kansas City Art Institute, he had wrestled with Ken Ferguson's pointed questions about inspiration and how to maintain it. Crete finally provided answers. Minoan Kamares ware, sarcophagi, Floral Style ware, and Marine Style ware—with their sea-derived imagery, their fluid, linear motifs, and their tendency to carry these evenly across panels or whole surfaces—established an aspect of Martin's aesthetic sensibility that has persisted into the present.

The second essential element of Martin's formative experiences came with the extension of his trip to include a visit to Turkey. In the mosques and museums of Istanbul, he fell under the spell of Iznik plates and tiles: Ottoman fritwares that worked their vibrant palettes of green, purple, black, turquoise, cobalt blue, and red-orange into flowing lines of opulent decoration. Just as influential as the floral arabesques on these wares was the effect of the primarily cool, liquid colors against the pure white of the slipped



Top: *Quilt*, 9 in. (23 cm) in width, marbled, slip-cast porcelain with glaze, fired to cone 10.

Above: *Agean*, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, marbled, slip-cast porcelain with glaze, fired to cone 10.



Crustacean, 17 in. (43 cm) in width, marbled, slip-cast porcelain with glaze, fired to cone 10.



Left: *Citron Confetti* (tulip vase), approximately 9 in. (23 cm) in height, marbled, slip-cast porcelain with glaze, fired to cone 10.



Right: *Two-Bird Box*, 11 in. (28 cm) in width, marbled, slip-cast porcelain with glaze, fired to cone 10.

fritware body. Iznik glazes, particularly the warm red accents that are composed of iron-rich Armenian bole (a native red clay) applied thickly as an enamel, often exhibit tonal graduations that instill visual depth in the surfaces. Most captivating for Martin, however, was the brightness of the characteristic Islamic turquoise, which immediately recalled to his mind the experience of standing on a cliff in Crete overlooking the sparkling azure of the Mediterranean and soda-glazed bowls he had made at the Archie Bray Foundation.

Upon completion of his graduate studies in 1984, Martin—who describes his work at the time as still “pretty rough,” albeit poised for development—moved to New York City, where he secured a

position in the reproductions department of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Although his job of glazing copies of the Met’s famous Egyptian faience hippopotamus for the shelves of the museum’s gift shop offered little stimulation to his creativity, the tedium was more than compensated for by frequent opportunities to peruse the historic ceramics in the museum’s galleries. One piece in particular, a fourteen-sided scalloped Islamic bowl, captivated his attention (and like a magnet, has drawn him back over the years since he first beheld it). Describing his time in the museum as a “visual education,” he extracts new lessons about form and decoration from this collection each time that he visits the Met.

Since his days at the Met, Martin's career has passed through varied phases, embracing everything from fairly high-volume production work to pursuit of unique aesthetic compositions in one-of-a-kind pieces. For six and a half years he operated a production studio that generated over 18,000 pieces of pottery. In that environment of repetition and sometimes "rote decoration," and realizing he was stuck in an "idea" about being a potter, he resolved to determine patterning and color schemes on a piece-by-piece basis. He continues this practice today, producing small quantities of vessels then varying the decoration on each as he goes along. At other times, when the work was not growing, a more drastic solution was employed—essentially walking away from ceramics for a substantial period of time, a measure to which Martin has resorted more than once. "What happened during those times," he explains, "was that I would give the work a rest, then I would come back to the work, it would be better without having done anything objective. The most important things got distilled. Stepping away has been an important aspect to how the work has unfolded."

A more concrete part of Martin's process is slip casting: a technique on which he relies extensively and about which he has authored a definitive text, *The Essential Guide to Mold Making and Slip Casting*. Disputing the notion that anything issuing from a mold

necessarily suffers the sterility of mass-produced factory products, he emphasizes the part of the mold making process that permits exercise of creativity (see sidebar on page 59). His own practice involves producing randomly cut paper shapes and manipulating them through further cutting and reassembly. Each step provokes aesthetic decision. When a viable shape eventually emerges, he duplicates it in Masonite templates that are used to form a prototype for the mold. In this process both serendipity and artistic discrimination have a hand, and this is reflected in the results. "There's a notion about slip casting that, because of its roots in industry and design, it is inherently reductive and minimalistic," he observes, "but when you look around my studio you won't find many of the forms to be that sterile. This is because of my background working at the wheel and understanding the relationships of line, shape, profile, volume, mass, and weight as the fundamentals of pottery form."

This is noteworthy, since Martin's work derives so much of its aesthetic effectiveness from the painterly treatment of surfaces. He does not, however, conceive of his vessels merely as neutral sites conducive to the more important activity of decoration. No doubt one of the lessons he has gleaned from the Met's Islamic bowl has been that perfect consonance between form and surface articulation raises both to a higher level of visual completeness than is possible



Intergalactic Peas, 9 in. (23 cm) in width, marbled, slip-cast porcelain with glaze, fired to cone 10.

recipe

MARTIN'S MOVEABLE FEAST

(UPDATED VERSION OF SHOW SAVER)

Cone 10 Oxidation

Barium Carbonate	9.0	%
Gerstley Borate	2.5	
Lithium Carbonate	2.5	
Strontium Carbonate	9.5	
Wollastonite (calcium silicate)	1.0	
Ferro Frit 3110	13.0	
Nepheline Syenite	14.0	
Grolleg	11.5	
Silica	37.0	
	100.0	%

Add: Bentonite 2.0 %

French Chartreuse

Add: Chrome Oxide 0.5 %

Victoria Green

Add: Chrome Oxide 0.50 %

Copper Carbonate 0.75 %

Brazilian Green

Add: Chrome Oxide 0.50 %

Copper Carbonate 1.75 %

Turkish Green

Add: Copper Carbonate 2.0 %

Aegean Blue

Add: Copper Carbonate 2.0 %

Cobalt Carbonate 0.1 %

Maroon

Add: Manganese Carbonate 2.0 %

Orchard Purple

Add: Manganese Carbonate 2.0 %

Cobalt Carbonate 2.0 %

Persian Blue

Add: Cobalt Carbonate 1.0 %

Manganese Carbonate 0.5 %

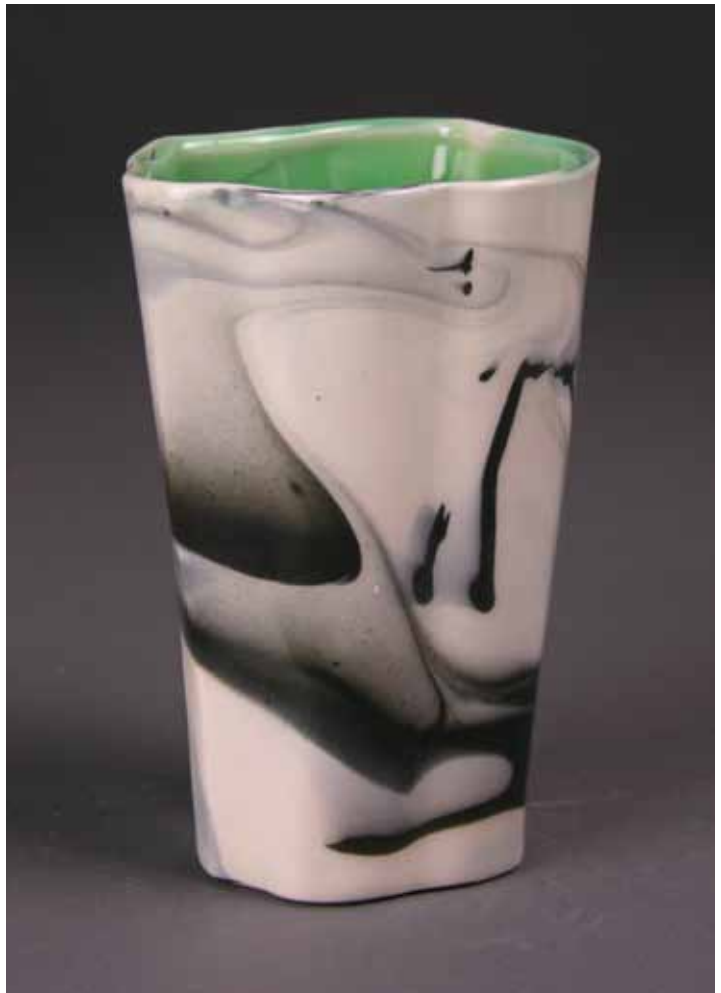
Clear Black-Gray

Add: Black Nickel Oxide 1.00 %

Cobalt Carbonate 0.25 %



Tang Persian Tango (tulip vase), approximately 9 in. (23 cm) in height, slip-cast porcelain with glaze, fired to cone 10.

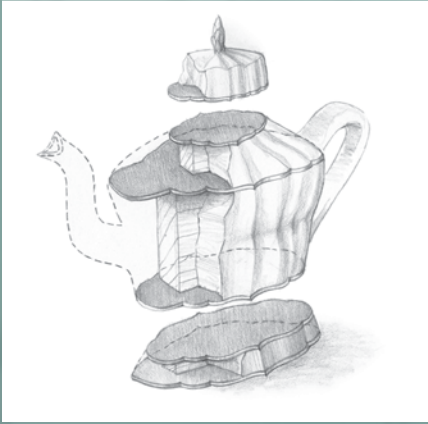


Marbleized tumbler, approximately 6 in. (15 cm) in height, slip-cast porcelain with glaze, fired to cone 10.

SIMPLE TEMPLATES FOR COMPLEX FORMS

Martin has devised a template system for designing forms for mold making. A series of templates that define the various sections of a given shape are glued together, filled with clay, and scraped to the appropriate profile with a custom-made rib. With this system, the form can be altered in several ways at every step in the design process. Complex forms can be made from simple templates, and variations on a theme can be explored by altering the templates, the relationship between the templates, or the rib profile used to finish the contours. Other elements, such as handles and spouts can be cast separately and added as needed, but it is a good idea to “fit” the models before making the molds.

These images were excerpted from Martin’s book *The Essential Guide to Mold Making and Slip Casting* (Lark, 2006).



for either in isolation. This consonance does not necessarily imply balance, but it does suggest a definite sympathy between form and decoration. For Martin that sympathy can manifest itself in many variations, and he seems intent upon exploring them all. “Today a teapot might have some kind of brush decoration and one color of glaze,” he remarks, “tomorrow it might have no brush decoration and four colors of glaze, then I may it and add some sprigs for good measure.”

These differences do not result from any systematic variation in the form or from any imperatives of originality that Martin imposes upon himself. Ultimately, they reflect the freedom inherent in the manner in which he naturally approaches the work. “I know for most people that’s linear,” he explains, “but for me it’s liquid. For years, the glaze that I developed after going to Turkey, how it flows over the underglaze and bleeds to creates a visual depth, has been an essential part of the visual language. Then, putting glazes next to each other that have the quality of plants floating under water, or a hedge that creates a garden gate: It is that movement that interests me. I don’t know where it’s going but I’ll put it down on the pot. It can be really bad or it can be really good, but I don’t worry about it. I just follow that liquid notion and let it become the solid form.”

Of course, solidity is a relative quality when one is speaking in aesthetic terms, and to the eye, even after their completion, Martin’s

vessels retain their liquid animation as a definitive aspect of their character. Surfaces flow, lines melt and dissipate, and shapes disintegrate in a watery medium that seems stirred in slow but endless motion. In these surfaces are reflected the distant perceptions of a shifting sea, the traces of filtered sunlight playing over tiled surfaces in the hushed atmosphere of a Turkish mosque, and the whispers of a thousand other impressions that have formed Martin’s sense of ceramics and its past. His own history and travels seem intimately bound up with that past, and memory—the source of his inspiration—envelops the surfaces of his vessels in a liquid intangibility that is a distinguishing stylistic trait. Nothing is quite solid, though everything is crystal clear. The quality of simultaneous resolution and watery insubstantiality is perhaps the most consistent element running through Martin’s work. Recognizable whenever it appears, despite the varied forms that it assumes in individual instances, this aquatic aesthetic is as constant and as shifting as a tide.

Andrew Martin is the author of The Essential Guide to Mold Making and Slip Casting (Lark Books, 2006). For more information, go to www.larkbooks.com or www.andrewmartinporcelain.com.

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