

Gillian Parke

Feldspar Inclusions

by Kathy Norcross Watts



North Carolina potter Gillian Parke's passion for finding harmony in what might appear contradictory is evident in both the pots she crafts and the life she leads. "The foundation of my work is contrast," she explains. She seeks it in surfaces, in images and in connections between Eastern and Western cultures.

Parke was born in Northern Ireland, but grew up in Weymouth, Massachusetts. Childhood visits to Ireland developed her appreciation for ceramics. Her grandmother would take her and her sister to a gift shop and buy the girls a piece of porcelain or crystal. "You couldn't touch anything," Parke recalls. "You could just look." Her introduction to the hands-on aspect of the craft occurred during the 1980s, when her mother owned a paint-your-own ceramics store called Gazebo Ceramics.

Parke grew up amid molds, bisque ware, paints and lusters.

Despite her early exposure to ceramics, she never formally studied art in college, instead earning a B.A. in chemistry from Boston University. She did become involved in the arts; after a class lecture by a representative of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston explained how his chemistry background helped in paper restoration, she decided to take a job helping to restore wallpaper. This experience piqued her interest in further study, so, in 1995, while working as an organic chemist for Glaxo Wellcome in North Carolina, she applied to graduate school.

Though she was accepted into graduate school in London, she received no financial assistance and deferred the degree for a year, then met her future husband and decided to stay in North Carolina.

"Cherry Bomb,"
12½ inches in length,
wheel-thrown and
assembled porcelain
with feldspar/mo-
lochite inclusions,
underglaze patina
and inlay, celadon
glaze, fired to cone 10
in gas-reduction; lus-
ter overglaze, open-
stock decals, multiple
firings to cone 017
electric.



“Wildflower Portal,” 13½ inches in height, wheel-thrown and assembled porcelain with feldspar inclusions, underglaze patina, celadon glaze, fired to cone 10 in reduction; luster overglaze, open-stock decals, multiple firings to cone 017 electric.

After deciding against graduate school, while still working full-time, Parke signed up for her first pottery classes through the Chapel Hill Parks and Recreation Department. In 1998, she began working at Stone Crow Pottery in Pittsboro, making production tea bowls and cups for the owner. For her work, she was given use of the equipment. The task of duplicating forms, along with her work making glazes, helped her to gain technical skill.

She took various workshops and courses but found that she was just emulating what she’d been taught. “I didn’t have my own voice,” she said. She’d heard before the wisdom, “Don’t borrow someone else’s idea; steal it,” which requires taking ownership of a technique in your own way. This advice helped her to develop her own style. “I’ve ‘stolen’ a lot of things from a lot of people and put them together to make what I want to say,” she explains.

Brad Tucker, a resident potter of Cedar Creek Gallery for many years, advanced Parke’s thinking further when she took a course he taught at Claymakers in Durham. “No one had really taught me about form and negative space,” she says. “He would bring in all these different examples from his collection at Cedar Creek, and we would sit down and talk about why a pot worked.” This was her first exposure to what makes a really good pot, she says. “He just had a profound effect on me, on the way I looked at pots.”

From Michael Simon, whose work

was rough and more organic compared to Tucker's, she learned, "It takes quite a bit of skill to be organic." A potter must have the technical ability to create an organic form that works.

Others who have influenced Parke include the late master potter Sid Oakley, whom she met on one of her trips to Cedar Creek. Parke remembers that Oakley told her, "My biggest advice is not to sell your work too early.' [and] I think what he said was true. I've never sold seconds. If a pot is not perfect, I just take a hammer to it. I feel like my pots are a reflection of who I am, and people are investing in my work."

When Parke was laid off from Glaxo in 2001, she decided to try working in pottery full time. "I found out that I couldn't be a production potter," she confesses, because she became bored with the repetition required.

She entered graduate school at East Carolina University in 2004 and gave herself a year to determine if changing careers was the right thing to do. During that time she gathered information from many sources. She gleaned wisdom from several other potters, all of whom left their mark on the way she would eventually create her pots. From Malcolm Davis, she learned about shino glazes and carbon trapping, while Chuck Chamberlain introduced her to lusters. From a workshop with Rimas VisGirda at the University of Indianapolis, she learned how color and line can affect one another



"Orange Daisy," Blue Rose 8½ inches in height, wheel-thrown and assembled porcelain with feldspar/molochite inclusions, underglaze patina and inlay, celadon glaze, cone 10 gas reduction; lusters, overglazes, open-stock decals, multiple firings to cone 017 in electric.

and gained more knowledge about painting with lusters. She also took Rimas' decal making workshop and created her own "bra-lady" decal, an image she still uses today. While researching to write a history paper on teapots, she learned about sexism as it related to the history of pots, and she became interested in feminism in art.

In 2005, she returned to Durham to begin working on her own ideas; she combined porcelain with feldspar inclusions, applied decals and

Orange & Blue Daisy Tea-cups, 4 inches in height, porcelain with feldspar/molochite inclusions, underglaze patina and inlay, fired to cone 10 in reduction; luster overglazes, open-stock decals, multiple firings to cone 017 electric.



lustres to create one-of-a-kind pieces. “I was trying to take the English porcelain tradition—white and feminine—and merge it with this Japanese Shigaraki tradition; it’s very masculine,” she explains of the process in which organic forms are fired with wood, and the flame hits the pot leaving nature to play a vital role in the outcome. As she adds layers of glazes and decals, each piece undergoes multiple firings to achieve the effects she seeks, sometimes as many as five to ten firings per piece. She wants her work to comment on the world. “Taking manufactured images and putting them on handmade pots is fascinating to me,” Parke explains, adding, “I am interested in the conflict created by kitsch images on handmade objects, and in challenging the aesthetics and values presented when using such materials unconventionally. The resulting works illustrate the contrasts in aesthetics, forms, traditions and function found between Japanese pottery and fine porcelain.”

Throwing with Feldspar Inclusions

by Gillian Parke

I usually work in stages on a set of pieces using Highwater Clay’s Helios porcelain with coarse Custer feldspar (1–10 mesh, Seattle Pottery Supply) and 50–80 mesh molochite wedged in. Throwing with the inclusions requires using a substantial amount of water to provide sufficient slip for lubrication. This helps prevent both finger cuts and tears in the turning clay. However, the piece will lose its strength and collapse due to the low plasticity of porcelain if too much water is used.

Each stage is thrown on the wheel and allowed to dry. Before removing the piece from the wheel, the feldspar and molochite matrix is exposed with a metal rib or trimming tool. This also serves to remove the surface slip.

After assembling the piece, it is completely dried and wax resist is painted onto areas that will eventually be glazed. Underglaze is then applied to the unwaxed clay areas. The underglaze is removed from the surface with a damp sponge, leaving an underglaze patina that accentuates the feldspar and throwing lines.

Wax resist is again applied to the dry surface. Using a needle tool, lines are etched through the wax, revealing the clay below. After wiping clean with a damp sponge, black underglaze is applied to the inlaid line.

After bisque firing to cone 07, wax resist is applied to black inlay lines so that glaze will not cover the line and affect the color. Glazes are applied by pouring, dipping and/or brushing. The resulting piece is then fired in a gas kiln to cone 10 in reduction.

Feldspar inclusions result in pearl-like eruptions covering the surface of the vessel. This surface is painted with various luster overglazes and fired in an electric kiln to cone 017 multiple times per layer of surface treatment.