

Matt Wilt

THEORY AND PRACTICE

by Nate Risteen



In 2013 I took the Foreign Service exam. The State Department uses this test to screen candidates for our diplomatic corps, and the test reveals what our government looks for in a spokesperson. One third of the test requires you to write an essay on a surprise topic in 30 minutes, which is supposedly judged on style rather than opinions. The remainder of the test asks a series of questions on the Bill of Rights, various international agreements, and workplace protocol. In short, it's a test of sensitivity and boundaries.

I passed the exam, but the State Department wisely chose not to hire me; after all, how diplomatic can an art critic be? But their test affirmed that a sensibility toward art and boundaries is crucial in some of the country's most important jobs, and it helped me to appreciate that sensitivity when I see it. Matt Wilt's "Theory and Practice," Yellow Peril Gallery's landmark opening of the spring 2015 exhibition

season, revealed Wilt's deft artistic sensibility, and it showed how an agile artist can play with even the most established of boundaries.

Unlike most visual art forms, ceramics remains bounded. If it ain't clay it ain't ceramics; and as this show was mounted in tandem with Providence's city-wide welcoming of the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference, clay was required. Wilt used this boundary as an opportunity, and he produced pieces that push clay's tactile breadth. He delicately suspended spheres of stoneware from leather cords, thereby making one of the strongest ceramic materials appear fragile. Wilt likewise cast balls of delicate string in firm porcelain, reversing our expectations of hard and soft, soft and hard. Most viewers appreciate the earthy richness of clay, and Wilt maintained that appeal while flipping how we expect to see it.



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He built on these unexpected tactile qualities by incorporating found objects and readymades. Rather than relying on glazing, Wilt encased his ceramics in actual tubes of glass. Not content with iron oxide, he included pieces of iron. A yellowing and decaying rubber tube provided a yellow that no ochre could match, and patinated glass reflected the oxidation of the nearby clay. The fired ceramics acted as points of comparison for the other materials, and they served as the starting point rather than a boundary.

None of these materials appeared randomly. The artist encased disembodied hands and bound tortured faces, and he even severed his ceramic fingertips. Such punishing treatments raised the specter of sexual deviance when positioned next to condom-shaped beakers, yonic bulbs, and both male and female forms that were submerged in vessels of murky water. These vessels served as negative mirrors for the positive clay forms and asked us to question what was actually male or female here. Wilt's forms



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1 Installation view. Foreground (right): *Zero Sum*. Background (left to right): *Unspecified Urge*, *Dive(r)*, *Wonderland*, *Gobstopper*.
2 *Aneurysm*, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, stoneware, steel, glass, 2014.
3 *Suckle*, 36 in. (91 cm) in height, stoneware, porcelain, steel, 2014.



4 *Dive(r)*, 22 in. (56 cm) in height, stoneware, porcelain, steel, glass.

5 Theory and Practice installation view. Foreground: *Wonderland*. Middle-ground: *Gobstopper*.



and their opposites referenced sexual identity or taboo obsessions rather than sex itself, and his found objects and umber tones called up associations with Marcel Duchamp's *Chocolate Grinder (no. 2)* in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, which has often been seen as one of Duchamp's more playfully deviant and suggestive works. Matt Wilt's connection to Philadelphia (he lived and worked there for a number of years) makes this allusion seem all the more intentional, and though these bondage elements are more associative than literal they could not be escaped.

Wilt also broke through the usual composition schemes of ceramic art. He composed pieces in the show in linear and graphic shapes, giving the viewer a memorable silhouette that sculpture and ceramics often lack. Many of the works that were included in *Theory and Practice* had a front and back, and though they rewarded the viewer from all sides, they gave a single image to remember them by. NCECA's Providence shows had an explosion of activity and Wilt wisely chose to exhibit works that could give a moment of visual clarity.

But despite the found objects and graphic qualities this was still a ceramics show. Wilt used matte pigments to make a stoneware surface feel like a rubber beach ball, and where we might have expected a metal grate, he made a slab-built clay fixture. The artist took advantage of clay's possibilities while remaining sensitive towards the work's overall material relationships. These ceramic attributes, however, remained conscious and considered. Wilt composed his images instead of relying on the happy accidents that can happen through wheel throwing or raku firing, and in doing so the exhibited work took on the image-first strength of drawing or graphic art.

Yet Wilt went beyond the materials by creating a metaphor for ceramics itself through his subjects. Wilt's pieces alluded to 19th-century scientists, mad alchemists, and phrenologists. He incorporated test tubes, experimental bulbs and funnels, and the glass jars of early experiments. Heads were force-fed, blindfolded, and exposed, seemingly ready for the phrenologist. And maybe this makes sense. Ceramic artists are a mix of scientists and alchemists, fire tamers and concoction mixers, testing variables and limits without knowing exactly what the outcome would be. Matt Wilt staked his claim in ceramics by not only pursuing new uses for clay, but also by symbolizing that pursuit itself in his subject.

But he was never held back by boundaries; all materials, images, and linear or graphic qualities were fair game in the work shown, and the clay never confined him. He handled all materials with sensitivity and a diplomatic respect for their individual aspects, and this clarity gave a welcome pause to NCECA's excitement. And true to the spirit of NCECA, Wilt's subjects provided a metaphor for the playful and experimental nature of ceramics.

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sculptural glazes

by Matt Wilt

Need some high-fire sculptural glazes that reference other surfaces and materials? Look no further than these recipes.

ARTICLE
36



BLACK COPPER OXIDE WASH (2)

Cone 9 Reduction (fired and cooled)

- Black Copper Oxide 1 Tbsp.
- Water 1 cup

Use this over bare clay surfaces to highlight textured areas. Not food safe.

HOT LAVA (1, 3)

Cone 9 Reduction (fired and cooled)

- Whiting 23.4 %
- Custer Feldspar 50.0
- EPK Kaolin 13.3
- Silica 13.3
- 100.0 %

- Add: Titanium Dioxide 11.1 %
- Silicon Carbide (100 mesh) 1.1 %
- Cobalt Carbonate 2.2 %
- Copper Carbonate 3.3 %
- Iron Chromate 3.3 %

Due to the addition of silicon carbide, the fired glaze is textural, bubbly, and blistered. The surface is dark with hints of color. It is possible to substitute the colorants above for others, including both metallic oxides and commercial stains to achieve different results. Not food safe.

LIMEY'S REALLY DRY (2)

Cone 9 Reduction (fired and cooled)

- Soda Ash 8 %
- Whiting 25
- Custer Feldspar 13
- Grolleg Kaolin 54
- 100 %

- Add: Cobalt Carbonate 1 %
- Copper Carbonate 4 %

This glaze can be tinted with a variety of colorants. The fired glaze is a dry surface like old paint on wood. Not food safe.



CEMENT (2)

Cone 9 Reduction (fired and cooled)

- Portland Cement 85 %
- Cornwall Stone 13
- Bentonite 2
- 100 %

This glaze has a dry, concrete-like surface. Add any commercial stain at a range of 5–15% depending on the desired color. Portland cement usually comes from limestone, and, among other elements, adds calcium and silica to the recipe. Not food safe.

YELLOW PAINT (1–3)

Cone 9 Reduction (fired and cooled)

- Nepheline Syenite 60 %
- Grolleg Kaolin 40
- 100 %

Add: Cerdec Yellow Inclusion Stain 20 %

Like the name implies, this glaze has a yellow, paint-like surface. Not food safe.

BLACK RUBBER (2, 3)

Cone 9 Reduction (fired and cooled)

- Cedar Heights Redart Clay 85 %
- Manganese Dioxide 15
- 100 %

The fired surface looks like a black rubber O-ring. Not food safe.



1 *Aneurysm* (detail), stoneware, porcelain, multiple glazes (including Hot Lava and Yellow Paint), steel, glass. **2** *Receive(r)*, 19 in. (48 cm) in height, stoneware, porcelain, multiple glazes (including Cement, Limey's Really Dry, Yellow Paint, Black Rubber, and Black Copper Oxide Wash), steel. **3** *Surrogate*, 25 in. (64 cm) in length, stoneware, porcelain, multiple glazes (including Yellow Paint, Black Rubber, and Hot Lava), steel, glass. All pieces are fired to cone 9 in reduction and cooled in reduction.