



HeadLINES

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Residency programs and workshops world-wide are a major source for international contact and give opportunities for experimenting with new materials, firing methods and concepts in ceramic art. Sometimes these are life-changing experiences such as the residency I undertook in 1975 at the Anderson Ranch in Colorado when I first came into contact with salt-glaze and the attendant forms to suit that particular ceramic genre. Another such experience was when Janos Probstner of the International Ceramic Centre in Keskemét, Hungary, invited ceramic artists specialising in salt-glaze from around the world to work together for five weeks in 1988, pooling knowledge and experimenting with different ideas. The friends made during these events remain close since those times. In 2006, this magazine awarded a residency experience to Felicity Martin, an honours graduate at the National Art School, Sydney, Australia, to undertake a month's residency in Keskemét during which time a woodfiring workshop was held. In this issue of the magazine Felicity writes on her time there, how it changed her thinking in a number of ways and inspired her to specialise further in her work. Attending a workshop in Shigaraki, Japan, Michael Wein describes how he was rewarded, fulfilling a dream to fire a wood kiln in Japan, gaining even more than he had hoped from his residency and subsequent exhibition there.

Julia Jones, writing on the workshops held at *ClayEdge* in Gulgong in April 2007, gives us a perceptive coverage of what it means to gather such an experienced and professional group of major potters together and how the variety of styles, purposes and aesthetic intent of these artists interacted both on themselves and on the participating audience that was in attendance. Looking behind the methodology, she was able to unearth references and meaning to the work made and describe it in ways that brought together the history and relevance of ceramics in a special way. In September 2007, I was able to visit the residency/symposium organised by Anna Zamorska, near Wroclaw in Poland. This is the 31st time this annual symposium has been held and although Anna declares it is the last it seems everyone I spoke to wants it to continue. Working in three separate porcelain factories, one making insulators fired to 1380°C and two producing tableware, I met artists from Latvia, Holland, the UK, Sweden, the Czech Republic, Germany, the US and Poland. Some had attended in previous years and planned this time to work more experimentally, extending the scale of their work that the factory situation allowed. The first such experience for others, these artists wanted to take porcelain to the limits of the material's capabilities developing their ideas at the same time. Housed together in a nearby spa town redolent with history, the exchange of catalogues, talks and background experiences brought together a rich event. History, as related to ceramics, is a potent factor as many of the articles in the issue of *Ceramics TECHNICAL* testify. We can learn about materials, methods of making and intent from the authors of these articles.



The Ceramic Decal Visual Diversity and Conceptual Complexity

*Anna Calluori Holcombe and Glen R. Brown
discuss the decoration process of ceramic decals*

THE CERAMIC DECAL, which entered into widespread industrial use by the early 20th century, has over the past 50 years come to acquire something of a split personality. On the one hand, it continues to lend uniformity to the decoration of mass-manufactured ceramic multiples, particularly tablewares. In this capacity it contributes significantly to a sense of the ceramic object's anonymity. On the other hand, in the work of a growing number of studio ceramists the decal has ironically become an effective device for enhancing the uniqueness of certain works in clay. In this context, decals are routinely altered, inverted, hybridised or otherwise employed in unconventional fashion. Like the bric-a-brac incorporated into sculptural assemblages or the fragments from which collages are composed, ceramic decals in the hands of studio ceramists have become the stuff of innovation and unique expression.

*Anna Calluori Holcombe.
Arrangement. 2006. Slipcast
porcelain, decals, lustre. Glaze
firing to 1305°C (cone 10);
decal fired to 717°C (cone 018).
Tallest 13 cm/h.*



Left: Wan Li Ya. **Mahjong**. 2006. Overglaze, china paint, decals on ceramic tile. Fired to 780°C (cone 016). Right: Wan Li Ya. **Beijing/Shanghai**. 2006. Overglaze, china paint, decals on ceramic tile. Fired to 780°C (cone 016).

Decal production is an imagistic technology and, in an age of astonishing advancement in digital processes, one would naturally expect the rapid emergence of new, more efficient and more versatile modes of generating decals.

While this kind of technical development has, in fact occurred, studio ceramists have always valued tradition as well as innovation. Consequently, it is not unusual to encounter a range of studio ceramic work decorated variously with imagery that reflects the earliest industrial decal technology, images created through a variety of unique, more-or-less hands-on processes of decal production, and imagery that has developed from exploiting the full potential of digital photography, computer processing, laser printing and synthetic materials.

Compiling a list of contemporary ceramists who have availed themselves of this range of possibilities would be a daunting task, but examining the work of even a small number of ceramic artists who regularly employ decal technology can provide some sense of the diversity of approaches. The four whose work will be discussed here – Wan Li Ya, Paul McMullan, Dalia Lauckaite-Jakimaviene and Anna Calluori Holcombe – have each found effective ways either to procure or create decals and to incorporate them into the formal compositions and conceptual content of their art. Their ceramic work ranges from functional objects to vessel-referential forms and sculptures, and each employs decals not simply for novelty's sake but as integral elements of their broader practice as artists.

Perhaps the most common sources of standardised decals are ceramics factories. Although much of the once globally thriving porcelain industry has migrated back to its birthplace in Asia, some factories in other parts of the world, especially in Eastern Europe, continue to produce decals for their manufactured ceramic wares. In many cases, samples of these have been made available to studio ceramists during factory residencies. No place, however, can provide contemporary studio ceramists with a broader selection of commercially produced ceramic decals than the undisputed capital of porcelain manufacturing: Jingdezhen, China. From among the offerings of the many decal outlets in Jingdezhen, studio ceramists such as Wan Li Ya find precisely the colour, pattern or image that they are seeking – or they commission them for a reasonable price. Many of Wan Li Ya's decals have been locally made to order from his Photoshop manipulated digital photographs.

Some of the decals that Wan Li Ya uses for his ornate tiles are still produced on decalcomania paper but, for the most part, clear plastic has become the vehicle for Jingdezhen decals. As in the factory context, alcohol is generally used to break down the plastic and make it tacky enough to adhere to the ceramic surface. (An effective alternative to alcohol is a solution composed of water and a water-based china-painting medium. After soaking the decals for a

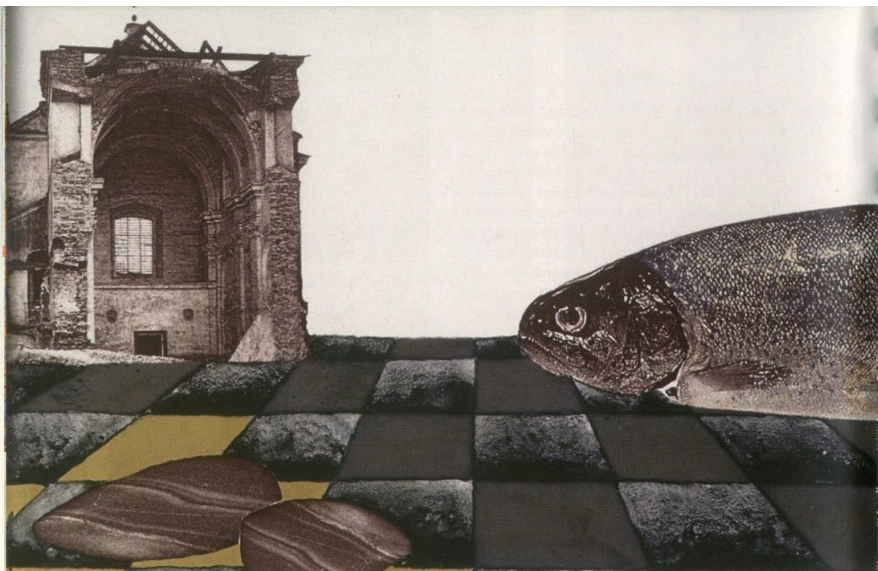
minute or two in this solution, one simply smooths them on to the ceramic surface, gently working any air bubbles outward so as to achieve a perfectly flat contact.) Wan Li Ya applies his decals with exuberance and a near *horror-vacui* obsession with filling certain spaces in order to achieve what he describes as a 'disharmonious balance'. For him, this quality mirrors the contradictions between unprecedented changes in contemporary China and the appreciation of the Chinese people for the purity of traditional aesthetics.

While Jingdezhen has been a major centre for the production of ceramic decals, today many small-scale manufacturers outside of China produce commissioned designs as well. The increasing availability of these custom-made decals has proved beneficial to a number of ceramists who formerly produced their own through labour-intensive methods that did not always yield satisfactory results. American ceramist Paul McMullan, a professor at Siena Heights University in Michigan, is one of those who began making ceramic decals early in his career through a complex five-colour process of screen-printing. In this process, printing is done on specially coated decalcomania paper using inks composed of ceramic colours mixed with screen-printing medium. The ink must dry thoroughly before each successive colour is registered and printed. Following the screen-printing process a cover coat of film solution is applied over the entire area. When the decal is soaked, water penetrates the back of the decalcomania paper and the sticky 'sandwich' of layered inks and cover coating slides off and can be transferred to the fired ceramic piece.

For McMullan, this technique of creating decals proved excessively time-consuming, and eventually he resorted to screening directly on clay and finally to painting by hand. Then he came across Andy Brayman, ceramic artist and owner/operator of Easy Ceramic Decals in Kansas City, Missouri. Using ceramic toners, Brayman prints inexpensive full-colour, continuous-tone decals in the small quantities typically desired by studio ceramists. Prior to the introduction of this technology, decal manufacturers generally only produced paper-backed water-slide decals in runs of hundreds or more, since their typical commissions were for logos or other designs to be used on mass-produced ceramic objects such as mugs.



Top: Paul McMullan. **Blue Boy**. 2006. 43 x 23 x 15 cm. Earthenware, decal, flocking. Glaze fired to 1060°C (cone 04); decal fired to 747°C (cone 017). Above: **Blue Boy** (detail).



Dalia Lauckaite-Jakimavičienė. By St. Joseph's Church (detail).

Because the particular black printer toner that she uses contains a high percentage of iron oxide, Lauckaite-Jakimavičienė is able to achieve the monochrome reddish brown hue peculiar to sepia-tone photographs, an effect that adds to the general nostalgic and melancholic air of her compositions.

In Brayman's process, runs of single sheets present no problems, and line drawings, photographs or anything else convertible into digital format can be quickly rendered suitable for application to ceramic surfaces. Since Brayman's decals are paper based and water soluble, they can be applied easily and without health risks. Now, rather than spending hours or days in the tedious process of producing decals on his own through silk-screening, McMullan merely emails digital images to Brayman's online address and within a few days receives through the post those images precisely reproduced as ceramic decals.

The speed and convenience of obtaining decals in this manner has caused McMullan's work to take a new turn. His sculptures, constructed from elements slipcast in the kinds of moulds available at hobby shops, present enigmatic narratives in which one figural element metamorphoses eccentrically into another like the mutating images in hallucinations or dreams. In concert with these sculptural forms, the decal imagery not only introduces a dynamic between two and three dimensions but also suggests that McMullan's work is less about the contents of the unconscious that were so vital to Surrealists than about the issue of montage in the representational strategies of everything from fine art to the mass media. Here, the allusions to multiplicity carried by the mechanically reproduced decal images are especially significant.

Like McMullan, the Lithuanian ceramist Dalia Lauckaite-Jakimavičienė employs decals to create strange narratives that combine the veracity of photographic imagery with impossible shifts in scale, anachronisms and hybridisations. Inspired by a baroque church in the city of Vilnius, Lauckaite-Jakimavičienė produces façade-like white-glazed earthenware forms with columns, pediments and porticos that not only echo the architectonics of classical buildings but also recall the heavily structured frames of Renaissance altar pieces. In an imaginary space both within and beyond this architecture,

haunting decal dreams unfold: curious images that have evolved partly through a blending of 15th century Florentine and early-Netherlandish stylistic traits. Her perspectively rendered tile floors, sweeping views of piazzas, curly haired angels with flowing robes, multi-figure banquets and Bosch-like colossal fish evoke the strange rigid precision and unearthly allegorical content of Renaissance painting that inspired such 20th century artists of the fantastic as Giorgio De Chirico and Salvador Dalí.

Lauckaite-Jakimavičienė describes her use of decals as 'collage-like', since her approach to composing involves piecing together pre-existing imagery in unusual ways and affixing the complex arrangements to the surface. Her compositions can contain as many as 50 individual image fragments that have been orchestrated into larger continuous and illusionistic scenes. Over these she often applies additional elements with a pen or brush and china paints. Her decal use has evolved through three distinctive phases. During the first of these, she relied exclusively on commercially produced decals. Later, she turned primarily to commissioned decals, which gave her the ability to incorporate photographs of local architecture and portraits of herself and her children. More recently, she has adopted a technique of producing her own decals through computer technology.

In this process, which is employed by a number of contemporary ceramists for producing custom decals, Lauckaite-Jakimavičienė scans photographs or other visual information into digital format and uses a laser printer (ink-jet printers are not suitable) to transfer the resulting images on to a special decal paper.² She then coats the paper's surface with decal lacquer. The decal is affixed face down on the glazed ceramic surface and then the image is transferred permanently to the work through firing at a temperature just below the melting point of the glaze.

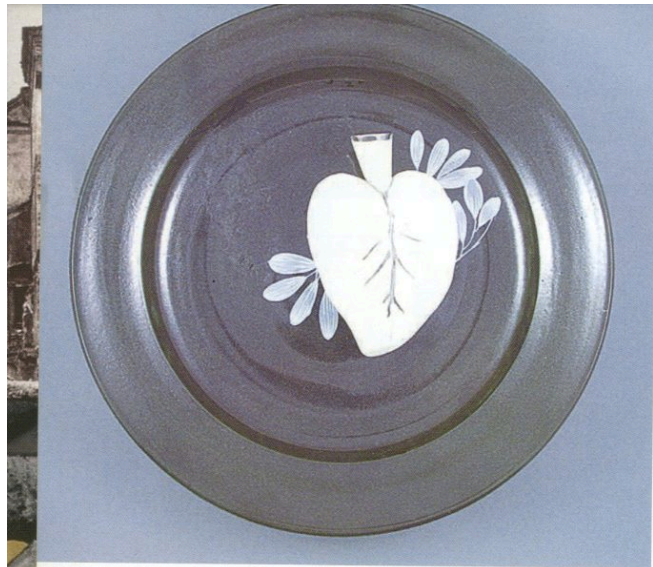
A certain nostalgia accompanies American ceramist Anna Calluori Holcombe's use of decals, although its source is an aura associated not just with the imagery but also with the decals as objects. Unable to find ceramic decals available in limited quantities and desiring an alternative to the laborious screen-printing process of creating them, Calluori Holcombe began acquiring vintage decals on a popular online auction site. On any given day, a search for ceramic decals will yield more than 200 items up for bidding. Although these primarily depict flowers, birds and cartoon animals, patience and persistence also turn up more unusual examples such as lettering, all white images, and patterns from the 1950s. Calluori Holcombe employs these vintage decals like collage materials, cutting them up and combining them into unique compositions. As these early decals are all on paper, she uses the soak and slide method to apply them then fires her work typically at 712°C (cone 018).

In her previous ceramic work, Calluori Holcombe frequently exploited an ambiguous relationship between two and three dimensions by positioning flattened vessel forms – usually heartlike amphorae – over the faces of glazed



Dalia Lauckaite-Jakimavičienė. By St. Joseph's Church.

2005. 48 x 32 x 4 cm. Earthenware, glazes, laser-print decals, commercial decals, china paint, lustres. Glaze fired to 1060°C (cone 04); decal fired to 960°C (cone 08).



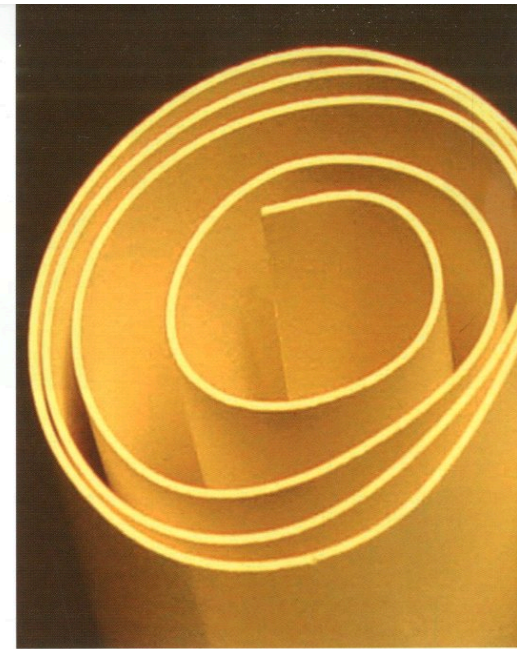
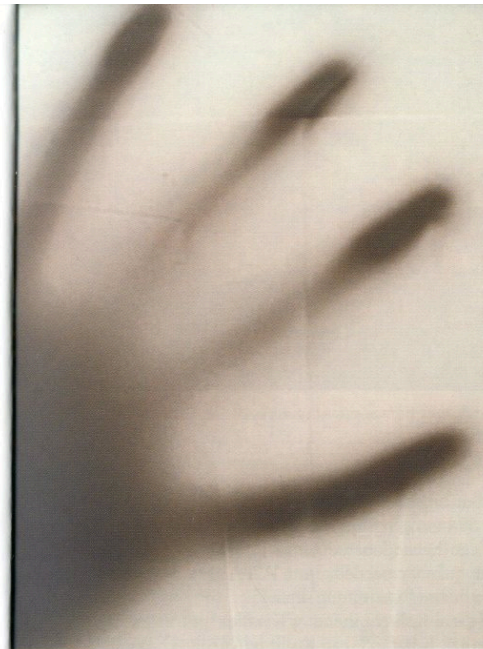
Anna Calluori Holcombe. *Black Tondo IV*. 2007. 30 x 4 cm. Thrown and slipcast porcelain, decals, lustre. Glaze fired to 1305°C (cone 10); decal fired to 117°C (cone 018).

ceramic chargers. Her use of vintage decals continues and enhances this exploration of contrasting dimensionality. The idea of cutting a vase form, which is illusionistically three-dimensional, out of a two-dimensional decal and then applying that flat decal to a rounded surface is particularly intriguing to her. In some cases, the decals that she employs were designed specifically for curving forms yet can be applied to flat surfaces instead. The resulting effects are visually engaging, but beyond that they serve as commentary on the simultaneously two and three-dimensional sense of space that ceramists have always keenly developed as a consequence of considering the decorated surfaces of rounded objects.

The element of time is also significant in Calluori Holcombe's use of vintage decals. References to the historical repetition of forms within the ceramics tradition have long been implicit in her allusions to amphorae and similar classical vessels. Vintage decals have become another vehicle for her reflections on recurrence and transformation in ceramics history. Produced more than half a century ago in an industrial context, these vintage decals serve as curious bridges between a period in which the uniformity of ceramics multiplicity was still a desirable attribute of modern progress and the present in which the anonymity, even sterility, of that industrial multiplicity has become problematic enough to spawn a host of studio ceramic works that tendentially undermine it. Calluori Holcombe's groups of small vessels, decorated in china paint, lustre and vintage decals, are oddly situated between mass-manufactured forms and unique objects that break from the mould.

This ambiguity, this duality – the simultaneous connection to multiplicity and the potential for uniqueness – is perhaps the most important conceptual attribute that the ceramic decal possesses in the contemporary studio context. Studio ceramics as a field is still wrestling with the implications of a past in industry, but everywhere there are signs that the repression of this past is coming to an end and a new period is dawning in which ceramic art has begun openly to acknowledge its kinship with design and even industrial mass-production. Much of this acknowledgement among studio ceramists has occurred through the use of factory blanks or forms slipcast in commercially available moulds, but the ceramic decal is emerging as another useful vehicle for commentary. The range of techniques for producing ceramic decals and the role of cutting-edge technology in their creation make them perhaps the most visually diverse and conceptually complex of devices for exploring the contemporary implications of ceramics multiplicity.

Glen R. Brown is Professor of Art History at Kansas State University. Anna Calluori Holcombe is a ceramic artist and Director and Professor of the School of Art and Art History at the University of Florida.



Keraflex Porcelain An introduction

Rachel Kingston and Margaret Carlin have been researching the potential of Keraflex porcelain tape

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Left: Translucency when fired is comparative to other porcelain mediums. Right: Even prior to soaking in water, Keraflex is flexible and easily manipulated.

- REFERENCES
1. Anna Calluori Holcombe uses this technique to avoid harmful fumes, flammable materials and the need to dispose of toxic waste. It may be necessary to experiment with the ratio of water to china-painting medium (similar to glycerin water), but a good ratio to start with is 4:1. For the decals to adhere effectively, it is critical that the glaze material be on the exterior and the plastic directly against the ceramic surface.
 2. For a more detailed description of this process see Frank Gaydos, 'Tips from the Pros: Do-It-Yourself Decals' *Pottery Making Illustrated* 9 no. 5 (Sept.-Oct. 2006): 7-8.