

EXPERIMENTATION AND ARTISTIC GROWTH

By

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Art plays an important role in our culture. Art, in all of its facets, is a unique necessity to everyday life. We all respond to art, consciously or unconsciously, on some primal level. Art in all of its forms makes life worth living and therefore worth saving. I am an artist because I believe being an artist is not a job or a career but a calling that one cannot resist. Art will always be a fundamental aspect of my life and a part of my purpose and identity. For my thesis I would like to discuss my personal artistic growth. All of which enabled me to create the body of work that I presented at the Master of Fine Art Show at the Lamar Dodd School of Art on March 25th, 2011.

To begin the investigation of my ceramic thesis work, I would like to analyze important aspects of my life that shaped my artistic decisions. Like everyone else, I feel my background and earlier influences created artistic epiphanies. Much of my resolve to create the work that was presented at my MFA show was directly influenced by specific choices I made during my three years learning and teaching at the University of Georgia. Due to my experimental approach to graduate school, I have grown exponentially as an artist and person.

My background is similar to my work in that I never have stayed in one place long before moving again. My hometown is Sarasota, Florida where the white sand beaches always calm my soul and the ocean's gentle hugging of the shore sings to my heart. I moved there when I was seven from a cold and dreary small town in Ohio and left again for boarding school when I was fifteen. I lived in Middleburg, Virginia for a year before transferring to a school in Connecticut for high school. Upon acceptance to Southern Methodist University, I moved to Dallas, Texas for four years where I studied abroad in Paris and Copenhagen. Upon graduation I moved back to Tampa, Florida, where I stayed for two years and then found myself in Athens, Georgia, for graduate school.

I have not lived anywhere longer than three years in over a decade and feel very fortunate to have learned about so many different cultures and their people. The character of the land and its people that I encountered during these experiences are always in motion, exploding with color, and constantly changing.

My earliest memory of art, which captured my body and soul, were works by Georgia O'Keeffe and Salvador Dali. My mother placed the images of O'Keeffe's lilies and desert scenes in my bedroom and lithographs of Dali's melting worlds throughout our house. These two artists heavily influenced my

art in three basic ways; merit, creating a world of imagination, and making the mundane utterly beautiful.

I knew at an early age I wanted to pursue art, but I could never draw like Dali or paint like O'Keeffe and was often frustrated with my inability to capture my ideas. Then photography became a new channel of artistic inspiration because it captured the moments that I could not render two-dimensionally and brought to life the world around me that I had not seen. The main source of photography that I admired in my youth was the famous photographers of National Geographic who created inspiring photographs of people and cultures from far lands. The captivating photographs of people and my family's traveling adventures out west and to the Caribbean created a definite desire for me to travel. I wanted to personally witness and learn about new cultures so I could draw upon that to create.

During my artistic development, there were two epiphanies that changed my direction in art. One was my first undergraduate sculpture class where I started working with the three dimensional form. I started to excel in my studies of art and knew then that my strengths would always lie in sculpture. It took three more years for me to realize clay would be the medium where I could best express my ideas and accomplish my goals. The second epiphany was that the best material for me to achieve my standards of technical merit (similar to Dali's realism) was one that was both an additive and subtractive. Clay was the perfect medium.

At this point, I graduated with a B.F.A. in sculpture. But I new I wanted to continue my artistic studies in graduate school. I studied at the University of South Florida in a post baccalaureate program creating a ceramic portfolio. The ceramic department head was John Byrd, whose work I greatly respected for its conceptual footprint in contemporary ceramics. Under his guidance, I learned a great deal of technical skills in ceramics and mixed media. At this time, I started to specifically focus on becoming a figurative ceramic artist. Two years later, I applied to ceramic graduate programs whose faculty helped paved the way for the figure in the contemporary ceramic art world.

Upon arriving at the University of Georgia, I started working in a style that was more expressive. My previous work was influenced by the precision of John Byrd's aesthetics. My new focus was to more fully understand anatomy and conceptually explore the strength and personality of the human form. I started to experiment with different ideas and ceramic techniques, putting more

of myself into my work but still hesitant to completely let go of other people's ideals. I made hybrids between humans and animals often on their own structure that was my approach to eliminate the boring pedestal. It is not until the next semester, when attending elective courses that I started to make work that felt more like mine. This is when I started to replace my ceramic figures with myself and construct ceramic appendages that were related to the animal part of previous ceramic hybrid figures. I started to create small minimal worlds where I would do performances, wearing the ceramic appendages, transforming and uniting myself with the ceramic material to form a new hybrid.

My first approach to this new line of thinking was a large porcelain cat claw that I polished and used mixed media in order to connect its aesthetics to an earlier ceramic hybrid figure. (images 1, 2) I had a small performance in which I put the cat claw on and scratched at wet porcelain, producing three marks. I documented the performance with digital photographs and a grainy video, which received negative critiques. The ceramic piece was an interesting object, and I thought it could stand -alone. My focus was to improve my documentation of these performances. I spent a year experimenting with performance art with digital media such as photography, video, and programming.

I kept making wearable ceramic objects that involved the human form mixed with animal attributes, such as claws, trunks and antlers. (Images 3, 4) In retrospect I was avoiding certain questions, such as why I used clay as a wearable material and how it was related to the performances. Unfortunately, I did not succeed at finding any answers to the core questions and wore myself out by trying to be a good ceramic artist, performer, photographer, stage designer, and video artist.

What I did gain from all this experimentation was my desire to return to the process of clay and how it was a positive daily interaction for my mind and body. I could spend two hours shooting a video and twelve hours editing it. The hours spent in the computer room became more unbearable and my life became unbalanced.

The second realization was the awareness that I needed to stop making hybrids and make art that directly talked about the issues in my life. I wanted to capture intangible concepts like spirituality and inner peace. I personally struggled to find these things in myself. I did not know what I believed in spiritually, so I started to research extensively. I concluded that I believe in light as the origins of all things. It works scientifically as well as spiritually because

light was the beginning of the universe. Light is God. Light is in every atom. Light is in every human.

The first attempt to capture light from within a body was the last hybrid performance. The animal I was fascinated with was the anglerfish that produces its own form of light through a chemical reaction in its body. (image 5) It is located deep in the ocean where light does not penetrate. The fish uses its light to survive by illuminating a small bioluminescent bulb that attracts small fish directly into its fanged mouth, but I wanted the concept of inner light to relate directly to humans in my work. However, I was clueless as to where to begin. I finally understood how to make that connection when I traveled to Italy for the summer and viewed my first religious painting in Rome. Inner light did exist in humans and they were considered holy, spiritual, and saintly. I used the halo to represent inner light in many pieces but found its religious affiliations too strong. (image 6)

The projections of people's personalities, positive and negative auras, became a way for me to communicate my interest. I returned to the construction of ceramic figures and tried to generate specific personalities. I investigated body language, eye placement, color theory, numeric, animal and object symbolism, and metaphors used by current and past artists. The research inspired me to create "To Be Buried in Your White Fur Coat", which references Leonardo de Vinci's "Lady with an Ermine". (image 7,8) This painting depicts the chastity and pureness of this woman by placing a white ermine in her hands. The metaphor being that the white ferret will die and be buried with a white fur coat, pure to the death.

I then created "I Have My Reasons to Judge You". I wanted to create the opposite aura of "To Be Buried in Your White Fur Coat". In this piece, I depict an aggressive woman who displays her negative attitude towards her feathery companion. (image 9) I utilized and played with the body language of the human and placement of the bird. Of interest is the juxtaposition of the angry gesture of the woman (who is unhappy with the animal) but nevertheless allows it to perch on her arm.

These pieces helped me decide how I wanted to render the figures for my thesis work as well as solidify my ideas about projecting negative and positive attitudes. My thesis work included two large ceramic swan boats, one black and one white, which held two women with opposite personal auras. (image 10) The swans were side by side but not facing each other, creating an environment of

duality. Each had their own personal dialogue with an accompanying dog. They were hand built terracotta and white earthenware and glazed at cone 04 with a variety of mixed media from raw clay, river rocks, acrylic eyes, epoxy, epoxy putty, and hard and soft ceramic brick.

The black swan was the first swan boat to be built and depicted a hissing, angry swan that held an angry, sneering woman. Her face is contorted with resentment while her eyes are dark, hollow sockets. It is said that the eyes are "the windows to the soul," and my decision to leave her eyes empty was to suggest the void in her soul. She is engulfed by smooth black river rocks that represent the burden of time that has consumed her body. The rocks are spilling out of the boat and onto the floor. Her body is twisted and covered in cracking clay. She is pointing an accusatory finger as well as casting a stone at the nearby snarling dog. This dog is black and has hands instead of dog ears. It sits atop a pile of stones. One hand is pointing an index figure at the woman while the other hand is signaling her to stop. They are ready to fight, blame, and cast judgments about the one another. Neither wants to take responsibility for their own negative action. The woman, swan, and dog are takers of light. They swallow it and are devoid of any type of love. (image 11, 12, 13)

The white swan boat is larger than the black swan boat and holds a woman kneeling in its sky blue interior. Their gaze is real and direct. The woman extends her hand, offering the viewer a small mirror. This mirror is her gift to those who want to become self aware, by accepting the present moment and loving oneself. Her smile is playful with a small gap between her two front teeth that offer the viewer a glimpse into her own personal beauty. She gazes calmly with beautiful bright eyes that show life, and her braids are arranged decoratively around her head to suggest her warm aura. In front of the white swan there is a three-headed dog that I borrowed from Greek mythology. It is the guardian of the underworld. I like the Greek idea that there is no heaven or hell, top or bottom. I loved the image of the three-headed dog and found my own personal symbolic meaning for the three heads. The dog head perched the highest is the future, while the one in the middle with real eyes that gaze at the viewer symbolizes the present. The head that is looking down with black and white eyes and crumpled ears represents the past. (image 14, 15, 16)

In my three years of graduate studies, I believe I have accomplished many challenging goals in my artistic practices as well as my personal life. I am truly dedicated to making ceramic art and know that my experience at UGA is an

extensive chapter in the book of my artistic career. It has been an amazing learning experience but a hard challenge to find balance. I have faith that the work I created for my thesis show will provide new ideas and opportunities in my future. I am proud of what I have constructed, but I am already aware that I can do better. I believe true artists never stop raising the bar for themselves. After every achievement, I already start to see what is past it. It is also an important goal of mine that the audience has an innate, almost visceral, reaction to my work. This work is a reflection of my intentions, but I also hope it may trigger their own story. In this way, my art is something the viewer might identify with and value. The ability to spark this emotion directly in the viewer and hopefully affect and change their perception of our world is what I strive to achieve in my thesis work.

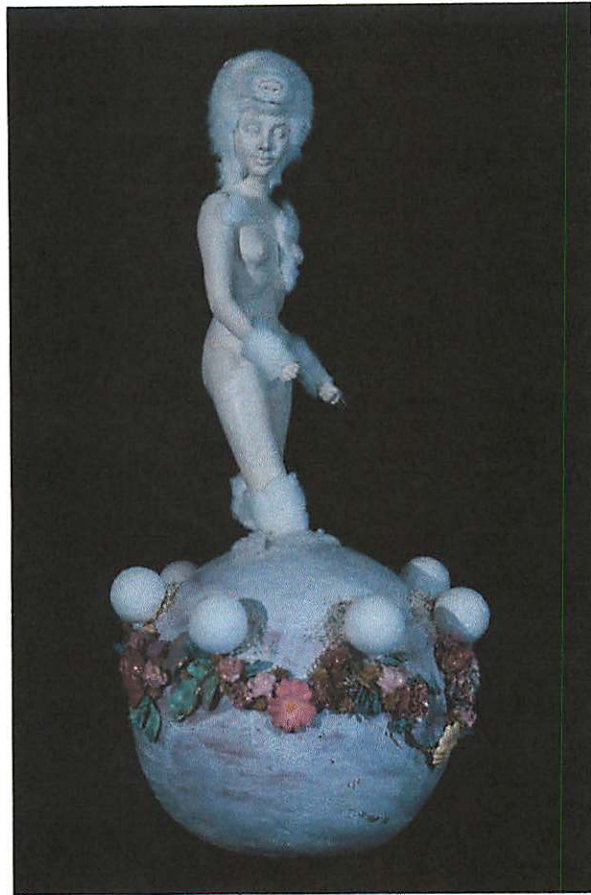


Image 1: Hybrid porcelain piece that influenced first performance

Image 2: Documentation of Claw performance





Image 3: Documentation of Elephant performance piece

Image 4: 30 HR Review with Antler Girls





Image 5: Documentation of Angler Fish performance
Image 6: Documentation of Halo performance



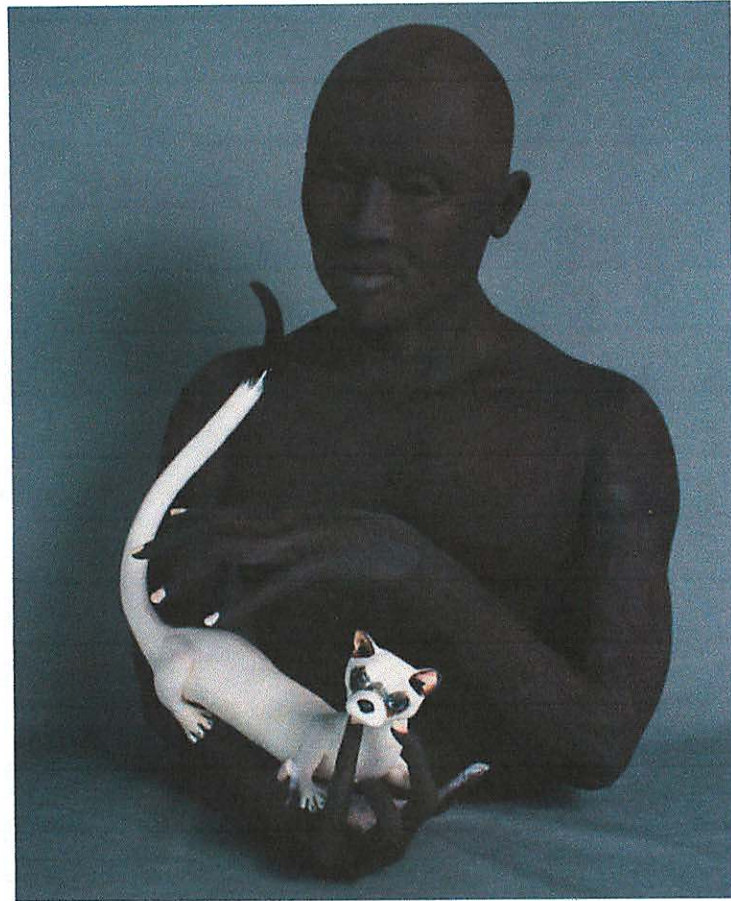


Image 7: "To Be Buried in Your White Fur Coat" 2010

Image 8: Leonardo de Vinci's "Lady with an Ermine"





Image 9: "I Have My Reasons to Judge You"



Image 10: Full Image of Thesis Work Installed



Image 11: Negative Swan, Woman and Dog



Image 12: Detail shot of Negative Dog



Image 13: Detail of Negative woman's face



Image 14: Positive Swan, Woman and Three-Headed Dog



Image 15: Positive Three-Headed Dog



Image 16: Detail of Positive Woman's Face

