In 2002, my housemate, a photographer, gave me his old digital camera and showed me how to use some of its basic features. I was immediately hooked and spent all of my spare time photographing local national parks, villages, and industrial areas; stalking my friends and family; and messing around with the images in his editing software. My new hobby provided me with much relief from my job as a contracts manager, which involved long days spent in managing a warehouse filled with box upon box of technical and contractual documents. Photography went a long way in helping to break the tedium.

By 2007, I had been made redundant in my job. Relieved, I decided to test my creative passions by enrolling in a one-year art and design “taster” course. I loved it, and by the end of the year, my tutors suggested that I enroll in a bachelor’s degree program. This was a shock, as I never imagined that art could be anything other than a hobby in my life. Several of my close relatives were exceptionally skilled artisans, and they had never succeeded in pushing their craft beyond a pastime, due to either a lack of professional opportunities or a lack of confidence. I realized that despite my doubts, this was my chance; all I had to do was choose a course and give it my best shot. I had found that I really enjoyed working with my hands, so I didn’t pursue photography or graphic design. Instead, I decided to keep my options open, so I secured an interview for a pro-program that would result in a B.A. in applied arts. To my delight, I was offered a place and spent the following two years knee-deep in clay, wood, metal, plastic, and textiles.

While I enjoyed working in a mixed-media environment, I soon realized that I was drawn more to ceramics. So, in 2010, I transferred into the second year of a ceramics program at a different university, Cardiff School of Art and Design (CSAD) in Wales, England. Photography and graphic design were still taking a back seat, being activities I did to unwind and relax. I had previously been discouraged from using them in favor of more traditional techniques, such as drawing and painting. To my excitement, however, CSAD maintained an open-minded view of idea development, and over the course of the following year, my sketchbook blossomed into a prolific mass of photographs, edited images, and designs. Although clay and digital imaging didn’t mesh materially, I thoroughly enjoyed working with all these techniques and felt extremely liberated.

**TIME CONSTRUCTS: COMBINING CERAMICS, PHOTOGRAPHY AND GRAPHIC DESIGN**

by Joanne Barlow
By my graduation year, I was becoming more attuned to what made me tick conceptually. I have always been interested in people: how others go about their lives, why we are the way we are. I wanted to find a way of telling people’s stories, of expressing their culture and history. Whose story could I tell? I originate from a small former coal mining village in the East Midlands, England. The area was decimated by the loss of this industry throughout the 1980s, and no replacement has been found for the jobs that were lost. I felt that there was a wealth of cultural history to explore here and that this could be something I could really get my teeth into. Still, there were many often-conflicting issues and opinions to consider. How do you reflect the past, present, evolution, tradition, modernity, industry, domesticity, interior, and exterior all at the same time? How can you convey possibly esoteric messages in a way that a wider audience can understand?

A combination of ceramics and photography offered the perfect solutions. Since their inception, both have been used to make social statements. Each medium carries its own innate connotations, such as the sense of nostalgia that is derived from photographs and the domestic associations that can be made with pottery. I realized that despite their apparent differences, ceramics and photography had one thing in common: their ability to record. From site-specific casts – material impressions of cultural artifacts – and documentary photography, I could create numerous physical and digital records and then use those records to tell stories and evoke memories. Time itself, for example, could be layered, recorded in a ceramic object during its creation by subjecting the clay to such techniques as soda firing, whereby the path of the vapor, the events of the firing, would be etched into the clay’s surface. These subtle traces of time could be used along with the more obvious clues that photography offers. As I finished up my undergraduate work, I realized that far from being sidelines, photography and graphic design were now pivotal parts of my practice. Photography, through the use of digital ceramic transfers, was providing a contrasting visual language to that of the clay, and photographs resulting from redocumentation in both the studio and back at home had now become as important as the ceramic artifacts themselves. Graphic design had become a translation tool that allowed me to break down esoteric messages, records, and techniques into a palette of more digestible symbolic images, enabling the jigsaw pieces to be put together.

As a tentative new artist, I have found these insights and developments to be invaluable. I realize that I owe a great deal to the marriage of my so-called hobbies. By using all of the tools that I have available to me, not just medium-specific or traditional techniques and approaches, a new light has been cast on my creative practice. I am able to combine a wealth of associations in my pieces: the symbolic nature of a house for a form, the industrial connotations of soda firing, the domestic interior feeling of a blanket-like texture, the industrial feeling of a photograph depicting rusted, corrugated iron siding. I am able to challenge how my work is perceived, by comparing it to the way ceramics is traditionally seen and by manipulating its context and placement. By exhibiting pieces in pairs – in a large installation, at an industrial site, or in a domestic interior – concepts can be altered or reinforced. By taking advantage of my works’ inherent diversity, I have been able to exhibit and sell my ceramic pieces in a mixture of ceramic, design, fine art, historical, social, and industrial spaces. I feel that there is much scope for exploration and plan to investigate further the combined potentials of ceramics, photography, and graphic design.