



# Meredith Host

## Translated Pattern

IT IS THE ROLE OF ART TO SPIN FLAT FACTS INTO THREE-dimensional truths. Meredith Host's intelligent, poignant, complex, funny new work takes what is mundane and renders it profound, transforms the common

into the exceptional. On view at the Belger Crane Yard Studios, Kansas City, Missouri, US between

### *A Review by Tanya Hartman*

1 May and 10 August, 2015, the exhibition, titled *Meredith Host: Translated Pattern* was an exploration of the difference between a design that carries cultural significance and one that we discard as having no importance whatsoever.

Much of the work that one encounters upon entering the airy, open installation of the exhibition is simply beautiful, the pale white

of porcelain plates and tiles made in Jingdezhen, China punctuated by the linear precision of floral underglaze tissue transfers. The opacity and gestural linearity of the transfers contrasts with the glassine and translucent purity of the porcelain. The simplicity of the contrast is visually fulfilling, and certainly sufficient to carry a show, but upon closer examination, pale dot patterns emerge, in a subtle grid that floats just over the transfers' strong presence. The more one looks, the more evident the dot patterns become and, with amazement, the viewer realises that s/he is looking at the patterns that often adorn paper products such as towels, toilet paper and napkins.

Host was born in 1979 and raised in a suburb of Detroit, Michigan. Her parents are still there and run a sand and gravel company, a service that is necessary, but often taken for granted, much like the ubiquitous availability of paper products in our culture. The fact that the artist's newest body of work directs attention towards what is commonly seen but rarely perceived, and the fact that paper products





have a strongly bourgeois nuance, makes me wonder if in some way the choices she has made in the work honour some aspects of her past. Host was a 'typical middle class kid' who lived in a wealthy county. She attended Cranbrook Kingswood for High School (on the campus of Cranbrook Academy of Art), where she experienced excellent ceramics instruction. Though she had been making ceramic art since the age of 10, at Cranbrook the practice became, "something that [she] could not live without", and catalysed her decision to attend The Kansas City Art Institute for college. She earned an MFA from The Ohio State University in 2008, and then returned to Kansas City, where she has been a resident artist at the Belger Crane Yard Studios since 2012.

A historian with whom I work routinely assigns novels to her students, who read them alongside historic texts. She does this to elicit thoughts about the limits of facts and the breadth of art. She believes that the act of imagining can fill in the unknown places in history, creating bridges of feeling and empathy connecting us to our past. Phrased another way, the South African novelist Nadine Gordimer is quoted as having said that, "nothing factual that I write or say will be as truthful as my fiction." Walking through the exhibition *Meredith Host: Translated Pattern*, I am reminded of these words, because in combining hand rolled Chinese porcelain tiles and tableware with the minimal prints found on domestic-use paper products, Host has created objects that speak about complex and emotional subjects in a

*Above, both pages: Dot Dot Floral. 2015. Porcelain with decals.  
1 in. x 27 x 10 ft.*

*Below, both pages: Dot Floral Print Dessert Plates (Details). 2015.  
Porcelain with decals. 1 x 5.75 x 5.75 in/ea.*

serene and poetic idiom. The simple juxtaposition of elements from Chinese ceramics history with the banal omnipresence of Western paper product decoration acts as fact (Chinese ceramics history) in collision with story (that which is often invisible yet glaringly in front of us) allowing us to conjure new meanings about our condition as human beings here on planet earth. What does it mean to eat a meal off of a plate printed in a pattern taken from toilet paper? We interpret eating as being a necessary, biological act elevated by its associations with celebration, community and nutrition while defecation is widely identified as an animal act that is evocative of both shame and decay. Why bring the two together? Yet, how can the two routines ever be separated? All acts of living are continuums along the path to dying. In what appears to be a simple plate with a visually pleasing aesthetic, the artist makes a profound statement about the life cycle and





Above: **Floral Print Vases**. 2015. Porcelain and decals.  
7.25 x 3 x 6 in/ea.

Below: **Meredith Host: Translated Pattern (Overview)**.

its relentless and inclusive momentum. The infinity of the circle of mortality is accentuated by a large installation of plates titled *Dot Dot Floral* displayed in looping patterns taken from a roll of paper towels that dominates the exhibition and, with no delineated boundaries, implies inestimable edges.

The work, however, is also funny. It is absurd to eat from a plate whose pattern evokes the stark reality that ingestion leads to cleaning oneself of filth. One of the tenets of good food is its health benefits and lack of sickening bacteria. Yet, the food from Host's plates would be presented within the cocoon of patterns that we use to obscure the fact that food and fecal matter are linked, as we decorate our paper products to camouflage their true, embarrassing purpose and

associations. Host says, "I think part of using toilet paper and paper towel patterns is that they are not thought of as beautiful. So this show makes us more aware of invisible patterns and overlooked decoration. Before, my work was about attraction and repulsion. This new work has a sense of humour – people find the patterns familiar and now they are eating off of them. Now, I get correspondence from people saying, 'I thought of you in the bathroom today.'"

As I walk through the exhibition, I think that the juxtaposition tells a human story that connects ceramics to the life force Eros and to eating (the plates), to the need for shelter and permanence (the tiles), to greed (mindless consumption exemplified by wanton use of cheap paper products), to death or Thanatos (overuse of our resources and our own defecation and degeneration).

Ideas for the exhibition germinated locally in Missouri and internationally in Jingdezhen, China. The artist had been interested in "overlooked domestic patterns" for some time. When the artist accompanied her boyfriend to clean out his deceased grandfather's house, she found in a kitchen cabinet one roll of paper towels that had been there "for 25 years, the final roll" and she took it and used its floral patterns on the work in this exhibition. Initially, Host had thought that she would use Chinese paper product designs upon work that she produced in China. She had been excited to travel to Jingdezhen, a city renowned for its ceramics history and contemporary ceramics practice, and she was intrigued by the idea that she would conceive pieces that Chinese artisans would fabricate for her. That is how things are done there, and the role of designer would force her to think in new ways. When she arrived in China, however, she realised







*Above: Pattern Variation #3. 2015. Porcelain and decals. 44.5 x 70 x 0.5 in.*

*Below: Pattern Variation #4 (Detail). 2015. Porcelain and decals. 20 x 22 x 0.5 in.*

that Americans have vastly more choices in toilet paper and paper towels than do the Chinese. Where an American supermarket would have shelves and shelves of products, a Chinese market would have few choices, and none were decorated beyond small dotted perforations to increase absorbency. Host was left with questions, such as: why do Americans decorate toilet paper? What does that mean? Are we afraid to admit its true function?" Therefore, the floral transfers in the work reference American "non-essential" patterns while the grids of dots that run over the patterns reference Chinese "non-essential patterns".

Host believes that in taking something disposable and making it permanent, a fleeting cultural moment is caught and made lasting. Her wall tiles, which are based on these "non-essential patterns" read as stunning abstract landscapes. The depth of her use of layering across all works in the exhibition, and the colours that she chooses that range from sepia, reddish brown and deep grey to the most ephemeral of blues and whites, create the blur of landscape and give the images atmospheric depth. Host states that we see "unimportant patterns more than important ones" throughout our lives, and she is interested in using other, overlooked culturally rooted embellishments in her future works.

The questions that this artist poses in this exhibition remind me that the role of art is not always to answer, but simply to inquire. Through the simple means of juxtaposition and appropriation, Host is able to ask profound and important questions, such as what is essential decoration and what is non-essential decoration in a culture, and how do we, as a collective, decide this? She asks how it is possible that we see things everyday, but seldom perceive

them. She asks if in decorating something that essentially does not need embellishment, we reveal a deep-rooted cultural bias against physical facts such as aging and death. And she does this by making objects that are so well conceived and aesthetically appealing that they continuously morph from utilitarian to art and back again, a fitting metaphor for our own lives, which swerve shockingly between the predictable and the profound.

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Tanya Hartman was educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University US. She now teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas and has received numerous awards including two Hall Center Creative Work Fellowships and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate research in Sweden, as well as others. Other honours include a grant from the Puffin Foundation and various teaching awards at Yale University and at the University of Kansas including the TIAA-CREF Award for Excellence in Teaching and an award for outstanding teaching at the graduate level from the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas.

