

Self-Confrontation In Clay

by

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A Report Submitted to the Lamar Dodd School of Art of the University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2023

## Introduction

As an artist who primarily works with clay, I am often asked what drew me to this medium and keeps me committed to it. Looking back on my early education, I was a student who was into observing nature and feeling tactile activity. However, this explanation fails to capture the full story of my passion for ceramics.

In high school, I found myself contemplating what would truly make me happy and decided to take a year off to pursue my artistic interests. This decision led me to attend Korea Ceramic Arts High School, where I was able to immerse myself in the beauty of ceramics and discover the humility that comes from working with clay. What I learned most in the school is that clay embodies the culture and history of our ancestors and serves as a reflection of our lives, more than just a material to manipulate.

As Herbert Read once said, "Judge the art of a country, judge the fineness of its sensibility, by its pottery; it is a sure touchstone. Pottery is pure art; it is art freed from any imitative intention. Pottery is plastic art in its most abstract essence."<sup>1</sup> By exploring the significance of pottery and ceramics as an art form, we can gain insight into a country's culture, the lives of its people, and the level of artistry.

Overall, my thesis seeks to explore the concept of self-confrontation by communicating with clay and how this process can allow us to engage with ourselves on a deeper level. Through this exploration, I hope to shed light on the transformative power of working with clay and the ways in which it can enrich our lives.

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>1</sup> Read, *The Meaning of Art*, 13

As I look back on my journey with ceramics, I realize that it has always been an ongoing search for an answer to the question of why I pursue this art form. Despite being exposed to the ceramics environment and field in my early years, I continued to grapple with this question by learning traditional craft skills and lessons from the artisans living near my school. While learning a multitude of clay techniques and studying the medium's long historical movement, I still could not find a satisfying answer. It was not until I had several apprenticeships under ceramicists and artists that I began to gain a deeper understanding of my own artistic vision.

Through these apprenticeships, I learned the importance of conscientiousness and attitude towards the medium. My teachers emphasized that ceramics is a years-long process that involves endless self-questioning, persistence, and perseverance. Looking back, I realize the significance of these words and the value of self-criticism. To find my own artistic language and push beyond my own limits, I had to let go of my ruleset and technical knowledge and approach ceramics with a beginner's mind, as if I was starting from scratch. This meant breaking the rules that I had set for myself and expanding my horizons.

By doing so, I discovered that ceramics can be more than just visually compelling craft forms, but also a highly versatile and expressive artistic medium. I came to appreciate the unique characteristics of clay, such as its flexibility, malleability, and firing properties, which I had previously overlooked. By revisiting these factors, I was able to utilize the medium to express the various facets of my identity and experiences, including my memories, anxieties, traces, taste, and emotions. For me, creating artwork is not just about producing aesthetically pleasing pieces but also about understanding and expressing myself.

Studying abroad in the United States allowed me to experience and discover another aspect of the art world through working with various ethnicities and assimilating to Western

culture. Participating in open critiques and intercommunication with a plethora of different people opened up new possibilities and challenged me to shift my artistic approaches and transform my body of work.

Throughout my journey with ceramics, I have spent countless hours in the studio, communicating with clay and engaging in self-reflection to cultivate myself morally and spiritually. By persisting through the challenges and staying true to my artistic vision, I continue to grow as an artist and further develop my own artistic language.

### My Early Studio Practice

Before joining UGA, I experienced the pandemic as a foreigner. All of my classes were canceled, and even my studio art classes prohibited me from retrieving my incomplete works which were left behind in Arizona. While getting used to wearing a mask and adjusting to online classes, I enjoyed spending most of my days in the studio working with clay. As a result, my interest naturally shifted towards everyday objects and products we use in our daily lives. I found that we can discover someone's taste by the everyday objects they like and frequently use. This idea led me to look at 'still life' paintings and 'Chek-ga-do', Korean folk-art, dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. [Plate1] As these still-life works allow us to peek at objects representing the time period, I would like to leave my traces on mundane products with some anecdotes I can share [Plate 2], [Plate 3].



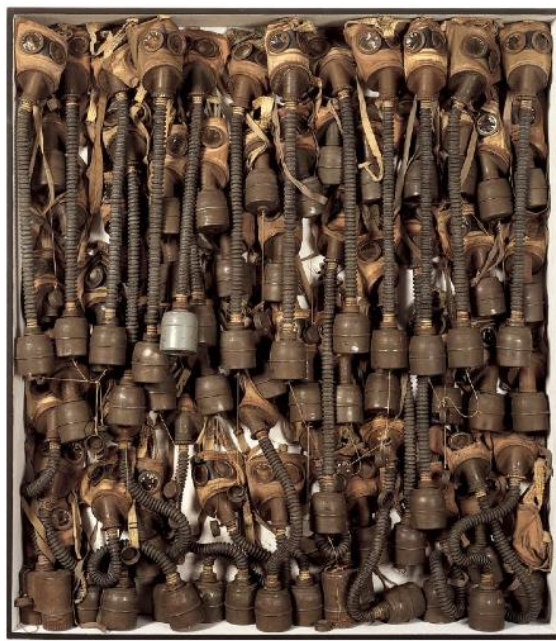
[Plate 1] Chek-ga-do, Unknown, Paper, 19<sup>th</sup> C, 61cm x 38.

To express my fascination with everyday objects, I created "The Life of Us" a series of out of stoneware. I sculpted all of the objects out of clay, leaving my index finger impression on the surface to stress its meaning and memory. I believe that this process is a form of communication between myself and the medium, as a hand-built object bears the maker's distinctive trace. Through this process, I revisited my cultural background, desires, and tastes.



[Plate 2 & 3] The Life of Us, Stoneware, Various stacked clay objects, Glazes, 2020

I was inspired by French-American sculptor Arman (1928-2005), who arranged gas masks found in garbage into a plexiglass box to symbolize the fear of the 20th century after World War II. [Plate 4]. However, my work is not meant to politically pinpoint the dark side of the world but rather to show a person's record such as history and taste to understand myself. My works are personal, but they serve as a mirror to suggest different ways of living in a diverse society, not just a portrait of myself. It is my voice to people who have lost their sense of self.



[Plate 4] Arman, Home Sweet Home, Gas Masks, 1960.

After working on accumulated objects, I began creating a new body of work, focusing on individual objects that capture my memories and evoke forgotten emotions. I formed coils pinched into string like shapes to form each object. Each "pinch" a repetitive mnemonic action that focused both mind and hand of specific memories. It was a therapeutic process that allowed me to revise myself. Sometimes, we overlook what is important to us and what we enjoy due to the busyness of our lives. I wanted to reclaim what I had overlooked by conjuring up my early life and memories, and these pieces are the result of that process. [Plate 5], [Plate 6].



[Plate 5] Entangled Memories, Porcelain, Glaze, 2021 [Plate 6] Entangled Memories, Porcelain, Glaze, 2021

### Self-Confrontation in Clay

After conducting my own research, my interest has shifted to how artists express their emotions in various situations and lived experiences. Expressionistic art may no longer be appealing discourse since many of the greatest and others have explored and addressed in the past. Nevertheless, artists are still curious about what they had yet to reach and explore before even someone had already achieved attainments. Although clay is a traditional art medium that has been considered as most craft and secondary material for modeling sculptures to artists, I

wanted to utilize clay as a tool that enlivens my voice and emotions. I am interested in how I can externalize my inner emotions using clay, which I have come to realize is unique due to its flexibility, malleability, and the effect of firing, making it the perfect medium to immediately translate the maker's trace.

The keywords for my abstract sculpture, which contains my emotions and memories, are "Daily Journal" and "Introspection." As my research focuses on myself as a reflection and portrait that can mirror people, I have decided to investigate my daily life by writing a journal and introspecting on my day. By expressing how I feel about a certain memory or day in my journal, I am able to create a research paper of who I am, and I use this information to fabricate sculptures. I not only practice this habit as a means to understand myself but also to become a better person than I was yesterday, as introspection through journaling helps me cultivate myself spiritually and morally.

The process of forming and composing structures and contents for my artwork is always thought-provoking. To allusively imply and convey a motion of written emotion, I have developed a variety of exterior compositions such as glaze and slip as a unique language of ceramics. While shivering, blistering, and crawling are known for being glaze defects, I utilize these imperfections to characterize emotions.

Many ceramicists have taken a rebellious stance by flipping traditional ceramic conventions and exploring whether what they have learned can be the next answer in ceramics art. As a ceramicist who has learned ceramics deeply rooted in tradition, it was almost unbearable to let go of my established skills; I tend to fabricate visually and functionally simple shapes of pottery with traditional decoration and historical glazes that have been familiar to me. From my experience and schooling, I learned what clay body fit in a certain glaze and technique,



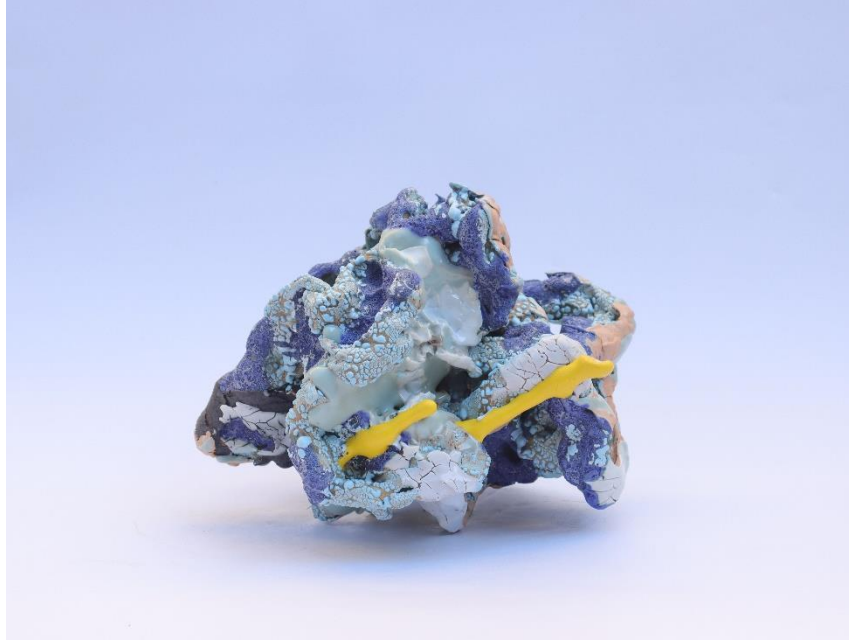
which set me a limitation to having a new idea. However, to break free from my established methods, I decided to exclude an ingrained mindset and tendency from my early schooling that I unconsciously formed regarding the vessel and container as preeminent ceramic form. I refrained from creating containers as the concept of 'containment' has been a dominant feature and component of my work, and I often found myself unconsciously forming containers. What it means is trying not to make stable structures that feature the function of 'containing,' 'covering,' and 'supporting'<sup>2</sup> because potters have adopted this rule for their works to survive in the kiln safely. [Plate 7] Creating non-container-abstract structures has brought about new perspectives and possibilities for future works. While forming the structures, I often flip and pivot the work, which brings about unexpected viewpoints and tension. This process also allows for the unique manipulation of glaze effects by gravity, which brings about new aesthetic aspects. [Plate 8].



[Plate 7] Minute Records and Lives, Stoneware, Glazes, 2021, 15 x 18 x 17"

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<sup>2</sup> Risatti. A Theory of Craft Function and Aesthetic Expression, 18.



[Plate 8] Squeezing My Anger, Stoneware, Glaze, 2023, 11 x 12 x 13"

The abstract sculpture formed does not contain and cover something anymore and loses its original supporting part, the foot. The work sculpted from a lump of clay directly indicates the pace of time and movement of a maker. Crackle white slip and crumble crawling glaze appeals to tactile stimuli, and the thick yellow glaze drip is whimsical and playful to watch.

### Portraying A Day Through Journals

In my thesis, I draw on my personal experiences and emotions, as documented in my daily journals. These works are inspired by a range of themes, memories, and lived experiences, often capturing moments of regret, longing, and reflection.

*Communication, a language we use,*

*Meant to bring us closer, but it left a bruise,*

*My words to you, like thorns they were,*

*And yours to me, a long-lasting scar.*

*How did we let it come to this?*

*When words meant to bring us together,*

*Now feels like a painful abyss,*

*Leaving wounds that we must endeavor.*

*Our tongues, once used to speak so free,*

*Now feels like a weapon we wield,*

*Hurting each other with every plea,*

*And causing our love to be sealed.*

*But let us not give up on this,*

*For language is a tool we must use,*

*To mend the wounds that we dismiss,*

*And let our love bloom anew.*

*Let us speak with kindness and care,*

*And let our language be a balm,*

*For the wounds that we now must repair,*

*And to bring our love back to calm.*

In the project, I reflect on a situation where my inability to effectively communicate due to language barriers created a rift between myself and a friend. Looking back, I express regret for any hurt that may have been caused and acknowledge the discomfort that lingers from this experience. As an artist with more ceramics and art field experience, I wanted to convey my concerns to my friend, but the language I spoke at the time was not enough to express my sincere words. I regretted what I said and wished I could have done better to communicate with them. To convey this feeling of incompleteness, I created a structure using stacked slabs that represents my regretful thoughts. The crumpled and perforated body of work symbolizes my incomplete language and the limitations it has placed on my ability to convey my true intentions.

Through the use of reddish-orange and moss-green colors, I aimed to present my apology and guilt. However, the fact that language can be a thorn that causes discomfort and misunderstanding is also represented in the white-off prickles that appear in work. The work serves as a reflection on the complexities of communication and the limitations of language; it invites the viewer to contemplate the impact of language barriers on relationships.



[Plate 9] I did not mean it, but Fuck your feeling, 2022, Stoneware, Glazes, 16" x 13" x 20"

*Fragile, oh how my soul is frail*

*Easily swayed by the world's harsh gale*

*Arrows aimed at my weakest parts*

*Leaving wounds deep in my heart*

*Overly imagining past situations*

*My mind's endless self-criticism*

*A burden heavy, oh so deep*

*Dragging me down into the abyss, so steep*

*Mentally weak, I must confess*

*My spirit longing for peacefulness*

*A strength I seek, to rise above*

*And bask in the light of self-love.*

In another entry [Plate 10], I discuss a period of depression that left me feeling emotionally fragile and unable to create. However, this experience ultimately allowed me to approach my art with a fresh perspective and new ideas.

The sculpture portrays a body that appears to be in a state of physical instability. Its form has shrunk and contracted, creating a large gap that resembles a wound. The skin, which has not fully healed, is scattered unevenly across the body. The shape of the sculpture, which was originally intended to enclose and protect the vulnerable body, has been rendered ineffective by the pock-marked traces left on its surface. The tangled, whitish skin that covers the sculpture is sharp and jagged, giving the impression that it could inflict a cut. One striking element of the sculpture is the trail of cobalt blue tears and puddles that appear to be washing away the troubles of the figure. The tears serve as a poignant reminder of the emotional pain that can accompany physical vulnerability. Overall, the sculpture captures the delicate balance between strength and fragility in the human body and invites the viewer to reflect on the complex interplay between physical and emotional pain.



[Plate 10] I Realized How Fragile I Am, 2022, Stoneware, Glazes, 20" x 15" x 20"

### Confrontations Of Visual Complexity

For my thesis show, I executed sculptural objects that function as a pedestal but in order to interact with the accompanying piece cohesively. [Plate 11] [Plate 12]

By utilizing unconventional pedestals, it loses original meaning and function and brings visual complexity to the main body works. Pedestals are a tool to help viewers only focus on work by maximizing the beauty of the work and adjusting to eye level for most viewers. However, my sculptural pedestals act as another artwork by itself. Contrast and confrontation between the thing underneath and the work on the top manifest visual interest and question the relationship between them.



[Plate 11] Silver lining on Blue Monday, Stoneware, Glazes, 2023

Plates 11 and 12 were created with the intention of exploring the idea of stacking emotions and giving them movement. I sought to express emotional voices in tangible objects that could be visually experienced by the viewer.

Plate 11 consists of countless tubes that are entangled with each other and covered in black and white tones. The tubes support each other to form open spaces that resemble the blood vessels circulating throughout our bodies. This collage of elements creates a visually complex work that reflects different stages of emotion. At the top of the sculpture, the undulated surface is coated with crackle blue slips and features various sizes of negative spaces. To further enhance the dramatic effect, a viscous, yellowish substance flows through the curved lines of the work, adding a powerful visual element to the overall piece. Through the use of these elements, the work lets viewers consider the ways in which emotions can be both interconnected and compartmentalized, and think about the role of visual art in expressing and processing complex emotional experiences.





[Plate 12] Being Cranky Mode, Stoneware, Glazes, 2023

"Being Cranky Mode," Plate 12, is a visual expression of my emotional state on a particular day. The sculpture represents my mood, which was both sharp yet blunt, disorganized yet organized - a complexity of contradictions that I seek to convey through my work. The dark brown tubes that entangle underneath the bodywork provide a stark contrast to the piece's top section. The height of the combined sculptures creates a unique viewing experience that allows the work's space and aura to infuse the atmosphere with eccentric energy. As viewers engage with the sculpture, they are invited to contemplate the tension between the sculpture's opposing elements - the chaos and the structure, the sharpness and the bluntness. This interplay of contrasts speaks to the many nuances of emotional experience and the complex ways in which our inner states manifest in the world around us.

I would want to emphasize that my art is a reflection of my personal experiences and emotions and that I use it as a means of communicating and connecting with others. Through my work, I hope to evoke empathy and understanding in my audience and encourage them to engage with the themes and messages I am exploring. Furthermore, I would want to stress the importance of art as a tool for personal and social transformation. By sharing my struggles and

emotions through my art, I aim to create a space for dialogue and reflection and promote a deeper understanding of the human experience.

Through my journey with ceramics, I have discovered the power of art to transform our lives and enrich our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. By communicating with clay, I have learned to confront my fears, anxieties, and desires, and engage in the important process of self-confrontation. This practice has allowed me to embrace my vulnerabilities, strengths, and unique perspectives, and to express them through the medium of ceramics. As I continue to explore the endless possibilities of this art form, I look forward to discovering new facets of my artistry and to continue growing as an artist. The journey has been challenging, but the rewards of self-discovery and creative expression have been immeasurable, and I am excited to see where my artistic path will take me next.

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