

A Material World

# JANICE JAKIELSKI'S

## IMPOSSIBLE OBJECTS

by Leigh Taylor Mickelson





1 *Jardinier*, 10 in. (25 cm) in diameter, porcelain. 2 *Sèvres Flower Bowl Book Vase*, 9 in. (23 cm) in height, porcelain, paper binding (left to right showing the form closed to open).

From a young age, Janice Jakielski was taught to use her hands to change the world. And when you look at her exquisite ceramic objects, she will certainly rock your world. For those with an experienced eye, it is not often these days that you can look at a ceramic object and not know how it was made. Through the use of clever content, meticulous detail, and material ambiguity, you are drawn in to closely investigate Jakielski's work. There, while being seduced by what is said and not said, you are challenged by the notion of what clay is and can be.

### Finding Limitless Possibilities

Raised by creative parents in an Amish farming community in rural Pennsylvania, Jakielski and her four siblings spent their days making stuff. With restricted access to TV and gaming and unrestricted access to tools and a barn full of odds and ends, they had to create their own fun. From building inventive slides and traps, embroidering with her grandmother, and hanging drywall with her father, Jakielski explains that her "childhood set the foundation for a love of all materials and the magical transformations that they could undergo." Her journey as a maker has been a wild one: at 15 she set out to be a potter, at 22 a glass blower, then at 27 a textile artist. While pursuing her undergraduate degree at Alfred University, in Alfred, New York, she felt pressure to categorize herself as an artist through her material choices. At the University of Colorado, Boulder, where she earned her master's degree, concept was king, and she had the freedom to choose a medium based on the idea, not the other way around. Now, it's a free for all and Jakielski doesn't

feel the need to define herself as a media-specific artist, but the limitless possibilities of ceramics have captured her attention and her current goal (when she is not beekeeping) is wrapped in the pursuit of excellence in ceramic craftsmanship.

Jakielski's new work goes against everything she learned about clay in her academic training. She was introduced to a new way of thinking about clay through her husband, who is a ceramic engineer at a private ceramic technology company. There, she was offered a residency and explains that she was exposed to "new ways of working with this ancient material. From tape casting to foaming to gelling, my time in the laboratory was truly experimental, each new discovery bringing a wave of possibilities and excitement." She ended up working for a year in this computer-controlled, industrial ceramics facility. It was a whole new world and her definition of ceramics was broadened substantially.

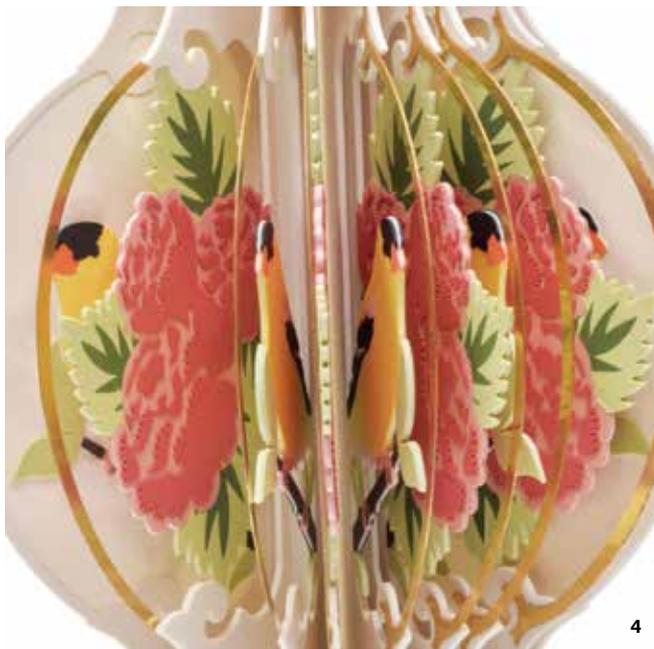
While ceramic gel and tape-casting processes are not accessible to most, as well as being toxic and expensive, Jakielski and her husband worked together to make it a viable material for her studio practice. Jakielski had come full circle, back to the material informing her work. But this time, she was breaking all the clay rules.

### Breaking the Rules and New Materials

The majority of Jakielski's current work utilizes tape-casting techniques. A New England Craft Artist Award through the Society of Arts and Crafts in Boston, as well as a fellowship in 2019 from the Massachusetts Cultural Council enabled her to acquire the unique equipment needed to dive into it: a high-shear mixer



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3 *Bird Cage Book Vase*, 10 in. (25 cm) in height, porcelain, paper binding.  
4 *Bird Cage Book Vase* (detail).

(which mixes beautifully without needing to sieve materials), a tape-casting machine (typically the ones used in industry are 15–30 feet long, but hers is smaller), a rheometer (which checks viscosity of the material), and a ball mill. Basically, colored clay materials are mixed with binders and plasticizers, like Elmer's glue. The clay-glue combination is mixed and then squeezed onto sheets of plastic. It sets up and when Jakielski is ready to use it, she peels off the plastic. It is clay with a paper quality—incredibly flexible and thin—and remains workable over a long period of time. In the firing, the non-clay materials fire out, leaving only the colored porcelain behind. She calls it thin-cast porcelain, and Jakielski and her husband have a patent pending on their unique process.

To work with this new material, Jakielski decided to reacquaint herself with what it is about clay that seduced her in the first place. “I remembered as a teenager lusting after Sèvres and wanted to get back to that original inspiration. I still love pots. I just needed to make pots in a way that suits me. I began a quest for that magical porcelain but have been pushing the boundaries of what that can be.” The forms that she chooses are inspired from historic ceramic sources. Jakielski shares, “I feel a kinship with Sèvres and Meissen as well as the other early-European porcelain factories in their quest for a seemingly impossible porcelain and pursuit of the exquisite object. I also pull inspiration from historic Japanese, Chinese, and Persian wares.” Her objects are instantly recognizable, yet totally reimagined.

### Developing and Designing

Spending a considerable amount of time in the development and design phase before actually getting into the ceramic making, Jakielski visualizes, sketches, and then digitally draws everything on her computer in detail, where she can conceptualize the porcelain layers. Color families are chosen from her vast test-tile collection and laid out to be considered while drawing. She uses maquettes to experiment with scale and will adjust and adjust until everything clicks into place.

“Much of my work is created by stacking layers of thin colored porcelain, so I need to think carefully about how the pieces will be assembled, Jakielski explains. “It’s similar to a printmaking process, starting from the bottom layer of color and working my way to the top.” For the more complex designs, she creates detailed lists of what is happening at each layer so she can refer back to her notes when she is assembling the objects. On the computer, the three-dimensional reference objects are transformed into two dimensions. Using a vinyl cutter to cut the tape-cast material as well as some hand cutting, the objects are made three dimensional again by stacking the thin layers of colored porcelain and positioning them so that each precise cut reveals something new. The work is then assembled and fired to cone 6.

### Objects of Comfort

*Saturation*, one of Jakielski’s more ambitious sliced vessels, utilizes a custom wooden stand to hold a dozen 9-inch-tall, thin, unglazed porcelain sheets upright (each sheet has several layers of colored porcelain cutouts). It was inspired by a Sèvres Medici



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vase originally made at the Vincennes porcelain manufactory. The specific vase she references is now part of the Thiers Collection at the Louvre Museum. From the front, from afar, you see a classic blue-and-yellow vessel with a window revealing a pictorial forest landscape scene. As you draw near, you realize there are layers upon layers of color and information, creating a depth that you cannot usually achieve with flat colors in two dimensions. At its cross section, you see that twelve tiles are spaced evenly apart, with actual and apparent shadows created by color and light mimicking the illusion of form, space, and depth. As a viewer, you are drawn into the forest, into this other world. Janice calls them “objects of comfort; escapist objects to provide focus of retreat in an overwhelming world.” It is astonishing that something so meticulous and technical, so sliced and unreal, can recreate the calm of nostalgia and nature.

Her series *The Collection* provides a similar retreat. They are recreations of familiar objects one might find in your grandmother’s corner cabinet or your favorite decorative arts museum wing—Jasperware bowls, Sèvres teacups, Japanese Hanami bowls, etc. Delicate slices of history made of thin layers of colored porcelain, they are lovingly propped up by a discreet wooden stand. The object’s reference and its material are what connects us to the past, but the way it was made and its exquisite craftsmanship are very right now, if not of the future.



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5-7 *Saturation, Sèvres* (front, back, and detail views), 9 in. (3 cm) in height, porcelain, wood stand.



**A** Artist laboratory where Jakielski processes materials and runs experiments. Anything dirty in the process takes place here: clay mixing, color tests, casting, etc. **B** Studio work table; the rolls are pliable ceramic sheets ready to be cut. Long sheets of porcelain are cut down to size using a cutting mat and fabric roller cutter. **C** The cut shapes of greenware porcelain are sorted by shape—like a puzzle—and assembled using tweezers, a scalpel, and slip. **D** The fired porcelain pages are carefully bound together using a paper binding, PVA glue, and thread. **E** Thin strips of greenware porcelain are rolled, curled, and coddled into a design. **F** The strips are assembled on pieces of foam and held in place with pins using traditional paper-quilling techniques and tools. The quilled components are attached together using slip. After they dry Jakielski removes the pins and carefully slides the piece from the foam onto a kiln shelf.



### Defying Practicality

Jakielski also looked to paper processes, like quilling and book binding, to inform her approach to thin-cast porcelain, using slip to adhere the thin layers of material instead of glue. Her quilled pieces, also recreations of historical objects, defy all notions of practicality. Delicate strips of colored porcelain are twirled like ribbon, bringing brushstrokes to life, creating actual structure while referencing decoration. The result is a blend of the old and the new, a disruption of the familiar, containers without containment, and a whole lot of material ambiguity. These ultra-thin cast porcelain sheets are cut, veneered, twirled, and slotted, manipulated in ways not thought to be possible.

Looking at Jakielski's incredibly fragile and intricate quilled pieces and wondering if you should hold your breath while nearby, you can't help but wonder if she has experienced failure in her process. About failure, she says, "Clay is such a wonderful material, rife with endless opportunities to experience failure. A few years ago, when I first began quilling porcelain, I shipped a very intricate piece to an exhibition. It arrived in a thousand pieces. Absolutely gutting for both me and the poor person tasked with unpacking and informing me. I've learned to build in a much longer packing window before deadlines so that I can troubleshoot and pack/repack before shipping. Time management is not always my strong suit, but since working in such a delicate manner, I've really tightened up my pre-show calendar."

In thin-cast porcelain, Jakielski has found her voice, and for right now, she is not thinking about moving on to something else, which has always been her *modus operandi*. Teaching on and off as an adjunct professor at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Jakielski is a full-time studio artist but has never focused on selling her work as a priority, which has truly given her the freedom to experiment. While this work sells, she doesn't feel loyal to the market and does not have gallery representation. She's not opposed to it but working full time as an artist without the demands of a gallery has its advantages. She pursues grants and fellowships, does demonstrations and lectures, and pre-COVID-19, she and her husband were planning to move to Scotland, where there is a strong design scene. That might have to wait for a little while. What she is interested in right now is creative crossover. Industry in art. Finding influence from other places. A builder of all things no matter where she is, Jakielski will continue to gather skills and material knowledge as an obsession, perfecting her craftsmanship and blending processes as her practice evolves and grows.



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8 Flattened Purple Bowl with Asanoha Pattern, 6 in. (15 cm) in height, porcelain, wood stand. 9, 10 Sliced Meissen Vase with Bird, 8½ in. (22 cm) in height, porcelain, wood stand. Photo: Alan Wiener. Courtesy of Greenwich House Pottery.

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