



Shot Glasses.

Habitual Rituals

Lorna Meaden

The evolution of culture is synonymous with the removal of ornament from objects of daily use.
Adolf Loos (*Ornament and Crime*) 1908.

ADOLF LOOS' SEMINAL ESSAY BECAME A PRIMARY TENET for Modernism. Modernists embraced the ideas that ornamentation was a crime and that form follows function. Ornamentation and functionality are often identified as opposing principles with moral implications. Contemporary ceramist Lorna Meaden challenges this notion by creating works both rich in adornment and fully functional. Her recent exhibition *Habitual Rituals* at the Clay Center in Port Chester, New York represents a departure in her work, exploring conceptual themes for the first time.

A Review by Colette Copeland

Drawn from the exhibition title, one of the themes is habit. Defined as an acquired, repetitive behavioural pattern, habits have both positive and negative connotations. Psychologists disagree about how long it takes for a habit to form but 30-40 repetitive exposures will usually be enough to create a pattern. Each of Meaden's 32 cone 10 soda-fired porcelain vessels celebrates an oral habit. For those with a caffeine habit, Meaden created espresso cups and teacups with matching saucers. For those with a sugar habit, there is a pie plate, cake plates, cupcake stands and



*Top: Last Piece of Cake Holder.
Above: Cocktail Pitcher (Detail).*



Flask.

my favourite: the last piece of cake holder. There is something a bit saucy and subversive about having a beautifully constructed receptacle that holds only a single piece of cake. For those with an alcohol habit, Meaden produced a wide array of selections such as cocktail pitchers, shot glasses and a spiked cider pitcher. For the serious drinkers, my recommendation is the whiskey bucket and rocks glasses. Or for the covert drinkers, there is a line of flasks. For the home distillers, go for the liquor jug. Nicotine addicts are out of luck. Ashtrays were the one vessel that was conspicuously missing from the exhibition. With smoking bans in offices, restaurants and bars, perhaps smokers have given up smoking in their domestic spaces as well? Or has smoking become so taboo, that ashtrays have become relics of the past?

The second half of the exhibition title is ritual, defined as an established procedure. The word elicits religious or spiritual connotations. We all have our daily (habitual) rituals, whether it is prayer before meals, walking the dog, drinking our coffee or tea before starting the day or unwinding after work with a cocktail. At what point does a habit become an

addiction or a vice? Perhaps when it becomes a need, rather than a want? Or when the habit evolves into a destructive pattern? Meaden's lavish vessels allow us to revel in our rituals with decadent indulgence. Yet she aestheticizes the habits, thus transforming them into something sacred, something to be cherished. The precious objects give us permission to abandon our guilt and delight in the ritual.

Ritual also refers to the ceramist's daily act of 'throwing pots'. Meaden's craft is superb and one that could not be achieved without daily hours of practice. Viewers do not usually have access to or an appreciation of the process of art making, privy only to the final product. When asked if he enjoyed the physical processes of art making, artist Marco Maggi responded, "It is my full-time job and my life's work. Process is my concept and purpose."¹ Maggi has a daily-ritualized practice of drawing. Each day, he may spend up to four hours performing free-hand drawing exercises, designed to achieve perfection in his line-making ability. This is akin to the practice of potters, who spend hours to produce the perfect work, discarding any substandard vessels. While





Facing page: *Whiskey Bucket*.
Above: *Liquor Jug*.



Round Flask.

potters participate to some degree in the culture of production, Meaden, like Maggi, opposes the model of mass production. As she states, "I am drawn to work that is rich in ornamentation...(yet) scarce in a culture of mass production."²

What distinguishes Meaden's work from many other ceramists is the attention to detail, both functional and decorative. Meaden designs and crafts each object with the consumer in mind. Each flask has a cork stopper attached to a string, to keep the cap in place. The cocktail pitcher has a sculpted strainer to catch the mint in mojitos or the fruit in sangria. The spiked cider pitcher has a wire and ceramic holder to prevent the user from burning his/her hands. The detailed design elements enhance the objects' functionality, without sacrificing their beauty. Each of the artist's vessels has a unique, meticulously painted design. For example, Meaden painted the bottom of each rocks glass with a linear/geometric design, so that while in use, the drinker's companion would enjoy the beauty of the glass' underside. My favourites are the ladies' flasks with filigree designs; the feminine design reminds me a mother of pearl jewellery box. The glaze gives the vessels an aged look, evoking mystery and nostalgia. Ornamentation is often confused with ostentation. Meaden successfully avoids this trap. She uses a muted colour palette and the ornamentation never feels excessive. While Loos propagated the removal of all ornament, Meaden

reclaims ornament as a means of introducing beauty in every day rituals.

Visiting the gallery on the last day of the exhibition allowed me to see which pieces featured the red 'sold' dots. I found it interesting and slightly ironic that few tumblers, tea sets or coffee cups were sold. The *Last Piece of Cake Dish* sold, much to my dismay. I wanted that for myself. All of the flasks, rocks glasses, spiked cider jug and whisky bucket sold. Is this indicative of an increase in alcoholic tendencies in our culture? The fact that most of the works were sold in sets points to the communal ritual of partaking with friends in a domestic environment. Or perhaps the sold works are indicative of cultural supply and demand? Either way, everyone who carried home a Lorna Meaden object would add an ornate richness and beauty to their *Habitual Rituals*.

FOOTNOTES

1. Becky Hunter. "Interview with Marco Maggi," *Whitehot Magazine*. March 2009.
2. Gallery artist statement.

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