

**Sums and Parts**

**A Wheel Thrown Ceramics Senior Individualized Project**

**Rachel Hayward**

**Advisor: Sarah Lindley**

**Winter 2004**

# SUMS AND PARTS

As a person approaching an art project from a biology background, I often feel that my ideas are influenced either consciously or unconsciously by the sort of information I have collected over the years. An aspect of biology that has always interested me is the way we use almost proverbial phrases to describe nature, and my brain seems to retain these sayings long after I have forgotten the technical details. They appeal to me, I think, because they seem to have implications that extend beyond biology toward something that is both simple and truthful.

The phrase that became a basis for this project is this: a living thing is more than just a sum of individual parts. It is a vague attempt to describe the hard-to-articulate quality that exists in things that are alive, and I prefer it to more complex explanations of life because there is truth in its simplicity. The parts of an organism fit together and interact in a system of precision and harmony that can best be described as “more”. Life is simply the quality that makes something more than just pieces put together.

My project came to be about a search for this sense of something more in my work. I have made enough mediocre work to know that ceramic pieces can easily be just assemblages of parts, and I wanted my project to reach beyond that. I wanted to create forms made up of parts that fit together and harmonized in such a way that the form as a whole would acquire some quality—a quality that I also find difficult to articulate—that would be in some way *more*. My work is an effort to achieve that quality.

My Senior Individualized Project in wheel thrown ceramics came as a surprise to me since I had always assumed that, as a biology and Spanish major, I would do a SIP with one of those departments. I was very excited when I found out that I might be able to do an art SIP, though, because I knew that it was possibly the only opportunity I would have to use what I had learned in ceramics classes to really explore what I could do with the medium. That exploration resulted in a process of consciously altering my methods of working and looking for new influences that might shape my work while still holding on to elements of my work that seem to be almost instinctive. The combination of trying a new approach while maintaining the better, more personal aspects of my past work resulted in what I feel are real improvements in my pieces.

I started working with clay in the fall quarter of my junior year and began by making functional pieces. In some ways, this seemed to be a natural process, since many of the ceramic items we use daily are based on the round shapes generated by throwing on a wheel. Cups, bowls and plates are logical forms to begin with and are practical choices for learning the processes involved in working on the wheel. Beyond that, I am drawn to functional forms because they seem to justify their own existence in a simple and objective way. It is far more complicated to identify something that is universally beautiful than something that is universally good for containing coffee, so my instinct was to make something useful in hopes that it would be in some way worthwhile. By the end of my second wheel thrown ceramics class, however, I was losing interest in the functional work I was producing. This was partly because my process was becoming routine and thoughtless, but also because the work itself was simply not interesting. The natural constraints that are imposed by focusing on function limited the way I was thinking about ceramics, which kept me from experimenting with or expanding my ideas. I

was bored with what I was making but unsure of how to change it without abandoning some of the interests that are central to making my work uniquely mine. At this point, taking Advanced Studio gave me what turned out to be a new sense of direction in terms of my work.

Advanced Studio was kind of a turning point because it was the first time I had ever made any sort of conceptually based ceramic pieces. The projects were a good opportunity to not think about function, which meant that I had to think about something else, which eventually meant that I was thinking about my work in a different way. I do not mean that I became focused so much on the concepts behind the work because I suspect that I will always be more interested in how something looks than in what it means, but I started considering more carefully what distinguishes work that is visually interesting from work that is not. As a result of making work that was less functional, I became more interested in using the processes of altering and assembling in my work. I had generally avoided thrown and altered work when I started working in ceramics because it seemed—and probably was—harder for me to control when I was learning to work with clay. My experience in Advanced Studio was probably the first time that I became comfortable enough with altering forms that I could let pieces become a bit more fluid without making a soggy, floppy mess, and I was surprised at how much more interesting some forms became when they developed a less controlled feel. Deliberately altering some of my working patterns and breaking the habit of focusing on function was ultimately helpful in expanding the range of possibilities for my pieces.

As I started thinking about what I might want to work on for my SIP, however, I felt that certain aspects of my past work were worth maintaining both because they were strengths of my technique and elements of my pieces that are essentially personal. My attraction to very clean, precise forms, for example, is something so consistent in everything I do that it seems to be an

essential part of the way I operate that surfaces in my work. While there may be advantages to trying to work in a new style, there is also something interesting about the way that work made by trusting unconscious tendencies becomes a reflection of an artist's personality, and my tendency toward making tight, clean forms was something I wanted to preserve in my work. Had I chosen to move away from working in ways that I seem to be naturally suited for, I think that I would have felt like I had lost some very central and personal element of my connection to the production process. Perhaps as a result of my being drawn toward precision, one of my strengths as a potter has always been making sets of pieces, and I had a particularly strong interest in lidded forms. There are demands for precision involved in the processes of making the same form twice or making a lid to fit a base that I have always found appealing, and I knew that I would enjoy my SIP more if I were really interested in the process. At this point I had made some decisions about which aspects of my past work to continue with and which to avoid, but I still had no real idea for the project, so I started thinking about some of the more concrete issues.

I suppose it would be logical to determine what a project is going to be and then decide on the materials to use for it, but I ended up reversing this process in my SIP. Even though I had not decided on an idea, I had some thoughts about the materials I might want to use. I also knew that my SIP was likely to be a sort of experimental process, so I needed enough variety in my materials to allow for that experimentation. I wanted to use high fire clay bodies because I prefer a material that is dense and somewhat vitreous after being fired, and I decided to use both a dark stoneware and porcelain. I liked the possibilities of using such contrasting colors, and the plasticity of wet porcelain versus the greater support of wet stoneware seemed to offer the potential for trying slightly different techniques. Additionally, the two clay bodies produce very different responses in glazes, so I knew that I could get a range of results from the same glazes. I

had become interested in mixing glazes during my second ceramics class, and I planned to make a selection of glazes in sort of earthy color tones. I had seen a photo of an installation piece done in porcelain by Alison Reintjes that was made up of fairly simple forms glazed in patterns of brown and gray.<sup>1</sup> Her use of pattern was appealing to me, but I was especially drawn to the way the fairly subtle colors emphasized her choices of pattern and form. I had made a sort of chocolate brown glaze in my Wheel II class, and I started looking at other glaze recipes and mixing test batches. For the most part, I simply mixed known recipes because I felt like I did not have time to really start from scratch on my glazes. I did learn some of the basics about making glazes, however, and I played with some alterations to known recipes in an effort to make glazes that were a bit more tailored to what I had in mind. I ended up with seven glazes in various shades of brown, tan and gray and a range of textures as the glaze palette for my project.

Having reached a point when I could no longer put off committing to some sort of idea for my SIP, I had to really think about where I wanted to start. I was planning to not focus on function because I wanted to allow myself plenty of flexibility in the project, and I knew that I was still interested in the processes involved in making lidded forms. I decided to start by making a number of bottles composed of smaller pieces that stacked to build the larger form. The idea was based both in my interest in making lids to fit bases and, more generally, in some of my interests related to biology. I have always been fascinated by the specificity of fit in the parts that compose a living organism and the precision in their interactions that allow for the processes of life. An essential element of the basis for my SIP was that fascination with the way parts can fit together and interact to make a whole that is somehow more significant.

My first pieces were so focused on the processes involved in making the components fit that I failed to focus on the overall form as much as I should have, and as a result, I feel like the

forms are not terribly interesting. However, in retrospect, I am not unhappy with my beginning to the project because I think that in general it was a good place to start. First of all, it was a start, which is important because it often feels easier to build from some initial stage than to start from nothing. Secondly, it gave me a chance to consider some of the issues involved in glazing pieces that are made up of interlocking parts, and some of my solutions to glazing problems seemed to produce more interesting bottle forms. My biggest dilemma in terms of glazing was whether to fire the components of each piece separately, running the risk that they might warp in different ways and wind up not fitting together, or whether to fire the bottles together, leaving patches of unglazed clay at all the points where components came together. Naturally I wanted the bottles to fit together after being fired, but I also wanted the forms to have a unified appearance that would draw attention to the whole piece rather than the smaller components. The solution that ultimately seemed to be successful was breaking up the glaze all over the form in a pattern that worked with the form while drawing attention away from the joints where interlocking pieces met. I made a tall bottle with multicolored horizontal stripes and a bottle with sort of vertical rays of glaze that both worked well with this technique, resulting in forms that are somewhat interesting because it is not immediately obvious how they might come apart. In addition to finding this rather successful solution, though, I learned in my first firing that the dark stoneware as well as the porcelain was subject to warp under the weight of pieces stacked on top of each other. This led me to start firing the components of my pieces separately.

Now that I knew more about my materials and had explored much of the variety possible in making bottle forms, I knew that it was time to think about some new ways to use the concept of fit in my work. From that point on, my SIP became a process of creating a group of forms, evaluating with Sarah what worked well in each piece and what did not, and building from the

successful traits to create a new group of forms. All of my pieces maintained the central concept of fit but they gradually began to branch away from thinking of fit only in terms of stacking pieces. The first shift came about as a result of making interlocking parts separate from the components they connected, which allowed for greater flexibility in the shape and size of the components. Each piece was no longer restricted by the shape of the pieces above and below it as they had been when the bottom of each piece was serving as the lid of the piece below it. This made it possible for me to experiment with alterations to the round shape that naturally results from throwing on the wheel. I made several pieces that were forms made up of stacking thrown and altered components and was not overly impressed with my results. The components were more interesting as a result of the alterations to the round shape, but the forms as a whole lacked a sense of unity or harmony that I felt they should have. Some of them simply looked like stacked pieces. This was a critical phase of my project, however, because in the process of experimenting with altered forms, I realized that altered shapes had potential for fit in a horizontal dimension as well as the vertical. The first piece that made use of this two-dimensional fit is composed of two stacking sets of rather fluid shapes done in porcelain that sort of twist together to make up a form that seems to remind people of a variety of other organic forms. I have heard it described as everything from a tree to coral to a spinal column, none of which are items that I had in mind when I made the piece, but which makes feel that the piece was successful in that it seems to provoke interest or some imaginative response in the people that see it.

As I was thinking about how I might want to foster a sort of organic feel in my work, I came across some pictures of teapots by Hwang Jeng-daw and was immediately attracted to his work. His teapots interest me because, while they clearly have a basis in a functional form, they

show a greater focus on creating interesting, almost sculptural forms. Of particular interest to me was a double teapot made of two types of clay in which the bodies of the teapots stacked and the spouts sort of wound together in a loose but clearly calculated way.<sup>2</sup> The contrast between a sense of carefully planned interaction between parts and a slightly more reckless flowing movement throughout the piece was very appealing to me and seemed like it might be useful in my own work.

After that point, my work became more centered around an interest in the different shapes that can be produced by altering a wheel thrown piece and the ways that those shapes can fit together both vertically and horizontally. I stopped making stacking pieces and shifted instead to pieces made up of thrown and altered forms that were designed to cradle smaller forms in the spaces between the altered forms. The advantage to this technique was that my work retained some sense of the precision involved in making the parts fit while also acquiring a greater feel of fluidity. I made two porcelain pieces using this method that I was particularly happy with. One is made up of two sort of oblong cylinders that cradle a miniature version of themselves between them, and the other is composed of six fluid, three-sided pieces that hold five cup shapes between them. The first works well, in my opinion, because the shaping of the two larger pieces is subtle enough that it seems somewhat surprising that the smaller piece would remain suspended without being attached. The interest lies in the viewer's sense that the piece should not work or that the balance that keeps the components grouped together is something very fragile. The second piece, much like my porcelain piece that reminds people of organic forms, seems to invite a variety of interpretations. It has also been described in terms of something living, but it seems to remind people of functional forms as well because of the cup shapes that are cradled between the larger components. Furthermore, while I have chosen a linear arrangement for the piece, there are

clearly many other possibilities that would also work, and I think that there is something engaging about a piece that could potentially be manipulated to create a new form. I particularly liked the contrast between the closed, sculptural-looking parts and the open, functional-looking parts of the form, and it ended up being this piece that led me into the last phase of my SIP.

After talking with Sarah about where my work seemed to be heading, I started to think about how I might try to incorporate some of the ideas I had been thinking about in terms of fit into functional work. It could be said that all of the work I had made is functional in some sense because all of the components of each form are containers, but I had not made anything with the specific intention that it would have a defined purpose. I was still attracted to the idea of functional pieces, but I wanted to make functional work that retained some of the interesting qualities I felt had developed in my SIP work. The pieces I came up with are still based in the general concept of fit, but they are also related to an interest in radial symmetry that I have had for as long as I can remember. I started making designs that began at a central point and worked outward when I was in kindergarten, and I can only assume that at some point I must have seen a design like this that caught my attention. It has been a pattern that has always appealed to me, however, and it emerged again when I started planning functional pieces. I made two sets of sauce dishes with spoons, each of which is contained by a tray that was made to fit the grouping of dishes quite precisely. The spoons fit into the curves of the dishes but also create a sort of circular pattern of movement around the form as a whole, and the dishes fit together in a way that is meant to draw attention to the vacant space at the center of the cluster of dishes. My final functional piece was a set of six bowl-like pieces that fit together in a way that is similar to some of my previous porcelain pieces. Three larger cylinders are altered in such a way that they can be arranged in a circle to support three smaller bowls in the curves of their sides. It is a form that

also clearly radiates out from a central point, but the piece as a whole has a more fluid feel than the sauce dish sets. These pieces are different than my past functional work in that there is something less practical about their intended function but also something more visually appealing and engaging about their form.

While it would only be honest to say that some of the results from my SIP were less than satisfying, I felt that the process itself was valuable. The fact that I had no definite direction going in to the project gave me the flexibility to reevaluate my ideas every week and change my plans according to how my work seemed to be evolving. The process of focusing on one basic idea but exploring many variations on that idea offered enough variety that I never got bored with what I was working on because it was always changing slightly. Still, the idea was specific enough that I felt like I was able to work through it in some depth over the course of eleven weeks. Continuing to work with the same concept helped me focus more specifically on what characteristics of my forms were—or were not—successful. I am not sure that in that time I ever created a piece which met my goals in terms of creating a sense of fit and harmony that was both interesting and appealing, but I think that my work improved in the process of trying. Certainly I am happier with the work from my SIP, both functional and non-functional, than I had been with any of my work in the past.

As I have no definite plans to continue on in art, it is hard for me to think about where I would want to go next with my work. I really enjoyed the sort of wandering, experimental process of my SIP and felt like my work was always changing in spite of being based in the same concept, so I might be tempted to just start again where I left off and continue to allow things to evolve. That might eventually mean drifting away from pieces in which parts fit to make a whole form, but I think there are elements of the rather exact processes in my SIP that would probably

always be present in my work. On a separate note, one thing I would really love to continue with in ceramics if I ever had the opportunity is really learning ceramic materials. I am very interested in all the possibilities that exist for making clay bodies and glazes, and I would like to really learn and understand how to manipulate the properties of a clay or a glaze. I have never been one to get terribly excited about chemistry, but I would be willing to work through some of the more tedious processes in order to know how to get exactly what I want in a material.

It is in some ways unfortunate that I have become so interested in a medium that is very difficult to work with on one's own, and I realize that it may take quite a while for me to find another opportunity to work with clay. However, I also suspect that it would be hard for me to give up ceramics entirely. My SIP has made me aware of how much I enjoy the working process, and I know that that process is something I will miss very much. But in addition to improving my pieces and giving me ideas for how I might continue to work, my SIP has given me a chance to become much more comfortable with the processes involved in working with clay, and I feel that perhaps the most important result of my SIP is that it has made me confident enough in my work and familiar enough with the medium that I might be able to eventually pursue other opportunities to work in ceramics. I have loved every minute of this project and I think that I will someday look for a way to continue it.

Notes

1. "Geometry and Pattern," by Alison Reintjes, appeared in *Ceramics Monthly* 51 Dec. 2003: 22.
2. Hwang Jeng-daw, "Symbiosis," *Ceramics Monthly* 51 Dec. 2003: 43.

Works Cited

*Ceramics Monthly* 51 Dec. 2003.

## Slide List

1. *Untitled 1*; Stoneware; 2.5" x 22.5".
2. *Untitled 1* disassembled; pieces range from about 3" to 6" tall.
3. *Untitled 2*; Stoneware; 4.5" x 15".
4. *Untitled 2* disassembled; pieces range from about 2.5" to 4" tall.
5. *Untitled 3*; Stoneware; 4" x 13.5".
6. *Untitled 3* disassembled; pieces from 2" to 4" tall.
7. *Untitled 4*; Porcelain; 8" x 4" x 7.5".
8. *Untitled 5*; Porcelain; 8.5" x 8" x 4.5".
9. *Untitled 6*; Porcelain; 23.5" x 7" x 4.5".
10. *Untitled 7*; Stoneware; 6" x 4" x 3".
11. *Untitled 8*; Stoneware; 9" x 4".
12. *Untitled 9*; Stoneware; 14" x 8" x 4.5".
13. *Untitled 10*; Stoneware; 14" x 13" x 4".
14. *Untitled 1, 2 and 3*; Exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004.
15. *Untitled 6*; Exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004.
16. View of exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004.
17. View of exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004.
18. View of exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004.
19. View of exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004.
20. View of exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004.



Slide 1  
*Untitled 1*  
Stoneware  
2.5" x 22.5"



Slide 2  
*Untitled 1*, disassembled  
Pieces range from about 3" to 6" tall



Slide 3  
*Untitled 2*  
Stoneware  
4.5" x 15"



Slide 4  
*Untitled 2*, disassembled  
Pieces range from about 2.5" to 4" tall



Slide 5  
*Untitled 3*  
Stoneware  
4.5" x 13.5"



Slide 6  
*Untitled 3*, disassembled  
Pieces from 2" to 4" tall



Slide 7  
*Untitled 4*  
Porcelain  
8" x 4" x 4.5"



Slide 8  
*Untitled 5*  
Porcelain  
8.5" x 8" x 4.5"



Slide 9  
*Untitled 6*  
Porcelain  
23.5" x 7" x 4.5"



Slide 10  
*Untitled 7*  
Stoneware  
6" x 4" x 3"



Slide 11  
*Untitled 8*  
Stoneware  
9" x 4"



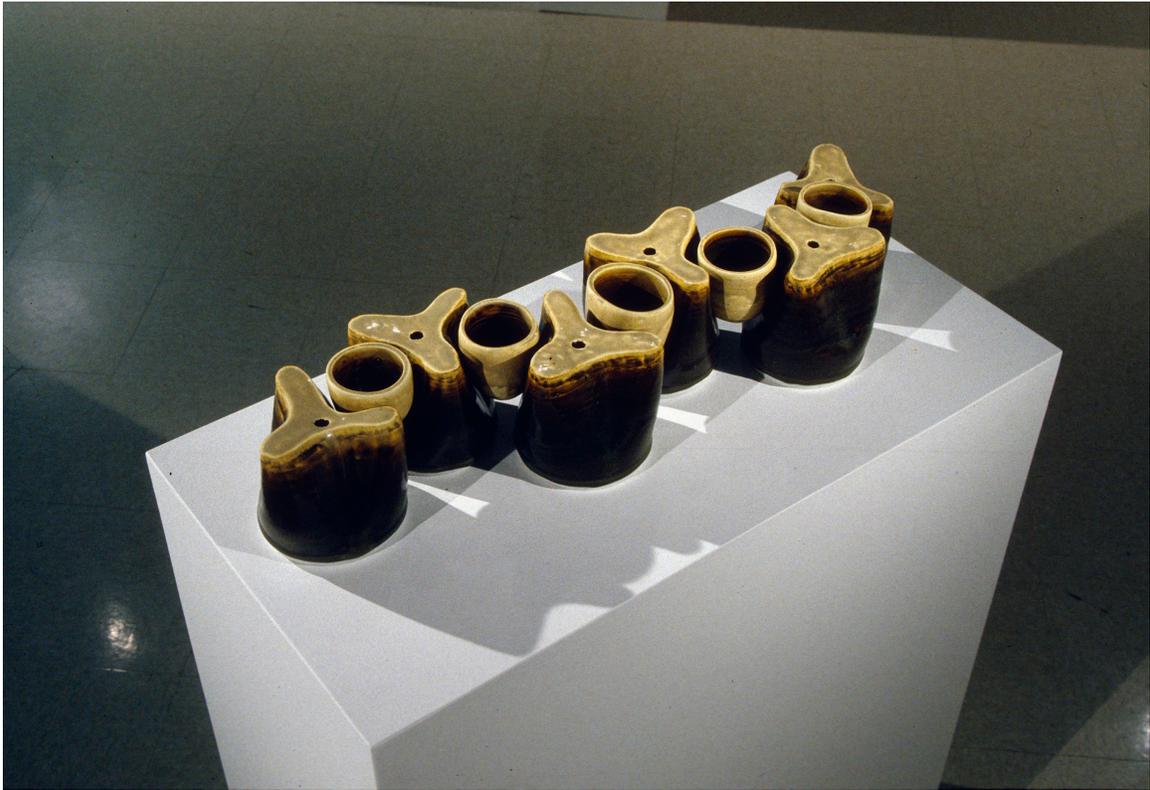
Slide 12  
*Untitled 9*  
Stoneware  
14" x 8" x 4.5"



Slide 13  
*Untitled 10*  
Stoneware  
14" x 13" x 4"



Slide 14  
*Untitled 1, 2, and 3*  
Exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004



Slide 15  
*Untitled 6*

Exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004



Slide 16  
View of exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004



Slide 17  
View of exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004



Slide 18  
View of exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004



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View of exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004



Slide 20  
View of exhibition in Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 2004

# SUMS AND PARTS



A Senior Individualized Project by Rachel Hayward  
Exhibition in the Light Fine Arts Gallery, May 17-22  
Discussion and Reception, Thursday, May 20 at 4:00pm

# The Relationships Between Fit and Form in Wheel Thrown Ceramic Pieces

Rachel Hayward Advisor: Sarah Lindley Kalamazoo College, Kalamazoo, Michigan

## Introduction

In making ceramic pieces, I have found that I am drawn toward creating functional work and that I particularly like lidded pieces for the specific relationship between the lid and the body of the piece. I have also learned that focusing only on the way in which a piece will be used can limit the variety of pieces I produce and can ultimately lead to less interesting results. I wanted my Senior Individualized Project to capitalize on my strengths as a potter but also to allow me flexibility to explore work that was not necessarily restricted by an emphasis on function.

The concept for my project began with the idea of creating forms that stacked to build a larger form, which dealt with my interests in specificity and fit. My exploration of fit gradually expanded to include pieces that fit together in more than one dimension. I chose to focus on the visual appeal of the larger form rather than on function, but many of my smaller components were still intended to reference or serve as functional pieces. My goal throughout the eleven weeks of the project was to create the best possible form: to make the most interesting and appealing use of the concept of fit.

## Materials and Methods

### Materials:

- Dark stoneware
- Porcelain
- Seven glazes

### Methods:

- Stoneware was mixed about five weeks prior to beginning the project in order for the activity of bacteria to improve the plasticity of the clay.
- Five glazes were mixed from known recipes and two were developed through experimentation.
- Components of pieces were thrown and altered or thrown and assembled.
- Calipers were used to measure flanges and bases in stacking pieces.
- All work was bisque fired to 945 °C in an electric kiln. Glazed work was fired in a gas kiln to 1260 °C in a reduction atmosphere.

## Results

My experimentation with fit produced a variety of forms that are composed of smaller pieces. Figures 1 through 8 are representative examples of my work.



Figure 1: Bottle made up of four pieces. Thrown and assembled stoneware, 5.5 x 11 inches.

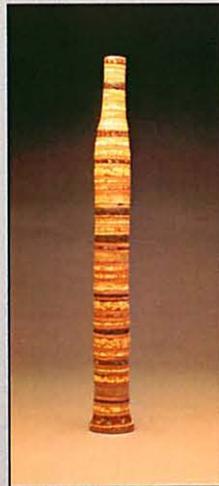


Figure 2: Tall bottle made up of five pieces. Thrown and assembled stoneware, 2.5 x 22.5 inches.



Figure 3: Components of tall bottle disassembled.

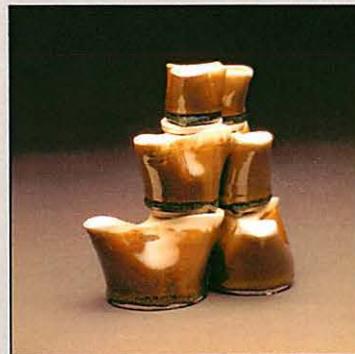


Figure 4: Piece made up of six smaller forms that fit together both vertically and horizontally. Thrown, altered and assembled porcelain, 8 x 4 x 7.5 inches.



Figure 5: Piece made up of three forms. Thrown and altered porcelain glazed only on the inside, 8.5 x 8 x 4.5 inches.



Figure 6: Six forms with five nesting cups. Thrown, altered and assembled porcelain, 23.5 x 7 x 4.5 inches.



Figure 7: Sauce dishes with spoons. Thrown, altered and assembled stoneware, 6 x 4 x 3 inches.



Figure 8: Set of six bowls. Thrown and altered stoneware, 14 x 13 x 4 inches.

## Conclusions

- Choosing a project that focused more on form than function offered a greater range of possibilities.
- My most successful pieces were those whose components fit together in more than one dimension (see Fig. 4).
- Alteration of the round shape that results from throwing on a wheel produced more interesting and visually appealing pieces.
- As a result of having experimented with a new approach, the functional work I produced in my project (see Figs. 7 and 8) was superior to most of the functional pieces I made prior to my SIP.

## Acknowledgements

My thanks to Sarah Lindley for the time and energy she invested in helping me with this project and to my parents for their generous funding of my education.