

# ADAM FIELD

## HARMONIZED DICHOTOMIES

by Lauren Karle



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1 Jar, 24 in. (61 cm) in height, Onggi coil-and-paddle constructed stoneware, carved pattern, porcelain slip, celadon glazes, fired in reduction to cone 10, 2014. 2 Vase, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, wheel-thrown porcelain, carved pattern, celadon glazes, fired in reduction to cone 10, 2014. 3 Rocks cup, 4 in. (11 cm) in height, wheel-thrown porcelain, carved pattern, celadon glazes, fired in reduction to cone 10, 2014.

Adam Field seems to purposefully infuse both his work and his life with dichotomies. His vessels reference history but at the same time reflect his own place and time. He does not let his work become comfortable, yet he makes his workspace as comfortable as possible. He seeks out or creates unfamiliar tools, but then adapts them until they become extensions of himself. Although accustomed to working alone he is constantly surrounded by a virtual community. Field has thrived on the challenges and opportunities for learning that he has encountered by moving from Durango, Colorado, to San Francisco, California, to Maui, Hawaii, to Yeosu, South Korea, back to Colorado, and, most recently, to Helena, Montana. The tensions of these challenges, transferred to his work, are embodied by his online avatar, the albino gorilla, which references (but does not replicate) something recognizable and makes you want to take a closer look.

### Symbolic Systems

While living in Maui, Field was inspired by the symbolic patterns on Hawaiian tapa cloth, but he also looked at Zulu basketry and was excited by quipu: Inca messages tied in patterns of knotted cords in a base-ten positional system. While he describes his success at creating a similar symbolic system as more modest, his own pattern language references the rhythms in those artifacts. As he carves patterns depicting the kinds of flowers that surrounded him in Maui, he is not intentionally creating a narrative, but perhaps through the repetition he is recording his own history.

Both the forms of his work and the celadon glazes that he applies to their surfaces allude to Korean and Chinese wares. Though his five-pointed dimple cup form was inspired by the over-ripe guava fruits he found in the jungle in Maui, it also echoes the aesthetics of historical work. Most of his glazes, on the other hand, are well-known contemporary recipes that he has honed and tweaked. By changing colorants or cooling speed he has pushed them to suit his own work.

### Process As Art Form

In 2007 Field did a ten-month apprenticeship under the 6th generation Onggi master Kim Il-Maan in Yeosu, South Korea. He credits his Korean apprenticeship with teaching him about “workflow and environment” in a tradition that developed over thousands of years. Individual studio potters may develop their own techniques and tricks as needed for their work and the projection of their individual voices, but when one learns from a tradition that has been refined over generations, the process, not just the product, can be an art form in itself.

While in Korea, Field took a keen interest in the working methods of the Onggi potters. Once jars got to a certain height a charcoal burner was placed near them to stiffen the base as the pot was built taller. To maintain even moisture throughout the clay the wheel would never stop, but the Onggi potter would fluidly change the direction of his kickwheel. When one step was finished the potter was already moving toward the next. As the pot grew taller, the rectangular cube on which the potter sat could be rotated to raise its height. Efficiency and economy characterized everything from the location of the clay and placement of the wheel to the arrangement of every tool. When firing the kiln, the workshop would be perfectly synchronized, minimizing the effort expended in handling wood in order to preserve the potters’ most important tools: their hands.

In his studio today Field has preserved the essence of these lessons in his own practice. Rather than continuing to engage in time-consuming habits, he constantly looks for ways to improve his process. Instead of measuring each point to lay out his patterns evenly, he uses a system of shadows and lasers, adjusted by tripods, to create a grid. Recognizing inefficiencies in his former method of stacking bats and books to raise and lower the pots that he carved, he devised a

table that he could easily adjust in height (see *Ceramics Monthly* February 2013). During mixing, glazes sometimes splashed on the floor, requiring time to clean up and sapping his enthusiasm. After designing splash-containing lids with slits for inserting the blunger, he actually finds himself excited to jump into glazing. Since he could throw faster than he could carve, he sought a way to keep his work moist longer. He had known about damp boxes for years, so he recently took time out from vessel making to build one. Since he continually transitions between throwing and carving and between creating Onggi pots and working on the computer, and pauses when traveling for workshops, the damp box allows him to pick up where he left off. It has changed how he works, allowing his pots to evolve even further. He can now throw 50 mugs in one sitting, challenging himself to make each different from the one before.



### Using the Right Tools

Tools clearly figure significantly in Field's studio practice, since they contribute fundamentally to making his porcelain carved work so precise and refined. For carving he uses a Korean tool called *sanggam kal*. Traditionally used for inlay in the Celadon tradition, Field employs it for incising. When he first used the new tool he preferred the Kemper triangle version (Mini ribbon/MR-5) to which he was accustomed. With time, practice, and experimentation he was able to achieve something even more effective, but he is quick to point out that tools can also be a trap: "It's not the tool. You have to have enough experience using it to know if it's a good tool for you or not."

When I first held one of Field's pots, the subtle quality of lines that he achieved with this tool was immediately obvious. Each line becomes thicker and deeper at its center, then softens again at the other end. Visually, the surface patterns that he creates with these lines give his already voluminous forms the impression of even greater volume.

When making Onggi pots, Field uses all the tools in their traditional way. Large Onggi jars are often used for fermenting and distilling in Korea. They are fired to stoneware temperatures but retain the breathability of low-fire ware, then covered with a traditional Onggi glaze. In his studio, Field uses stoneware clay but underfires it to allow for traditional breathability of low-fire ware. Field does not sign the Onggi jars because he had no role in the design of them. As an outsider who was generously allowed into a tradition, he feels indebted to the practice and generosity of his Korean teachers.

### Fusing Styles and Techniques

Onggi pots and carved-porcelain vessels have constituted two separate bodies of work for Field, but he is currently using his time as a long-term artist-in-residence at the Archie Bray Foundation to fuse the two styles and techniques. He is not presumptuous enough to attempt to improve upon thousands of years of the Onggi tradition. His goal is to make work that is different enough to be seen as a respectful reference to that tradition. After making a traditional Onggi form, he pours a layer of white slip, formulated to fit the Onggi stoneware clay body, over the leather-hard pot. He then uses his porcelain carving technique to adorn the surface. Although the work that he produces in this manner retains direct associations with historical forms, he hopes that his modification of the strong connotations will provide the viewer with a different frame of reference. In this way he seeks to give the forms the ability to reach further into the world, while speaking of another time and place.

Field is also developing another way to unite past and present through the use of emoji. Japanese for picture symbol, emoji are digital icons representing different gestures and emotions as images. *Mon*, the root of emoji, references symbolism and pattern but secondarily connotes pottery





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4 Stopper bottle, 14 in. (36 cm) in height, 2014.  
5 Covered jar, 18 in. (46 cm) in height, 2014.  
6 Serving bowl, 14 in. (36 cm) in diameter, 2013.  
4–6 All wheel-thrown porcelain, carved pattern, celadon glazes, fired in reduction to cone 10.  
7 Adam Field, 2013. Photo: Ben Carter. 8 Adam Field, 2015. Photo: Rachel Hicks.  
9 3-D printed plastic emoji designs with *Emoji-Mon* clay sprigs.

ware. He calls this new style of work *Emoji-Mon* to indicate its connection. To get a crisp computer-generated image he had his own emoji designs 3-D printed in plastic then made plaster casts of these to create round sprig molds a centimeter in diameter. By applying the resulting sprigs to pots that reference historical Korean forms, Field fuses a recognizable contemporaneity, expressed through modern technology, with unmistakably historical elements, and even manages to inject a sense of humor into the process.

### Technology and Community

One cannot talk about Adam Field without talking about technology. He is well known for creating Hide-N-Seekah, a scavenger hunt that gives clues to the location of a pot or sculpture using Instagram. During a Hide-N-Seekah event, invited artists hide a ceramic piece somewhere in the city where an NCECA conference is being held. Whoever finds the piece gets to keep it. Although he has an official [@hidenseekah](#) Instagram feed, participants must follow each participating artist to receive the clues. This broadens the audience by encouraging each individual's followers to connect with others, expanding the network. The point of this network is to encourage sharing of information, techniques, and inspirations behind the work. He wants to inspire passionate ceramic artists to contribute to the flow of ideas. Field asserts that “we might work

alone in the studio, but we need community to grow and to succeed.” This resonated with me. At my first NCECA one of my wisest and most generous mentors, Simon Levin, told me that by raising the community, you also push yourself. Field asks for very little in return for organizing Hide-N-Seekah, because he says it is not about the individual, but rather about highlighting what is happening throughout the ceramics community.

Whether virtual or physical, our relationship with our community is reciprocal: we change the community and are in turn changed by it. Field is aware of his impact in this regard. As he moved, each place offered new ways to grow and give. Inspiration was received and shared through social media. The patterns and forms in his work and the ways in which he operates his studio have been influenced by each experience. Now Field hopes to inspire others by sharing what he has learned: not just about techniques and tools, but also about experiencing life to the fullest. Living by example, he hopes to encourage others to get outside of their comfort levels and push themselves further than they have ever thought of going.

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