

# ADDING TO THE STORY

*The Work of Martina Lantin*

by Katey Schultz





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1 *Installation of Plates*, 42 in. (1.1 m) in height, earthenware, slips, glazes, 2013. Photo: Kathryn Gremley. 2 Large vase with quatrefoil decoration, 11 in. (28 cm) in height, wheel-thrown and altered earthenware, slip, glaze, 2013. 3 Six-stem flowerbrick, handbuilt and extruded earthenware, slip, glazes, 2013. Photo: Kathryn Gremley.

Ceramic artist Martina Lantin is writing stories. Whether you are sipping from one of her small mugs, serving from a wide-mouthed bowl, or encountering an installation of dinner plates, it's evident that each lip, layer, and line of Lantin's work evolves from a confluence of ideas about function, ornament, and technology. Like the tiny commas and periods that transform sentences into stories, her historically based design features are transformed by graphic presentation, turning everyday objects into components of a larger narrative.

The story Lantin seeks to tell is something she calls the "nostalgia of the future." "While my work refers to the past," Lantin says, "I seek, if possible, to make objects that are deeper than the pop of pattern and color." To achieve that depth, Lantin first looks to the past: early English porcelain and cream ware, Italian Renaissance majolica, and Persian slipware. "I have a copy of a shape book (catalog) from Spode, a company in Stoke-on-Trent, England, from the 18th century, that shows the forms they produced. I used this as a jumping off point and revisit it when I have a block in the studio," Lantin says. Creamy white slip with hues of earthy blues,

reds, greens, and yellows move thinly across the exposed cut on the rim of a bowl, the curve of a handle, or the lip of a pitcher. Beneath this, a chocolate-toned, deep rust clay reveals itself. Across most surfaces, gestural dots, smears, drips, and thick lines hint at objects from nature, some deliberately forming repeated or cropped patterns inspired by historically reoccurring geometric motifs.

Like any good story, there is a crafted structure beneath the surface details, and Lantin is a serious advocate of her earthenware clay body, which she calls "chocolate porcelain." "Historically, the tin glaze and the white slip that advanced in Islamic ceramics were strategies to disguise the rough earthenware body that they had available locally in order to imitate the fine porcelains that were coming from the east," Lantin says. "The history of the material is a big part of the story for me. The earthenware was disguised to look like the valuable and coveted porcelain." Playing with that disguise, Lantin's work relies on technology to mask her chocolate porcelain, while her intentional decision to leave the mark of the handmade forces us to look at what history has deemed more or less valuable art over time.

But Lantin's work is not strictly paying homage. Her historical references offer a respectful nod to the past, as she simultaneously moves forward by presenting her work in provocative installations of call and response. *Family Dinner* features six round, creamy white dinner plates and nine matching snack plates arranged in a geometric pattern against a wall. The wall is covered in hand-screened, bright red wallpaper with alternating deep gray and black circular or triangular patterns. The plates appear to be arranged lengthwise, drawing the eye from top to bottom; while the wallpaper draws the eye left to right. Remove a plate for use, and the pattern is disrupted. Remove another for a guest, and the pattern changes yet again. Swap several plates and create a new geometry, altering the entire experience and setting up the next new encounter for whoever greets the work. The more each piece in the dinner set is used—removed, replaced, re-set—the longer the story of these objects becomes, connecting the threads of the past to the future Lantin is so determined to move toward.

Likewise, in *Hall of Standing*, a set of platters is installed against a backdrop of hand-printed wallpaper featuring silhouettes of human teeth and ghostly, floating silverware to suggest eating. The details of the installation—from floor to ceiling to mantelpiece—are thoroughly considered. Dark lighting casts dramatic shadows,

and deep blues and grays on the walls make the white, wooden table and luster-white slips appear illuminated from within. And yet we are meant to gather there; to celebrate, converse, and find nourishment. *Hall of Standing* is informed by the past, calls us into the present moment, and propels us forward into reaction.

So begins our “nostalgia of the future,” where viewers are moved by history, technology, and design to write the stories of their own futures. Whether *Hall of Standing* makes us feel warmed and invited by its quiet, spacious installation or intimidated by its dark undertones and appearance of “perfect” domesticity, there's no denying the power of the work. According to Lantin, that's her desired impact. “Each gesture—from the making to the installation of a piece—is a component in the story and in that way becomes a part of the narrative...I then imagine the power of the viewer to take the objects further...At a certain point, all of my work aspires to be an object of reflection and reaction.”

Other works by Lantin that are similar in nature include *Rear Wall* and, more recently, *Installation of Plates*, which focus less on mood or stage-setting and more on patterns and repetition. “I was interested how various surface treatments of the same motif would appear over the wide spread of the plates,” Lantin says. While each individual plate functions aesthetically and in terms of





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4 *In the Making: Rear Wall*, 8 ft. (2.4 m) in height, earthenware, toner-resist transfer, slip, glaze, luster, 2009. Photo: Mathieu Léger. 5 Bowl pair, to 6¼ in. (16 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown and altered earthenware. Photo: Kathryn Gremley. 6 Platter with multiple decoration, 11½ in. (29 cm) in length, wheel-thrown and altered earthenware, slip, glaze, 2013. 7 Luster mug and saucer, 4 in. (10 cm) in height, thrown and altered earthenware, slip, glaze, 2011.

use, together the pieces command a different kind of connection. Viewers can't help but compare and contrast, finding repeated lines or colors as they dance between positive and negative space. Of course, the plates are meant to be used...but they're also meant to invite viewers to do what Lantin calls "invade the composition." By selecting one plate over another, taking it home, and adding it to your own collection of varied objects, the story grows. At first glance, we appear active in this experience: we encounter the

work, we react, and we choose one above all the rest (or, perhaps several). But Lantin, who studies phenomenological philosophers such as Martin Heidegger, would say that this is actually the object acting upon us.

Throughout history and time, preferences and biases develop. Patterns repeat and break down. Technology advances and fails. "I'm interested in that history," Lantin says, "the history that lives behind the objects—in the distance—as well as the history



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of an object's own construction...the actions I took in making it, the layers of surface it contains...and the way it may be integrated with what is already in someone's home." As each idea unfolds, so a page is turned; a story advancing, plate by plate.

In 2014, Lantin will show new work in "Art of the Pot" in Austin, Texas. This may include work inspired by her recent research into the movement of motifs and technology between Turkey and Iran during the 14th and 15th centuries.

**8** *Family Dinner*, 8 ft. (2.4 m) installed, hand-screened wallpaper, earthenware, slip, glaze, 2011.

**9–10** *Hall of Standing*, room is 17 ft. (5 m) in length, earthenware, slip, glaze, luster, wood, hand-screened paper, 2011. Installed at the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center, Brattleboro, Vermont.

*Photos 8–10: Jen Morris.*

The use of earthenware, veiled in white slip, is linked to European porcelain mania during the Baroque era—but as it occurred in the Near East. Camouflaging their ruddy earth with an opaque coating—whether with slip or glaze, the potters strove to imitate the fine porcelain that made its way west along the Silk Road. Inspired by this history, both *Family Dinner* and *Hall of Standing* echo the forms and traditions of ornament central to this phenomenon.

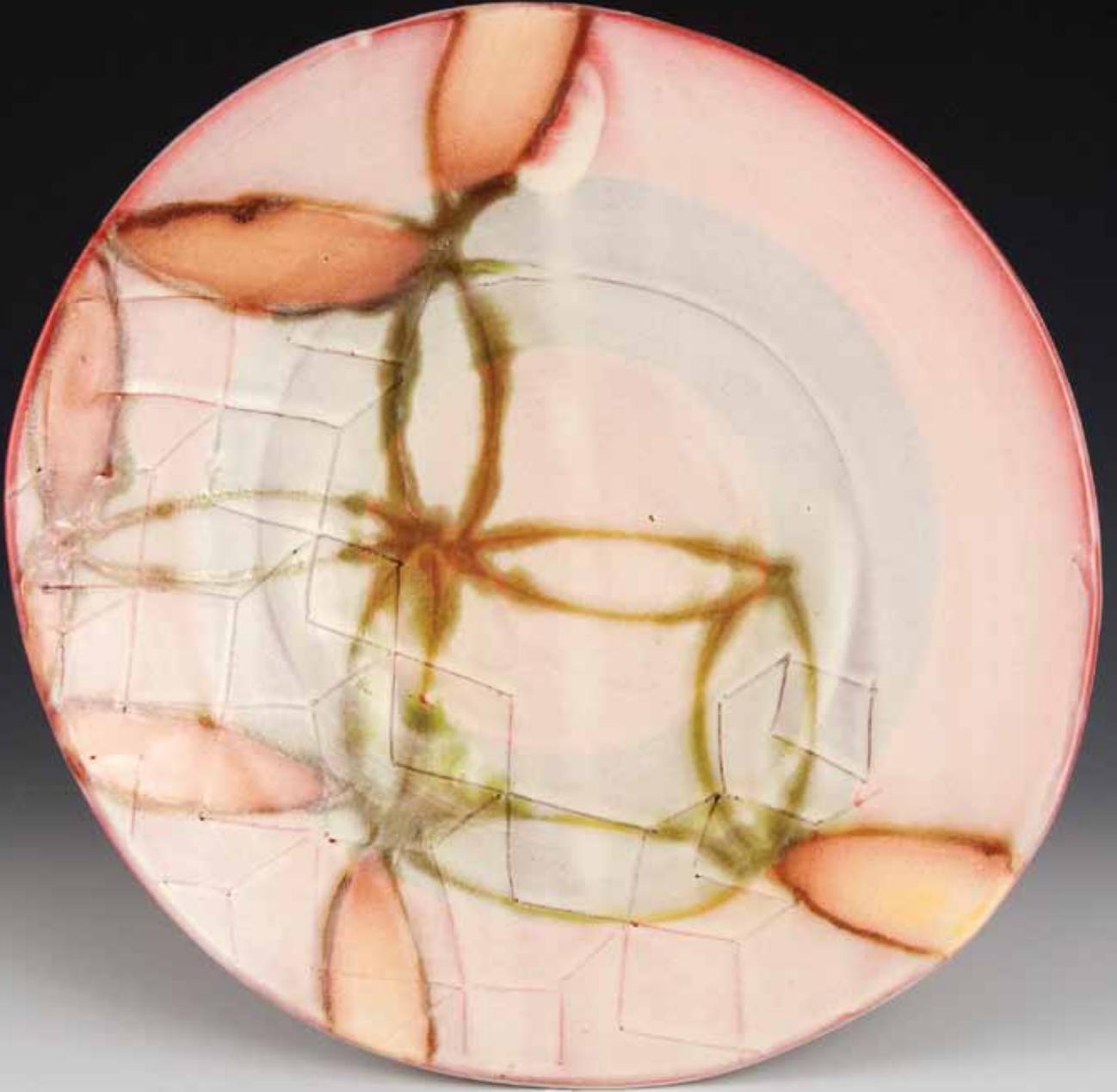
**11** Side plate with blush, 8¼ in. (21 cm) in diameter, wheel-thrown and altered earthenware, slip, glaze, 2103. *Photo: Kathryn Gremley.*



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Lantin has also been short listed for the Raphael Founder's Prize, awarded by the Society for Contemporary Craft in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which includes an exhibition from April 11 until August 23.

*Martina Lantin studied ceramics at NSCAD University in Nova Scotia, Canada and is currently professor of ceramics at Marlboro College in Vermont. Her work has been exhibited at numerous galleries in the US and Canada. In 2014, she will teach a class at the*

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**the author** *Katey Schultz has written over 50 essays featuring artists and their creative processes. Her first book of short stories, *Flashes of War*, was published by Loyola University Maryland in 2013 and recently awarded Book of the Year in Literary Fiction. Learn more about her writing and her services to artists at [www.kateyschultz.com](http://www.kateyschultz.com).*