THE GOOD BARGAIN: AN EXHIBITION OF CERAMICS FOR SALE

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

By

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My thesis exhibition addresses the discourse around value, object histories, and perceived worth by subverting the expectations of the gallery setting. Putting my handmade ceramic pots and sculptures on display with other found "jumble sale" objects emphasizes the contrast between those categories while labelling and pricing them draws attention to the layers of emotional, social, and artistic importance attached to them. Garage sales and roadside stands thrive on the thrill of the hunt, on finding something special, rare, and underappreciated on the outliers of consumer culture. But it is also about the relationships that are built between people and between objects as they interact. Questions of worth have been at the uncomfortable edges of the studio pottery movement since Bernard Leach's humble pot, but I am still unsure of how to appreciate and value my own work. The underlying motivation for this project is to explore my own search for identity as a potter in the internet-trend-connected world and how other people's perceptions are reflected through their interactions with me and with the work.

CHAPTER ONE: HOW I CAME TO CERAMICS

When I was in high school, I took several pottery classes. My teacher was an old hippie potter with a bushy beard who wore shorts in the winter and played oldies, loudly, on the radio while expecting his introduction to pottery class to throw pitchers, footed bowls, and rimmed plates by the end of their first year. That class was more of a throwing apprenticeship than a high school art class. I realize now how unusual that was but at the time I only appreciated being challenged in ways I wasn't in other classes. That experience changed my life in a lot of ways, but one of the most important was that it gave me a place where I felt successful. (Which I think is a very good argument for having art in schools.) But once I had decided that I wanted to be a potter, I threw myself into it. I would get up early and go before school. I stayed late after school. I spent my lunch and school assemblies in the pottery room. As a young man my heroes were the potters my own teacher looked up to, especially Susan Peterson and Bernard Leach. (Fig. 1) The lineage of apprenticeship is important in production pottery. My own teacher had apprenticed with Warren McKenzie in Minnesota, who sold things from his workshop on the honor system if you promised not to let out the cat. And because McKenzie had apprenticed with Bernard Leach in England, I was the inheritor of both his techniques and his moral philosophy about pottery.

Figure 1: Bottles by Bernard Leach in the Leach Pottery, Cornwall, UK. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission.

Bernard Leach was celebrated for bringing the styles of eastern pottery to the attention of western people hungry for meaning and art. Leach demonstrated

exactly how the Zen aesthetic of accepting and celebrating the unpredictable nature of wood-fired pots could be an antidote to the machine-driven age of industrial perfection. This was heady stuff for generations of potters who wanted to reject the straight lines of society in favor of living out their version of the vision which Bernard Leach set out in his writings (Leach). Part of why Leach was able to be so influential was because he could see the importance of publishing books for people who weren't already potters, for folks who just needed to be educated about the social and moral benefits of valuing well-crafted handmade pots. Bernard Leach's artist-potter was part of the wider artistic philosophy of the early twentieth century Arts & Crafts movement, one part of a fervent belief that craftspeople were the prophets of a new Camelot. The people who come out of Leach's pottery were my role models. Educated, artistic, cultured, self-reliant, they were generous teachers and dedicated students who created things with their hands and their hearts and their heads. I had a direct line to this philosophy, and like a religious truth it offered me community and acceptance and purpose. It showed me a path from my suburban outlet mall fever dream into a place where you could construct your own utopian reality.

I went on pilgrimage to the Leach pottery when I was 19. In old movies it's an idyllic place surrounded by fields of cows above the sea. In 2008, there was a gas station next to it on a busy road out of town. When I returned ten years later it was even worse. The pottery had become a museum, but it was squeezed by development onto a tiny triangle of land. This isn't surprising because even in the production years the pottery had to stop firing the kilns with oil because of complaints from the neighbors. But it's a metaphor of how the dream was squeezed too. When I moved away from this community, I lost my anchor and found myself contemplating if academic settings are the antithesis to this purity of intent or simply chasing the wider awareness of how to eventually enter the competitive world of the fine art market. One

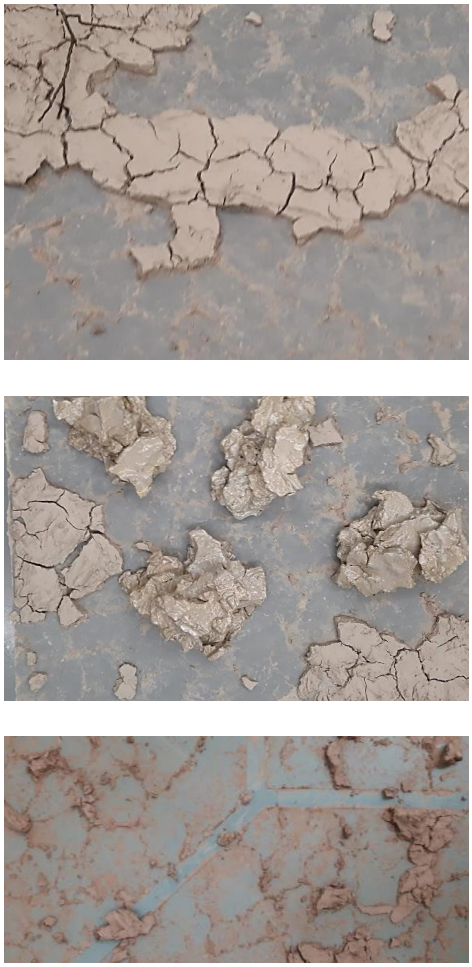
reason for this is a greater awareness of other practitioners doing things similar to me and I felt frustrated by the feeling that I had nothing new to offer the equation.

My initial admiration of Leach was under new scrutiny. I saw how his studio and work had been transformed by the 'market' to undercut the purity of his initial intentions. In my experience of the studio pottery tradition, skill is valued for its own sake. You can expect other potters to admire what you do but you can't boast about it. It's an internal value, dependent on your own dedication and effort to get better at your craft and the way you expand on tradition with your own small innovations. This is the measurement of success, not the size of your bank account or your fame. This is authentic, moral, humble. Being satisfied with this internal passion and the recognition of your community is the whole point. Potters made things for themselves and the people who understood it. Every old hippie potter who believed in this vision was generous. It was a shared purpose. They shared knowledge, time, bread, beer.

This is the opposite of the outrageous prices paid for some pretentious conceptual art and perhaps has contributed to the "undervaluing" of pottery in the art world. Somewhere along the way the economic margin and satisfaction possible if you lived a simple life seemed to get further and further away from a standard of living that was acceptable or possible in the modern world. On the other hand, pottery was the one artform that was possible for me to afford. Pots reflected one person's unique style and ideas, but a potter could still make lots of them. They weren't precious or rare, they didn't take weeks or months to make, and they weren't made of expensive materials. It was incredibly special to me when a more experienced potter saw that I genuinely cared about what they were doing and gave me a pot. I treasure the stories I have gotten along with cups from my pottery heroes and friends over the years. Those pots have stories. They have emotional appeal that is individual and not always equal to their price tag.

My three years in graduate school have been altered by a global pandemic that significantly reduced human interaction, which is what I enjoy about ceramics. My experience in has been very different from the warm supportive environment I had found in my high school and community college. Nonetheless, I persisted and underwent several different phases or directives (Fig. 2-14)

Figure 2: *Spectacle of Making*. Gallery 130, 2019. This was a public performance artwork about developing skill. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission.



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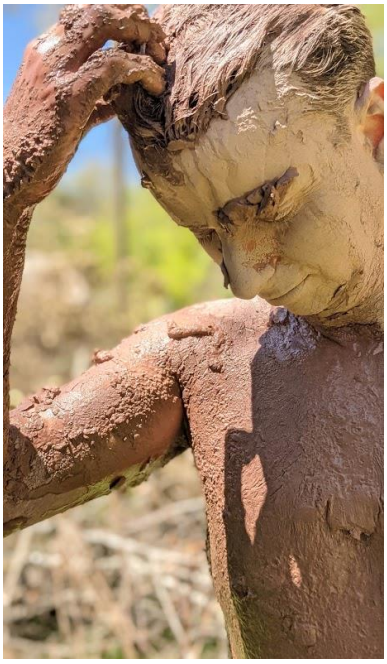

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CHAPTER TWO: THE MUSEUM AND THE THRIFT SHOP

Art museums are high status places in our society. Membership in an art museum does more than give financial support to the institution, it offers you access to a place where you can meet other like-minded people. The gallery space is a marketplace for art where certain behaviors and attitudes are implied and expected. But this also makes it a social environment where community is built. Going to the opening of a show is not necessarily about buying art but about seeing and being seen. Participants talk around the objects, using them as a framework for conversation.

The same thing can be observed in the flea market—another important place for conversation. Going to a thrift store or flea market is about the thrill of the hunt, on finding something special, rare, and underappreciated. But it is also about the relationships that are built between people and objects as they interact. I have observed this in almost every second-hand shop I have been to. These places are usually set up to benefit a local charity and divert good items from the dump, a double dose of endorphins, especially when you feel like you got what you wanted for less than you were really willing to pay (Bain).

Both of these exchanges are defined territory. Both have different sets of cultural cues. The objects and people change but the community remains. They represent how you see yourself in the world. If people don't interact, they won't see the value in other people beyond the superficial. For example, the service workers who facilitate the running of the museums and galleries aren't generally considered part of the art world but they're essential to it (Becker). This can be measured by sociologists like Paul Bourdieu who studied the effects of perceived boundaries of social class in predicting cultural interests. (Bourdieu) When those in power define

the aesthetic of what makes good taste those invisible boundaries are reinforced in the daily life activities—whether you buy art in a thrift shop or in a potter's studio or in a gallery.

Sometimes, especially at small independent thrift stores, there will be a section—a table or counter or side room—where the valuable antiques and art are set apart from the rest of the jumble. They're curated for you on a pedestal to be noticed and admired just as if they were in a boutique gallery. But what is precious in one area may not be precious in another. When I was younger, handmade objects and artisan tools seemed easier to find than they are now, and I felt like I was giving these things new life, rescuing them to a home where they would be loved and cherished. For my parents, old things were the representation of yesterday's hardship. Buying new was a sign that you had made it in life. Thrift stores were not where you went to find unique treasures but where you went because you had to swallow your pride and accept someone else's castoffs. Used things just weren't as good and couldn't compete with the allure of time-saving technology and fashion. But for others, these things have an entirely different set of associations. They are increasingly scarce reminders of our collective nostalgia and identifiers of uniqueness in a sea of indistinguishable consumer goods, and so inevitably they command higher prices. Interestingly this only applies to some kinds of used goods. If something is not particularly unique or old or broken and unrepairable, it doesn't matter how much history it has or how valuable it was new. It will sit on the shelf unwanted. How does this balance of personal and monetary values develop? Objects have what Igor Kopytoff's described as 'a moral economy that stands behind the objective economy of visible transactions.' (Kopytoff) Like the pots I own which are invested with the memories of people I have known, objects have their own biography and stories to tell. Used objects have a history. To me that adds another layer of value that

doesn't exist in something new. Every scratch and chip on a pot is a way that you can read the accumulated stories of who owned it and the life it has lived.

When I came to the mountains of western North Carolina I expected to find evidence of Appalachian craft traditions and pottery in second-hand stores. I was excited about the idea of being able to buy these things at a price I could afford but I was disappointed in what I actually found. Thrift stores tended to value new, manufactured 'junk' as opposed to hand-made items. In the 1920s and 1930s in a period known as the Craft Revival, strong idealistic women built on a romanticized material past to create an entirely new kind of artistic present. Lucy Morgan taught young women at Penland to weave and trade on their local authenticity. (Fariello) Jacques and Juliana Busbee encouraged local potters to make wares they could sell in New York tea rooms (Compton). The Qualla Arts and Crafts cooperative gave Cherokee craftspeople a consistent outlet for their work (Carroll). Olive Dame Campbell and Marguerite Butler introduced the avant-garde European concept of a folkschool as a framework to promote the work of local carvers (Craft Today: John C. Campbell). And although that might feel like distant history, many of the institutions created during this period still exist today, having merged the real history they represented with the narrative they wanted to bring about. You can still buy handmade things at any of the local craft centers, but this is still largely a story told for tourists and relatively wealthy urban people. The products of these places are not in thrift stores, which to me, means they are not in the hands of regular people being used and passed around. It could be that the eBay sellers and antique shops are just very good at diverting these things from estate sales and the transfer stations, or that everyone has such unspoken respect for them that they just never end up at the Goodwill in the first place. But I think there's something else going on here that is also about the unspoken history of craft and its contentious place in the art world. It is

telling that Andy Warhol's collection of industrially produced cookie jars (bought used for $20 or $30 apiece) was auctioned after his death around $200,000 but handmade, wood-fired pieces formed through the hard work of a local potter are valued less or passed over entirely (Muchnic). During my final semester, social restriction from the pandemic subsided and I returned to questions about the economics and perception of craft. Process is important to me and thus so too is process of presentation. As much as I enjoy watching the ribbons of clay fly off while trimming or the need to collectively fire a wood kiln and all its flaming glory, I've also started to ponder how finished ceramics are presented and valued.

Other artists have also questioned the pricing structure pottery in performative artwork. In 1999 Tim Foss made *What a Thing is Worth, No One Really Can Tell* which was inspired by his youth activism to use the market of the fine art world to question the value of handmade pottery (Foss). This was an installation of 101 glazed green earthenware pots which were arranged according to their size, from one inch to eighteen inches high. The pots were priced the opposite of this, with the smallest one selling for $1000 and the price decreasing as the pots got bigger until the largest one was free. Martha Rossler held a garage sale in the art gallery of the University of California at San Diego in 1973 ("Meta-Monumental Garage Sale | MoMA"). The event was advertised both as a garage sale in local newspapers and as an art event. The event has been held several times since then, most recently at the MOMA in New York. Rossler's event sold items donated from the public and took photographs of visitors but was focused more on the metaphor of transaction than the objects on display.

My work and my thesis explore these contradictions. People go into the spaces where they feel they belong, whether that's a gallery or the flea market. The definition of an art world is one that the participants construct—we define what we value. My thesis project is about value,

about who gets to choose the value of an object and about how those values change depending on the environment they are in. I placed my own handmade pottery along with other objects from my life in two different spaces, the gallery and the flea market, and paying attention to how people react to them and with me. By subverting the expectations of the setting for a body of work that is valuable to me, I hoped to challenge the visitors to consider their own experiences in both the gallery and the garage sale. Transposing the environments encouraged visitors to both places to think about how they value objects, draw attention to their cultural expectations of the gallery and used objects, and to move out of the spaces where they are comfortable belonging. To see art as a part of life not as a separate category. I am a potter, but this show was not about the work itself. It was theater.

The work I have made over the past few years has explored several directions that I brought together and put on display with other found "jumble sale" objects. The work on display was interactive, encouraging exchange—both conversation and monetary—as everything will be for sale, just not at the expected prices. I priced my items according to what I perceive their value to be, which is individualistic and random, and expected people to haggle and to find common ground through negotiation. I wanted the experience to evolve during my performance. Which world does my work fit into? What makes it stand out from the random background noise of the masses of things in our material world? Is a table of used things for sale in a gallery just as out of place as handmade pots in a flea market? Or are potters the in-between, who can be comfortable at both the edges of both art and craft without having to be defined by either one? Perhaps the philosophy of a good pot for all people can be the bridge that can reach both places. I want to facilitate a sense of belonging that can bring people together. For me these things are still unresolved, and this is a step towards finding a place in the spectrum of art and craft.

CHAPTER THREE: THE EXHIBITION AT THE FLEA MARKET

The first part of my exhibition took place at Uncle Bill's Flea Market in Whittier, North Carolina. Uncle Bill's is open year-round with over 200 booth spaces under cover. They claim to be one of the biggest attractions in Western North Carolina (Uncle Bill's Flea Market). During a weekend in April, I spent three days managing a reception-based exhibition at a gallery I created under the tents and concrete pad floor of the flea market. (Fig. 15) My intent was to question the gallery culture and the expectations of display, with a dose of humor. I wanted the opening to be accessible and playful, bringing in a wider community to the show by using advertising more typical of a gallery show and offering sweet tea and boiled peanuts as analogues to the more typical wine and cheese.

This included creating signage and an artist statement, fresh flowers, and a black-table

Figure 15: Exhibition View with Rooster. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission

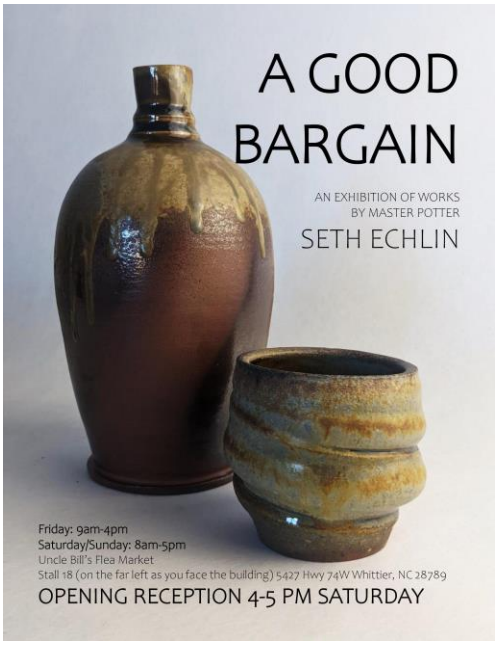

Figure 16: *A Good Bargain*. Installation Announcement 2022.

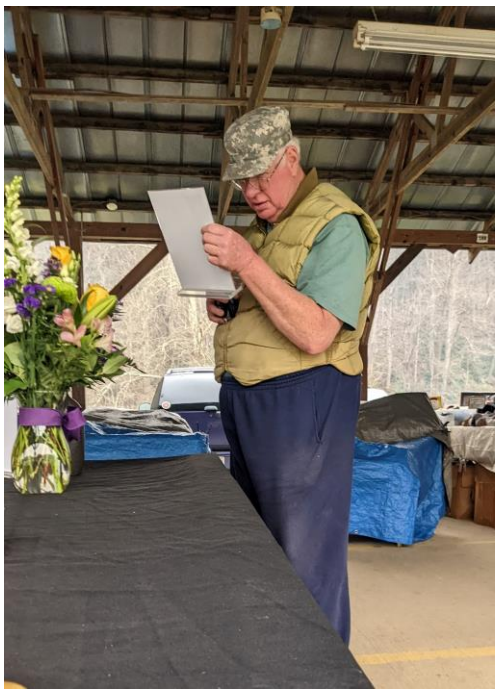
Figure 17: Exhibition View with Man Reading. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission

cloth reception area with free sparkling cider and ouer-d'oeuvres. (Fig. 16) The pottery I have made in the last three years was set in amongst the real-life debris from moving into the next phase of my life. The pieces on the pedestals were selected by their existence at the intersection of these two overwhelming categories of objects in my life right now. In some ways this is random, but so is the assortment of objects in a thrift store. It's important to me that this element stayed in the work. My pots were placed on the pedestals alongside paperbacks and factory-made mugs. (These mugs had been refired in a wood kiln as a part of a project that I had done during my first year, but which had remained surprisingly unaffected by this process.) I put price tags on these that were randomly determined—a woodfired vase sold for fifteen cents whereas an ash-filled china mug was listed at thousands of dollars.

I estimate that five hundred people saw my work over the course of three days. I interacted with about a hundred of these (Fig. 17-21). In addition to many puzzling looks, I observed people picking up my food serving bowls in the expectation that they

Fig 21: *A Good Bargain*. Installation view. 2022. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission

were for sale. Almost no one handled the items on the pedestals, although many did stop to look curiously at them or to read my statement. There was a very clear sense of anything-goes acceptance for the prices I had set and of my presence there, although I didn't sell anything to the public. I also spent time with the people running the booths around me, who were welcoming, hearing their life stories and offering advice on how to improve my sales. (Fig. 22) Many of them shared that they were disabled or retired and that selling at the flea market was just as important of a social event for them as it was a source of income. In response to this feedback on the last day I brought in my wheel and demonstrated throwing cups. (Fig.23) This did bring in quite a few people to watch although strong winds sent many people home from the market by the late morning. A key takeaway for me was the comradery and food sharing among a demographic I don't typically encounter in academia. Many of the people who came by for the food I offered seemed as if they may have been genuinely hungry for it, and this stood out to me as a contrast in the gallery, where food is freely given with the expectation that most visitors would have the funds to pay for it, while at the flea market, even the food had a set price.

Figure 18: *A Good Bargain* Installation View with Visitors. 2022. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission


Figure 19: *A Good Bargain* Installation View with Visitors. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission

Figure 20: *A Good Bargain* Installation View with Visitors. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission

Figure 22: Uncle Bill visiting my installation. 2022. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission.

Figure 23: Throwing Demonstrations. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission.

CHAPTER FOUR: THE EXHIBITION AT THE GALLERY

Figure 26*: A Good Bargain*. Installation view. 2022. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission

Figure 27: *A Good Bargain*. Installation view. 2022. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission

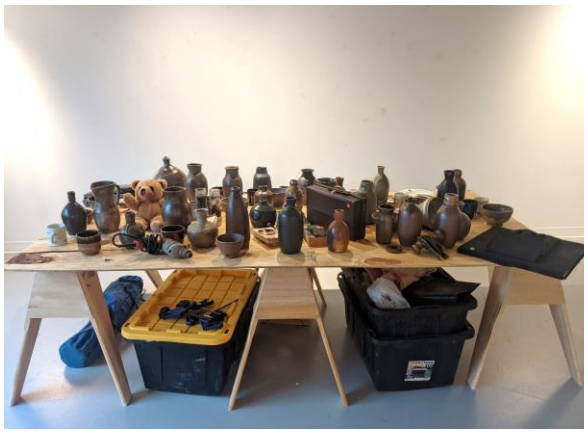

Figure 28: *A Good Bargain*. Installation view. 2022. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission

The second part of this public performance was in a new co-operative gallery space in downtown Sylva, North Carolina. It was the first solo exhibition in a downtown area heavily trafficked with tourists and local visitors. Before the weekend I put up garage sale signs and flyers and made crockpots full of boiled peanuts for sale. (Fig. 24-26) I recreated the aesthetic of the flea market table which is covered by a tarp when the sale isn't active. (Fig. 27) The display space was make-shift plywood on top of sawhorses but lit by gallery lighting. (Fig. 28) The prices were again set randomly and the objects on display changed both days. Sometimes there were more pots and other times more other moving sale objects. I sold ten pots, and interestingly had many people pay closer attention to the objects when they were set

Figure 24: *A Good Bargain* sign. Installation Announcement 2022.

out on the table together because they were curious to see everything that was there. (Fig. 29). People spent equal time looking at my pots and the other objects, which I think partly had to do with the relatively simple pots I had on display and because people have less experience with woodfired pottery. The connections people made with the other objects were often the beginnings of conversations. I observed people pick up and examine the objects which is culturally allowed with pots on a table for sale.

Unfortunately, the exhibition was limited by a surprise snowstorm which meant that less people attended than I expected. I also think it was less effective than it might have been at a different venue, like an art museum. One of the interesting takeaways from this aspect of the project was how difficult it was to locate an art exhibition space for this second part. The question of the appropriateness of having a monetary exchange in a non-profit space and the conversations it generated were an important part of this experience too.

Figure 25: *A Good Bargain* sign. Installation Announcement 2022.

One thing I tried to do at this opening on April 9th was to encourage people to attend my third venue at the WCU Fine Art Museum which held sculptural works on display with other members of my graduating class as a requirement of my thesis. (Fig 29-30.)

Figure 30: Installation view, *Pseudotsuga menziesii 3' x 4' x 6'* Partially fired clay reforming decayed sections of kiln dried logs, WCU Museum of Fine Art, 2022. Photo courtesy of Heather Mae Erickson, used with permission

Figure 31: detail, *Pseudotsuga menziesii 3' x 4' x 6'* Partially fired clay reforming decayed sections of kiln dried logs, WCU Museum of Fine Art, 2022. Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission

CONCLUSION

This performance project looked at the social and microeconomic art market value especially in comparing hand-made ceramics to items that are not. It's ironic that objects that have less utilitarian value often have more monetary value. In that sense, it can be easier to make a sculpture than a good functioning pot because there are no shared objective criteria for art, but everyone can tell if you've made a teapot that leaks. It's a different context.

Putting pedestals in the space of the flea market changed the space and how people spent time in it. Putting a table full of junk in the gallery space made people question if they were in the right place. The visitors didn't understand immediately how to navigate. They stopped and slowed down. That was the most successful part of this event. It really highlighted the shared unconscious expectations of commercial, institutional, and public space and how we internalize those past experiences, for example not touching art on pedestals, but being willing to pick up work from a table. Or when to expect free food and when you have to pay. The place where art is experienced influences how that art is perceived. Obviously, since I didn't sell everything, the prices I set did not line up with what other people expected or perceived as appropriate. As a young potter, almost every pot I owned from people I admired were 'seconds', lower-priced work that didn't

measure up to the maker's high standards. I valued the tiny flaws, off-centered handles, out of round rims, and small glaze faults because I understand this as a part of a ceramic artist's identity and history. I didn't expect perfection, I expected and wanted connection. Most of the people who bought something from this exhibition I already knew, which reinforces that pottery, whether it's in the gallery or the flea market, is built on relationships. In this project, I interacted and formed connections with a very diverse group of people. There were all over the map in terms of politics, level of education, life experience, socioeconomics, but we could talk about pottery. We communicated and had shared positive experiences. I hope that the pots people bought from me go on to have interesting lives. Their new owners will at least have a very unusual story to tell about how they came into their possession.

Figure 29: *A Good Bargain*. Installation view. 2022.
Photo courtesy of Jillian Echlin, used with permission

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