

The Hierarchy of the Subconscious

by

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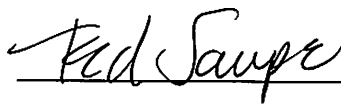
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Approved:



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Date

Most animals, particularly humans, have a learned system of hierarchal order. This learned behavior subsequently becomes a subconscious thought in many instances. When a person is confronted with something that is larger and taller, they instinctively recognize this, and rationalize their relationship to whatever they have encountered. The same can be said for something that is smaller than a person, but the subconscious hierarchical response will differ. As humans, we live our lives in a hierarchical structure system. We rank and rate everything based on what we have learned and experienced in life. These experiences influence our subconscious ideas and thoughts, and guide our conscious activity in everyday life. I find the investigation of hierarchical structures to be fascinating, and it was influential in the presentation of my work at the MFA exhibition.

I was born on May 14, 1970 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. My parents were young; my mother was twenty, and my father was twenty one. My parents became active protesters against the United States involvement in the Vietnam War in the late 1960s when they were in college. My father had quit the Marine Reserves during his junior year at the University of South Carolina, and was considered A.W.O.L. My father's family had been hit hard by the war. Both my father and his brother were drafted, and their brother in-law saw military combat in Vietnam, in which he witnessed the death of his friend, and was injured himself. The Vietnam War affected multiple members of my family, and thus, had a large impact on my young life.

My parents were part of the counter culture movement in the 1970's. We lived in the Mount Airy section of inner city Philadelphia, where my parents worked as social workers. My parents were young, educated, liberal, culturally and socially active. This left a deep impression on me as a child. I was taught to question authority. I was made aware of the social injustices done to ethnic groups such as African Americans and Indigenous Americans, and that not everyone enjoyed the same opportunity and equality. Growing up in inner city Philadelphia, I saw first hand how ethnicity, economics, or where one lived defined a person. Having a hippie childhood in Philadelphia had a dramatic influence on who I am as a adult.

In the 1980s, my parents gradually became more conservative and mainstream. My family, which now included my sister and brother, relocated to suburban Philadelphia. We lived in a huge housing development in which most occupants had children. A large amount of people from the neighborhood were of Italian or Irish heritage that had moved from Philadelphia, or the New York City area. Growing up as a teenager in the suburbs, I had lots of friends. I played sports and got in trouble with these friends. Even though I had many good friends, most of whom I still have contact with today, I found myself discontent with the status quo of the materialistic 1980s. As with many artists, I found myself as a silent observer, and in many ways considered myself an outsider to the conventional thought and ideals of the conservative 1980s in suburban Philadelphia.

As a child, and into my teenage years, I had trouble with school. I was diagnosed with dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, and hypertension disorder. I had trouble reading and writing, and was labeled a discipline problem. My two favorite classes in school were art and gym. I played football, ran track, and played lacrosse in high school. I also took painting and ceramics classes. My high school had a very large and accomplished art department. Many of the kids in my high school art classes fed into the many good art universities around the Philadelphia area. I did not because I was kicked out of high school before graduation my senior year. This may have been the best thing that could have happened to me because it motivated me to prove my teacher's wrong. I proved that I was not a screw up, that I could make it as an artist, and, ironically, as a teacher.

I graduated from the University of South Carolina with a BFA in ceramics and a degree in art education in 1994. I moved to Penland School of Crafts and participated in the Core Student Program in 1996-97. I taught middle and high school art in North Carolina, and numerous workshops to kids and adults. In 2000, I married my long time girlfriend, Andi Steele. We moved to Athens in 2001 and I began graduate school in 2002.

During my three years of graduate school, I have logged extensive hours in the studio. Working in the studio allows me to clear my mind, and to think about life. When I am engaged in a piece, a head for example, I feel that the process of making becomes meditative. The longer I am in the studio, the greater the meditative process.

My work is all about me, and the conversations that I have with myself when I am working in the studio. The best thing about working in the studio is that I can reflect. I sometimes think about current personal issues, or more global issues like the war in Iraq, or some other story I might have heard or read in the news. Most of the time, I think about my life: people that I knew or know, places I have been, the memories that I have about my life. As with anyone, my life contains happiness, sadness, times of triumph, and times of failure. I also think of the future: goals to achieve, life after school. When I start a head, a discourse begins between the work and myself. My ideas or emotions are transcended through the meditative act of making, and are expressed by the heads in different facial expressions.

When I look at a finished head or face I have created, I can tell what kind of mood I was in while making it. Some faces have a look of surprise, others seem to be shouting or talking, but most of them seem to be in a state of contemplation; the same contemplation or reflection I might have had when I made it. There is a conversation that goes on between myself and the face or head I make. The thoughts or feelings that I have are translated directly to the face that I am working on with my hands. I rarely have a clear cut approach to how an expression will be on a face. Rather, it usually just appears when I am building up the face to look recognizable or realistic. The face develops by way of my inner conversation with it, by what it tells me it wants to express.

All of the heads that I make are hand built out of clay. I work with slabs to build the initial shape for bigger faces and heads, and work primarily by adding clay on the form to build up the facial features. I find this method of working to be limiting, in that I cannot work the head from the inside, and that the piece becomes heavy.

For the most part, I make small to medium sized forms that I pinch out in the shape of a head or face. I then push through the back of the form (on the inside of the piece) to start the facial features. After that, I start to add clay to accentuate facial parts, such as the brow, or cheeks.

When adding facial features, I always start with the nose. It allows me to start in the middle center of the face. Once I successfully map out the correct location of the nose, I work on the eyes. I start the eyes by pushing the clay from inside the form to produce eye like forms. I cut through the eyes and push the clay up to create eye lids, and add small balls of clay for eye balls. I then work on the brow and cheeks of the piece. I use the same methods to build the brow and cheeks as I did with the nose or eyes. I push through the back, and add clay to the front . Working this way allows me to achieve more depth in the features of the face. After the brow and cheeks are established, I work on the jaw and chin. When those are in place, I cut into the piece to open up the mouth. I push out the clay to get the mouth, and add clay around the opening for lips. The last feature attached are the ears. I usually start ears by adding a coil over top the jaw muscle. I then build it up with small balls of clay, and eventually carve into it as well. I spend a lot more time on the details of a face or head, than I do on pinching, or building, the form.

Whether I am working on faces that hang from the wall or heads in the round, I build in series. I usually make work in a series of five or ten. This comes from working as a potter, and from the time I spent at Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina. I often considered myself a production head maker when I was working to get ready for the MFA exhibition. I can look at the heads and faces that I made over the past two years, and see a chronology to them, just as I would see a progression in throwing cups on the potters wheel. Working on a large series has enabled me to achieve better results by working and reworking ideas and forms for an extended period of time. Whether using high detail or working more subtly, I can evoke a psychological response from the viewer by using techniques that were developed by the act of repetitive making.

I fire my work in a sagger, within a salt kiln, as many times as it takes to get the desired surface. All of the heads and faces have terra sigallata on the outside of them. Some of the faces that appear crusty and have less detail have glaze under the terra sigallata. These heads I fired six or seven times to achieve the desired result. The heads that have a less tactile surface were fired once, or at the most twice, in a sagger kiln. I estimate that I fired the salt kiln fifteen times before I was satisfied with my work.

Firing in a sagger kiln with terra sigallata speaks directly to the ceramic tradition, particularly to the ceramics of the indigenous people of the Americas: southwestern Native American, Pre-Columbian and Peruvian. The effects from the saw dust in the firing show fire marks on the terra sigallata (Image 4). A face might have different effects or marks on different parts of the face. This leads some viewers to think that the faces have been burnt or charred by fire. In the kiln, the heads have been literally burned or charred, but I do not think of the finished surface in that way. I feel that when I paint the terra sigallata on a face, I put it on knowing the sagger firing will change it into something else, and ultimately something better. The face in the kiln has an interaction with the saw dust and the fire. That interaction is random and beautiful. I have no way of controlling what happens in the kiln, yet I usually like what I see come out of it. The way a head looks after it has been fired is a result of chance and circumstance.

When I look at a face that I have made, and that has been fired in sagger, I look at it as if the face were from my subconscious. The sagger fired terra sigallata surface does not read as skin, but rather separates itself from what we believe to be skin. The surface of the sagger fired heads thus tends to relate more towards non reality, unconsciousness, meditation, and thought.

I consider my heads to be from another reality. They exist as my thoughts and ideas. They are a literal depiction of what I consider to be the voices inside my head; the voice that I hear when I am thinking in the studio, or falling asleep at night. The voices that I hear are from my conscious and subconscious. They are influenced by my experiences of life. I trust the voices that speak to me, because the voices that I hear in

my head are not only my own, but my ancestors and my friends as well. They are any and everything that has an influence on me in my life.

After I hung the wall piece in the gallery for the MFA exhibit, I finally got to see the vast amount of heads that I produced as a whole (Image 2). I had been making heads for the better part of two years. I had not had the chance to see them outside my studio. I knew that I wanted to hang the piece high on the wall to make the viewer look up at the work. I could not figure out how to place the faces on the wall. I came to the conclusion to hang the the faces in a circular shape because the faces were already hanging at or above eye level, and that created a sense of higherarchy between the viewer and the work. It is the same sense one gets when they see large statues or large scale architecture. With this in mind, the large circular shape of assembled faces further enhanced that feeling of hierarchy. The large round shape, high up on the wall reminded me of ornamentation I would see in churches, in train stations, or in museums.

The wall piece changes depending on how close one is to it. The impact is different if the viewer is standing far from the piece as opposed to looking up at it from close proximity. This is similar to the experience of walking into a large church with a huge crucifix hanging above the alter. I wanted the wall piece to command attention by its height and size. From far away, the viewer concentrates on the shape in which the heads are assembled and is less confronted by the faces. When one is closer to the work, the scale and the facial expressions produce a sense of insecurity in the viewer. I feel the closer one gets to the piece, the louder the faces and voices become.

With the floor piece, the sense of higherarchy is reversed because the viewer looks down at the piece (Image 6). I intentionally wanted this piece to be shoved in an innocuous corner (Image 5). This piece is more private. The heads give no sense of grandeur or power. This is because of its size; it is significantly smaller than the wall piece. More importantly it is because the piece sits on the floor. The viewer approaches it, and looks down. It is less threatening and more inviting. This piece refers to the compulsive act of making the heads, and then assembling them. It took over ten hours

to hang the wall piece, it took about ten minutes to stack the floor piece. In both pieces, the arrangement was critical to the overall impression it left on the viewer. The large scale of the wall piece was amplified by the height at which it hung. The piece was confrontational and, no pun intended, in your face. The floor piece was quiet, more reflective and thoughtful. It had a sense of delicacy, and seemed more inviting to the viewer. It was not as intimidating as the wall piece.

I want my work to allude to the subconscious, and for my faces to speak to the viewer. At the same time, it is important for the individual heads to interact with each other and relate as a whole. The placement of the work in a specific space is crucial to achieve the desired effect. This is even more evident when one adds the element of the human figure. These were issues I dealt with when trying to decide how I was going to present my work at the museum.

I looked at artists who dealt with the figure and space, namely Juan Munoz and Antony Gormley. Both of these artists are interested in the figure, the relationship the work has with a particular space, and the relationship between the viewer and the work in that given space. This relationship between the viewer, the space, and the work, was what made me decide to hang the wall piece so high on the wall. By looking up at the work one has already begun to sense that the work is taller than they are. The number of heads and the size of the wall piece reinforces the feeling of the elevated stature of the work. When walking toward the work from any entrance to the Kennedy Gallery, one notices how much the wall piece changes in appearance and consciousness (Image 1). The relation of the work to the space, and how the work interacts with the viewer is an intriguing idea that I will explore further.

I plan to continue to work with clay, and the human body. I am interested in getting a little more design oriented exploring the possibility of repeating shapes and parts through the use of plaster molds to form large scale assemblages. I want to investigate repeating other parts of the body, such as hands or ears.

My work relates to the figurative trend in contemporary art. I am influenced by contemporary ceramic artists such as Robert Arneson and Stephen DeStabler. Arneson

devoted most of his mature work to the representation of the face. He was a master in depicting emotion in his large scale heads. DeStabler's work deals with spirituality. His figures have a presence about them, as if they are from another dimension or consciousness.

I am not only interested in representation of the figure, but with the psychological reaction the piece may or may not receive from the viewer. My work is made out of clay, and then fired in a kiln to achieve its surface. It can be categorized as ceramic if one is inclined to departmentalize art. I consider my work to be a little bit of a throw back in terms of what is going on in the art world today. I am concerned with the actual making of each individual head or face I create, and how that head will relate to every past or future head that I have or will make.

There is a hierarchical system in every aspect of life. Whether it be art, social economics, race, even mundane issues such as what tastes good, or what is most desirable. It was my intention to create a sense of hierarchy between the viewer and my work at the MFA exhibit.

Learned experiences and behaviors become the foundation of ones hierarchical order. Our subconscious guides our conscious thoughts and actions. In many instances our subconscious defines who we are as human beings. Our hierarchical sensibilities define us as people as well. The hierarchical stature changed between the faces in the large piece that hung from the wall and the three dimensional heads that were stacked in a corner on the floor. Reactions to either piece were from a conscious perspective, but originated from a subconscious hierarchical order.



Image 1: Wall Piece, Installation View

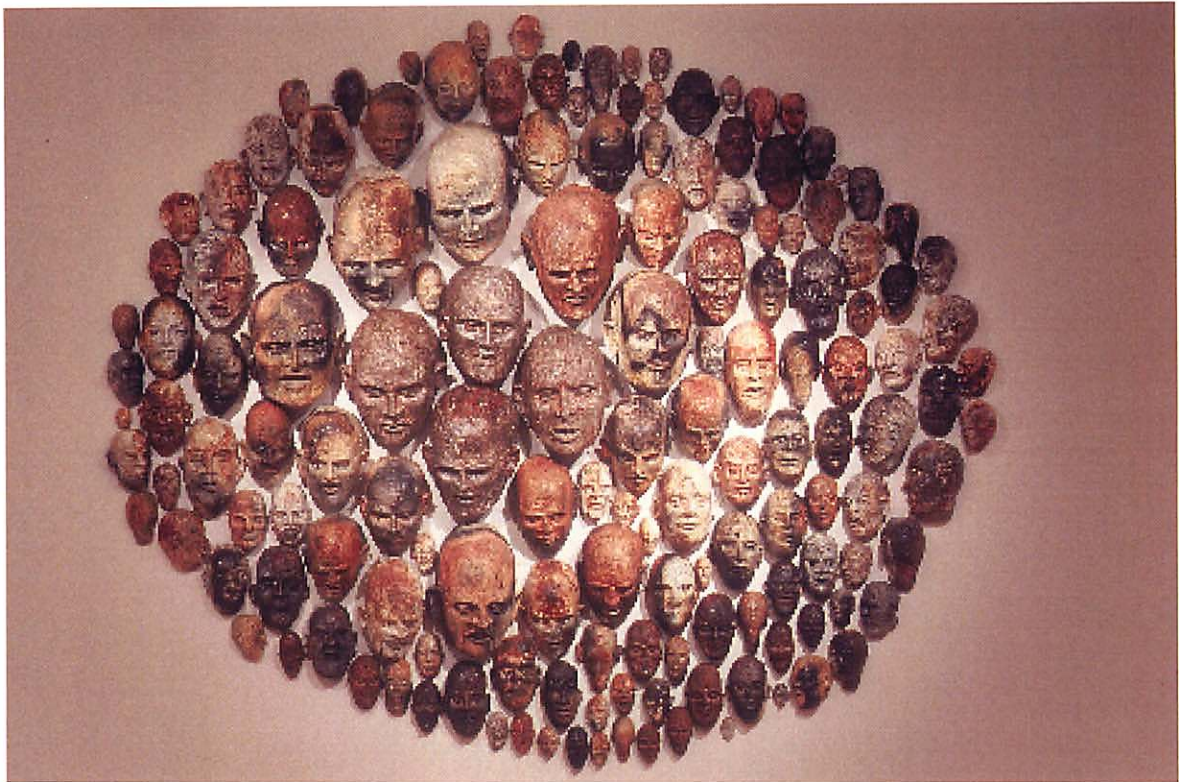


Image 2: Wall Piece, Kennedy Gallery, Georgia Museum of Art, 14'x9'

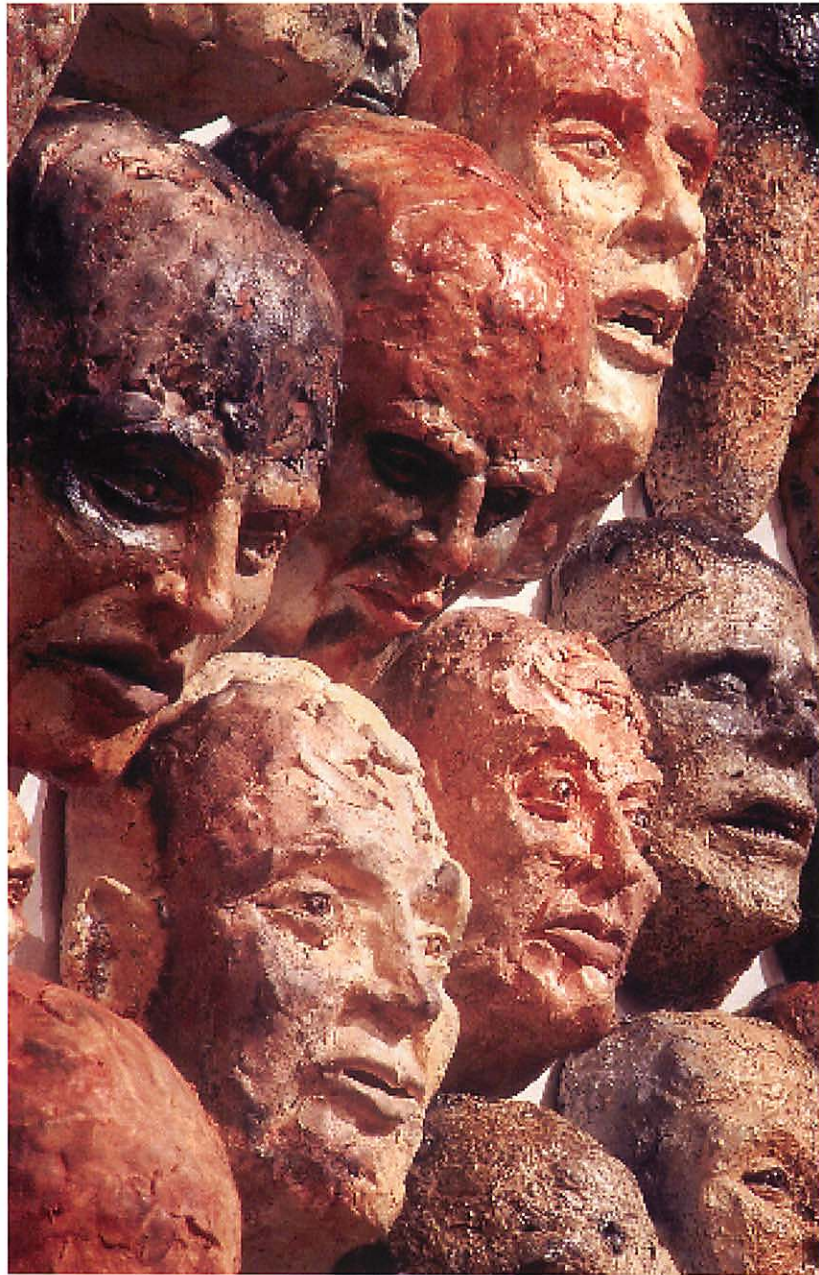


Image 3: Wall Detail



Image 4: Wall Piece Detail



Image 5: Floor Piece, Installation View



Image 6: Floor Piece, Georgia Museum of Art, 36"x21"x14"



Image 7: Floor Piece Detail