

Critical Care: The Art of Self Critique

by Simon Levin



“Neighborhood,” to 4½ in. (11 cm) in height, porcelains and stonewares, fired in an anagama, 2005. Levin says, “I was still locked in my assumptions of the houses as individual works until my three-year-old daughter started to arrange them into a city. Changing shapes and surfaces across many houses creates rhythms and even narratives. Grouping the houses allows me to consider the implications and how the results might feed my next series.”

I use one tool everyday, on every pot or sculpture, whether I made it or not. This pervasive tool is critical analysis, and I use it to assess the pot I am currently throwing, the work I made yesterday and the work I made years ago. Like a bite of the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, having an understanding with which to assess pottery cast me out of the garden of blissfully bad pots into the struggle of evolving a voice in clay. My work and view of pottery has never been the same.

Before I understood critical analysis, claims that all art is subjective were used to counter any critique that was not complimentary. I had critiques such as: “Your work seems to have an Asian aesthetic, and yet you are Jewish, why don’t you make pots with a Jewish aesthetic.” I spent many soul-searching hours struggling with that comment. In the midst of this foggy thinking I met prophets of the pot—Linda Christianson and Michael Simon—who gave me my first meaty critiques, which sent me back to the wheel energized with understanding and direction. They gave me that first bite of the apple and I am forever thankful. Their gift gives me a basis to

make sound judgments about my own work, and with which I can harness my drive to make better work.

In order to critique your own work, you have to have an intent on which you can judge yourself successful or not. Through working with Linda and Michael I came to see clay as a language. A good pot should be like a paragraph exploring an idea; each element of the pot should be a sentence that rephrases the idea, adding nuance and depth while reiterating the theme. Like learning a new language, I first began to acquire vocabulary, slowly translating ideas into wet clay. In time, I became more fluent in the language of clay. Eventually I had to decide what to say.

Linda achieves that delicate mix of being totally affirming and totally honest. Her critiques center on elements in a pot that are enjoyable, and discuss how she responds to them. Then she points out aspects that are untoward, unconsidered or detract from the articulate elements. My first critiques with Linda revealed the enormity of elements in a pot. I would offer up a piece for critique and she would say, “Oh, I am liking that exterior but I am not convinced about

the interior.” I would return to the wheel attending to the interior as well as the exterior. Again, I would submit the next generation of pots for review and Linda would applaud my efforts, but ask me to consider the foot. To the wheel I would return with interior, exterior and foot in mind, and again back to Linda. Each time she would add elements to my to-do list, challenging me to consider relationships between surface, rim, weight, texture, feel, glaze, color, stance, thickness, clay treatment, etc.

Through working with Michael, I came to understand that technical skill had little to do with expression and emotive communication. Michael’s critiques called into question assumptions about what makes a pot good. Comments like “thinness is only one virtue” sent me exploring choices I made about vessel walls and weight of ware.

Both Linda and Michael were passionate about taking responsibility for all the choices made in a pot.

In deciding what I wanted my pots to say, I chose words that I wanted my pots to embody; like *soft*, *generous*, *full* and *kind*. I found these words more approachable than ideas of revolutionary, anti-establishment, earth-shaking social commentary. Then, when I was making a decision about the weight or shape of a lip, I asked, “Is that a soft lip? Is it generous?” I let my intent guide my decisions, striving to become aware of choices I had made without knowing. I worked in series, varying forms and elements, and changing relationships between shapes and surfaces; all the while critically assessing the effect of each change and sum of the parts. The pots deemed most successful were the ones that best captured the essence of the words.

Critique offers a process for growth. It is the natural selection mechanism for studio evolution. The plumped out house at right was the first generation. It is almost a foot tall, made from solid clay, and then hollowed and stretched from the interior. I was looking for rugged forms that could take repeated hits from wood and dramatic shifts in the temperature of the stoking aisle. I chose houses because of their timeless, universal qualities and the rich metaphors created by windows. I regret the static and uninteresting edges of this house. The window is skimpy and overworked. These houses needed so much handling that the process removed the gesture and energy I was seeking to create.

The second generation of houses became much smaller (under 4 in.), and though the edges remained sharp, the planes and the lines of the houses became wandering and gestural. I was still locked in my assumptions of the houses as individual works until my 3-year-old daughter started to arrange them into a city. Her honest interaction with the pieces threw the work in a modular direction where I create relationships between houses. I can create neighborhoods such as the one on page 34. Changing shapes and surfaces across many houses creates rhythms and even narratives. I often ponder which house is the Boo Radley house of the neighborhood. Grouping the houses allows me to consider the implications and how the results might feed my next series.



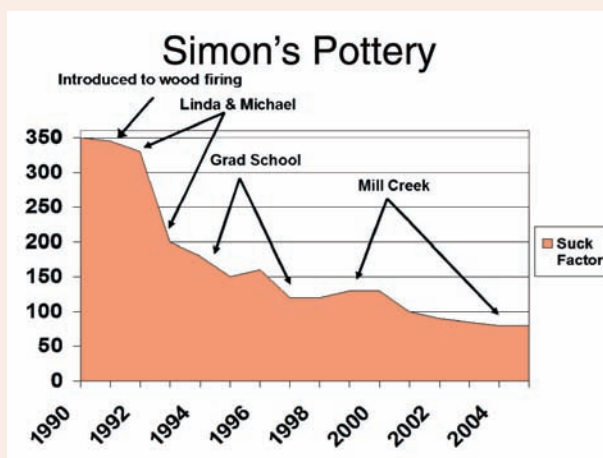
“Dream House Volume 3,” 12 in. (30 cm) in height, wire cut and hollowed stoneware, fired in an anagama with sand, 2004.

The Suck Factor

In a hotel room one night preparing to give a slide lecture, I decided to graph my pottery career. On first glance, it looks as though my career has been one of steady decline, but let me explain. I needed a unit of measurement to plot. I thought back to my early pots—the ones that were trying to be novel for the sake of originality—and how much those pots sucked. It seemed natural to graph the amount my pots have sucked over time. Hence, the birth of the Suck Factor Unit or SFU.

The next decision was to set the parameters of the suck factor, how much, or how little, can a pot actually suck? It occurred to me that a pot can suck all the way around; therefore the maximum is 360°.

The graph then charts milestones where the suck factor changes course. Starting around 350°, the pots started to become better in 1991 with my introduction to wood firing. This is not to say that wood firing makes pots suck less, but my being connected to the process of making helped to reduce the SFU in my pots. Looking at the chart, you can see the SFU plummet when Linda Christianson and Michael Simon became my teachers. My understanding of clay as a form of communication, my own critical analysis and attention to detail are all due to their teachings. You can see a rise in suck factor during graduate school. Trying new things, the influences of many voices and outside pressures all served to make my pots suck



more. This continued for the year after grad school when I didn't have access to a kiln. Since building my own kilns in 1999 and trusting my graduate training and self assessments, the pots have become more my own and the SFU has decreased to around 80°.



I am a sucker for a good wood-fired surface. I fell in love with the ash and flash of the process. The drama of runny ash is seductive. The more I live with wood-fired pots though, it is the synergy created between form, surface and effect that really holds my attention. I am forced to ask myself if a bottle like the one at the far left becomes a generic canvas to showcase firing effects. The subtlety of this bottle form seems antithetical to the activity of the surface.

The combination of surface and form of the bottle on the right is more successful. The bottle is soft and lush. It tells the tale of the firing but in a much more coy way. The surface is velvety and soft, and the curves of the flame path are more akin to the lines of the form. This bottle is a bit static; the walls lack some of the movement and life that enriches a good pot.

Left: "Busy Bottle," 14 in. (36 cm) in height, thrown porcelain, fired in an anagama, 2006.

Right: "Helmar Bottle," 13 in. (33 cm) in height, thrown porcelain, with dried slip, fired in a noborigama, 2005.

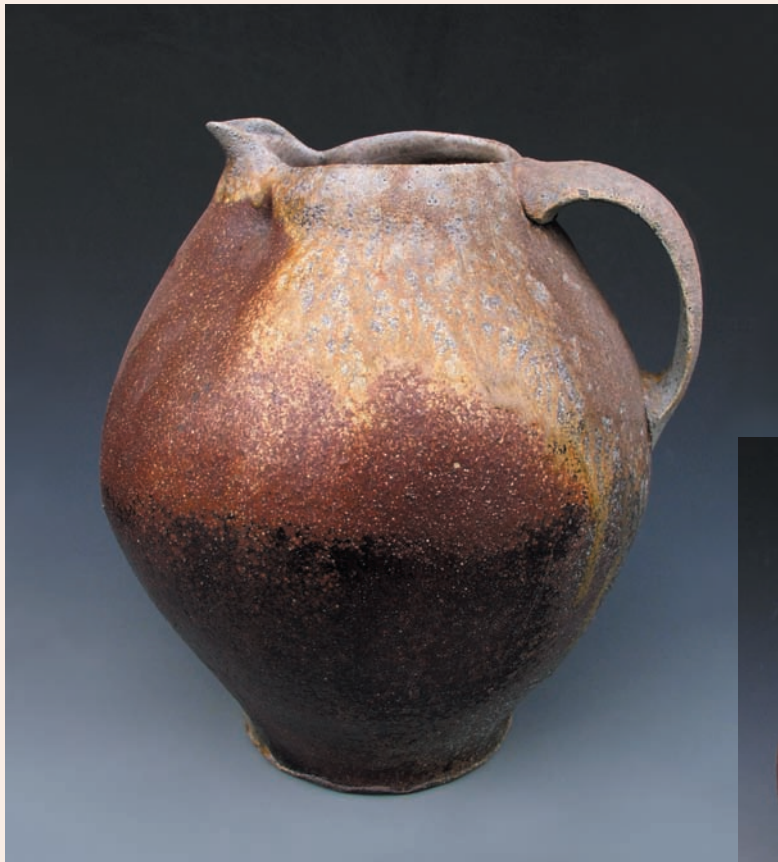
Today I still work in the same manner, though, like a poet changing a single word, the permutations seem less extreme and more about nuance. I seek to create relationships in my pottery that reiterate not only linguistic ideas, but also formal elements. I love when a handle echoes the width of a spout or trim lines have a similar width or feel as throwing lines. I despair when I miss opportunities to emphasize the best parts. Often critical analysis serves as a reminder of what to do better next time.

Occasionally I become enamored with some aspect of clay and it blinds me to the actual effect of the whole piece. Like a good gimmick, it entralls my eye, obfuscating the lack of substance. I strive for objectivity in my critiques, but like everyone I often fail. There are small truths I discover when I am working on the wheel. Little things are revealed in the process, like the telling rip of short clay when you trim a foot, or the burnished quality of clay when it is trimmed past leather hard. I find clay to be a very honest medium, unforgiving in its sensitivity as a recorder of information. I hope to be

so honest in my assessments of my own work. In an effort to become more honest, I try to demystify myself and my processes.

Critical analysis makes us better artists because it focuses our attention on aspects of the work we might otherwise gloss over. While critique is a part of an artistic educational experience, it is lacking from our magazines and conferences. Critical analysis is not something we clay artists practice in public. The NCECA (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts) conference, though full of great shows and interesting panels, is usually one big congratulatory hug. Affirmation, though addictive, is not instructive. I ache for a good critique now and again. It occurred to me that the best way to initiate a critical dialog would be to critique my own work here. I do it daily, why not publicly?

When things are at their best in the studio, I wake in the morning hungry to get back to the wheel. I am motivated when the conversation with the work is full of questions and direction. Critical analysis provides feedback to the questions posed by making work. A good



"Blowfish Pitcher," 10 in. (25 cm) in height, thrown and plumped stoneware, fired in an anagama with sand, 2004.

I love how fat and full this pitcher is. It swells so generously with lift and heft from a small base. It has an almost comical austerity. I also enjoy the puckered liplike quality of the spout; it reinforces the humor of this swollen birdlike form. Looking at the detail below, I really respond to the roundness of the handle. I like the relationships created between the width of the handle and the width of the spout. The curve of the handle connections beautifully mimic the opening of the pitcher. But the side of the handle creates an edge that is unlike anything else on the pot. It is a clean sharp line that distracts from all the other things this pitcher communicates.



critique leaves you with a next step. After graduate school, I began to rely on my own assessments of my work, and I discovered a perpetuating dialog of creation and critique.

As potters, we are really good at affirming each other, concentrating on strong elements in the work and nurturing almost to the point of mollycoddling. How honest are we when we don't offer our insights both laudatory and critical? I have had the honor to have been taught by some very insightful teachers. But the ones who have made the greatest impact on my life and my work were those who were courageous enough to be honest with me and to teach me to be honest with myself. I challenge the writers, thinkers, speakers and publishers in our community to create public space for criticism, ignoring the fragility of egos and trusting the benefits of honest appraisal.

I have been making these large thrown jars for several years now and they have evolved nicely. I am drawn to how the swelling surface is accented by lines that broaden and flatten toward the widest point and narrow at the neck and foot. I use a dry slip technique to soften the effects of shiny ash and I love the misty movements of flame path across the side of this jar. The suggestion of symmetry in the form gives the vessel breath and life, and makes me want to take the journey around it. The weak point for me is the lip. The edge of the lip is a nice echo of the wandering edge on the foot, but the point at which the texture ends is muddy and unclear. I need to find a clear way to think about the rims of these jars, but because they are an anachronistic form I struggle to justify direction.



"Combed Jar," 14 in. (36 cm) in height, thrown and plumped stoneware, with dry slip, fired in an anagama, 2006, \$350.



"Swiss Mug," 3½ in. (9 cm) in height, thrown porcelain, fired in an anagama, 2005.

I am disappointed with the edge of the lip of the cup above. The handle is full, the belly swells nicely but the lip is so sharp. The handle also fails to continue the line created by the belly.

The mug to the right offers a much better relationship between handle and lip treatments. The wad mark on the side is a nice echo of the negative space of the handle. The soft flashing is like the wandering lines of lip and foot, yet the bottom half of the handle feels thin and rigid. Imagine if it were more plump.



"Lush Mug," 3½ in. (9 cm) in height, thrown and altered porcelain, fired in an anagama, 2005, by Simon Levin, Gresham, Wisconsin.