

HOW TOUCH KNOWS FORM: THE INSI

by Carolyn Leach-Paholski

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Touch is our first earthly experience. Before language it is how we know. It is how we describe the world to ourselves before we have words. Our earliest gesture is to reach out from ourselves – to hold onto the world and to be held. Perhaps this explains our abiding interest in the shape of things. Touch understands form in a way that looking does not. Holding an object, we comprehend its heft and its three-dimensional presence; its surface is at once apparent to us through the medium of our hands. Touch tells us what is smooth, what is rough, what is stony cold or conductive of heat. In our childhood we grasp, touch, and hold the objects of our interest in order to understand them. We are natural scholars, and before we have books, objects teach us.

Soon enough letters and numbers replace objects as our teachers, and we begin the business of abstraction. But what if we were able to advance our conceptual thinking whilst remaining immersed in the tactile world of infancy? Well, it seems that potters do just that. They know form with a more exquisite sensibility than most of us. Objects continue to speak to them through touch because the potter's instrument is the hand.

Speaking to Australian studio potter Jane Sawyer, I learn the importance of communicating not through a spoken or written language but through clay's own memory of gesture. Her posture as she leans over the wheel, the wall or arc she makes of her hands as the clay is thrown, are recorded in the object's form and then fixed by fire. She describes the clay as her muse, from which form is physically lifted. Where a sculptor might chip away stone from a block to reveal an object, the potter must work both with and against gravity to lift form free.

We begin our conversation over a pot of tea. As she boils water and scalds the teapot, I am delighted to note that we will be using her footed tea bowls. I am reminded of the axiom of daily use proposed in *The Way of Tea* – that pots “come to life only after they are put to the test of their purpose.” I am glad to be giving life to these beautiful objects by using them, by holding them and having the chance to see them with my hands. I have read that tea bowls are an article of intimacy because they are not just held in the hand but also touched by the lips. Thrown from red clay, decorated in white

Jane Sawyer, *Caress Series*:
Cups, 2006. Red earthenware
Various dimensions: 3.5 x 3.5 in.
All photographs by Terence Bogue.



DE OUT THINKING OF THROWING POTS

slip, and finished in a transparent leadless glaze, Sawyer's tea bowls have the slight asymmetry of natural objects: the roundness, weight, and shine of water-washed stones. Raising a cup to my mouth, my fingers sit where Sawyer's must have – an indentation made by her hand, which in turn teaches mine how to hold it. This nuance, which does away with handles, seems at once poignant and entirely sensible. It is a design problem, she tells me, solved in the simplest way. But there is poetry in the solution. She has provided a handle by taking one away. It is almost a koan – a teaching, at once simple and complex. If there is a message in the clay, it is that potter and tea drinker are united in touch.

Sawyer's formative training was in Japan at the Shussai-gama pottery, so it is no surprise to me that her aesthetic is spare and that most of her work is functional. But utility does not preclude beauty. The glassy sheen of the transparent glaze recalls the slick of wet clay as it was turned on the wheel. The white slip is applied in a painterly broad brush. In its application there is sometimes captured a fingerprint or stiff-bristled brush marks, and the result is arresting. Following the marks with my fingers, I am reminded of *sumi-e*, which, like Sawyer's work, combines seriousness with sensuality. That the process is still partially apparent is affecting. Some of the potter's skill speaks to us directly through the object.

Walking about her studio Sawyer lifts down pots to show me how it is that form records gesture – how clay has a memory for touch. I am very taken with a double-walled Buddha's belly of a bowl. It is part of a group called *The Pillow Series*, made, she tells me, as a sphere. The air inside it was released very slowly by a pinprick. I wonder aloud how she has come up with such a technique, and she tells me that her thinking is done through doing. It is just one of a bunch of examples of the inside-out thinking that potters do. I am sure that her hands are well schooled in technique – to the point perhaps where they do the figuring out while the mind floats free, a creative reverie that the Australian poet Les Murray describes as having a painless headache. The head feels full, the eyes become unfocused, while the hands are alert and alive to their task.

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Later she unpacks an antique Korean rice bowl. It is more than 400 years old, yet the fingerprint of the potter who made it is still clearly visible in the glaze. Once again, I feel united with the potter. We discuss the glaze, the calligraphic decoration. I want to look at the pot, but more than that I want to touch it. I want it to teach me about its maker, its fabrication and uses. I want to think like a potter with my hands. Sawyer must fully subscribe to *The Way of Tea's* thinking because despite the pot's value she lets me hold it. We are both silent for a moment, thinking perhaps of the number of hands the bowl has passed through. In its time it would have seen daily use and would have as such taken its form from function. She shows me that the glaze has taken on a rubbed softness where it has been held and that the clay at the foot where it was cut from the wheel is perhaps smoother than it once was. Despite this wear, there are indentations still evident on the foot from where it stood stacked in the kiln. Thus the object remembers, and the memory is passed through ages by being held.

We move back to the studio to examine a more linear series of pots. They belong to a series called *Stretch* and are thrown from a clay that moves in the kiln. A wetter clay, I surmise, but no, Sawyer tells me that it is the increased iron content of the clay that expresses itself in the fire. These long pieces can be hung on the wall like paintings. They are deeply grooved, and they have recorded some sort of kiln chemistry in their sculptural form. Once again, they are formed for function: their primary purpose is as tableware. But they seem almost animate in their posture. I imagine them upright like a person or lying like a sleeping child. The phone rings. While she answers, I make a careful examination of a piece on her staircase. She is away for a while. I move my hand along it. I practice thinking like a potter because touch, I now know, is how reality is tested.

Jane Sawyer, *Pillow Series: Tea Pot and Cups*, 2004. Red earthenware. 6.5 x 4 x 8 in. (teapot), 3 x 3 in. (cups)

