

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

There Are Still
Gabrielle Grace Graber

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts, School of Art and Design
Division of Ceramic Art
New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University
Alfred, New York

2017

Gabrielle Grace Graber, MFA

Table of Contents

Opening: Encountering an Introduction / 5

Clay—Form—Body—Figure / 10

Photographs—Fabric / 11

Installation (In the World) / 16

Appendix / 18

Technical Statement / 20

Selected Bibliography / 21

List of Figures / 23

“We as a people say: I and my body. One of the things that separates us from animals is that minute, momentary distance between *I* and *my body*. The body is the form to which we must relate and the vessel that carries us through life. The body is the house of the self, the dwelling of the soul. But the body can also be our burden. I, and my body. In between the two is a gap filled with riddles and secrets, darkness and promise. Out of that gap. Or incision, or wound, grow songs and stories, religion, dreams, and discoveries”.

-Anna-Karin Palm, *The Body and Its Stories*, pg. 20

I

My Body

Opening: Encountering and Introduction

There Are Still

I make these things because they are a release to make. Most people are scared of them. They describe them as haunting. They are aware of them as clay, they relate to the objects as figurative sculptures. For me, these are monuments of my understandings of being here now. Yet I question myself: maybe they are more about my past. They are all naked. I used to be afraid of showing my skin. I went to a Baptist elementary school and even to show a bit of one's back would get you sent to the principal's office. When I would get called down, I was teased and reprimanded. It was publically embarrassing. I wanted to hide my skin.

I think about classical sculpture, and how from the first moment I saw them, they changed the way I made and thought. They embody victory and memory as monuments. People put them in their homes or in public spaces, like in plazas. My figures are staring back at me. They make me aware of how I am in the world, and maybe they help me understand why I distance myself from people in my life. Through making these forms, I am learning to see myself, and where I am in the world – not at the center, but part of a grouping. They show how I live in the world in 2017.

I keep hoping that critiques and conversations will tell me what I'm doing. I am so unsure of myself and what my work is doing. I wish I could step out of my body and observe from a different perspective. When I'm in my own head, even now when I'm writing, I'm editing myself because I'm unsure. And then at the end of the day, I know there's no answer, but I still want to know what the questions are. There are some

questions here in my thesis, but I still can't answer them. Like: "how impossible is the distance between one choice and another?"

My practice is an ongoing investigation of being a body in the world. Layers of experience and interactions collide into material form. The figure invites me to reconcile perceptions and thoughts. The gap between my body and the figure is a window or an opening. My subconscious offers me things about myself, and I am aware of my body: the circumference of my wrist, how my leg muscles squeeze. Even when I'm making work about other people and their stories, my body is involved. I hear conversations, sometimes more than once, and I put fragments together. I try to not assume, but I take experiences and retell them in my context now.

Cygnus (see fig. 1)

The clay figure on the floor of my studio separates from itself. One part folds over and the other stretches upward. The folding figure squeezes her legs to her chest as tight as she can to protect herself from the unknown sound. It ricochets inside her bones



Fig. 1. Gabrielle Graber, *Cygnus*, 2017, Stoneware, 58.5" x 34" x 56"

and rises in volume as though it's coming closer to her. This position is her way of preparing for whatever may appear out of the darkness that surrounds her. The figure that emerges from this fold is a fallen being, one that has broken its wings on its way down. Bent over, mangled and vulnerable. The leg of this figure bends into a swan, the

Cygnus constellation which I see every year. Its neck dives back into the water to collect the pieces from the separation. Shinji Moon writes about “the soft, cluttered breath of a child who held too many broken things inside of her” (p. 57). This breath is what the silk photograph represents in this piece.

What is the gap between these two bodies? The gap is a gut feeling between going and coming; it is liminal space. It is indecision: what I should do when someone or something is pulling me one-way and another is wanting me to stay. Pulled, stretched, and torn between the two. How impossible is the distance between one choice and another?

My forms grow out of an intuitive process of making where a mass of clay is physically pushed, pulled, and manipulated, and something beyond spoken language appears in a visual language of marks that designate space. At times, the form is generated consciously by personal experience, memories, dreams or grief.

In his play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, Tom Stoppard wrote: “death is not anything...death is not...it’s the absence of presence, nothing more...the endless time of never coming back...a gap you cannot see and when the window blows through it, it makes no sound” (p. 51).

In Between the Whispers

Absence and presence, transparency and density, two-dimensional and three-dimensional space – in my installation *In Between the Whispers*, the lightness of the fabric and the image on it become a breath next to the solidity of the figurative ceramic sculptures and create a resonance in the space (see fig. 2).



Fig. 1. Gabrielle Graber, *In Between the Whispers*, 2016, Earthenware and Inkjet Printed Silk Organza, dimensions vary

The forms are nude, without clothing, and they represent a fragile being, one that is exposed and vulnerable in contrast to the solidity of the material itself. In the photographic images the subject is present when it comes into focus. In contrast, its ghostly environment appears to be in a state of flux. This turbulence is evidence of someone going or coming. The subtle hints left behind, like the wake after a boat, indicate recent movements. These hints are similar to the marks left behind on the surfaces of the ceramic figures. They show the history, action, and emotion during the making.

Sway Me

Sitting on the edge of Forte Rous—Our feet dangle below. Occasionally we straighten our knees, to point towards the sea with our toes, describing the landscape around us and imagining what it might be like to live in such a place during the winter. Would there be hazy pockets of moisture stuck between the tree lines and frost that might coat the bushes below? It becomes hard to imagine that place as the warmth of the midsummer sun beams down upon us as we share an early lunch.

In *Sway Me*, the faint gesture of a female figure reaches upward with her right arm as the rest of her body comes into focus (see fig. 3). The chair holds the presence of her body. Curling into herself, feet off the ground, and tightly holding a pair of knees to her chest, she balances her weight and sways from left to right. The chair is her foundation, her stability, and becomes a part of her.



Fig. 3. Gabrielle Graber, *Sway Me*, 2016, Digital Photograph

In *Your Body Holds You In Its Arms*, the memory of this movement is translated into clay (see fig. 4). I situate these sculptures and textile photographs in spaces and am



Fig. 4. Gabrielle Graber, *Your Body Holds You In Its Arms*, 2017, Earthenware, 17.5" x 13.5" x 29.5"

able to walk between, to provide a path, an opening large enough to stand in. The translucent textile becomes a metaphor for my experiences the actions and gestures are generated in clay. What is it like to be in the middle of a thought and an action?

Clay—Form—Body—Figure

One of the questions I ask myself each time I un-bag a cold, damp pile of clay is: How can I become—extract a being out of this material?

I make the intangible; my forms offer memories that change with each passing moment. They move farther from my reach and so I dig, scrape, and grasp toward them through the clay. I grab the material—a fistful at a time. I pull, push, smack it around with my forearms and elbows. Violence and aggression are layered into the clay, packing it on top of itself. It embodies my loss and solidifies it in the material.

There is still something missing. How to make the intangible reveal itself more fully? What does cutting begin to reveal? It dissects truth. This is when I cut the sculpture into pieces/parts.

SURFACE

Paint: white—muted, soft. Color where there is feeling—heat—chills

Wax—depth, to preserve

Resin—fake purity

Mending: erasing the connection—the prominence of the gesture of erasing as a means of remaking (I erase detail when rendering the figure in clay also—I pull detail forward and then push it back down where needed—leaving the gesture in the clay).

Color: The use of color in my work is done cautiously. I start applying simple layers of white, cream, pink, gray tones of acrylic paint and gesso. During this layering I step back periodically to observe before continuing. The shape is what carries the meaning, telling me what the finish should be.

Photographs—Fabric

TRANSLUCENCY

The light that passes through the tiny openings in the woven textile brings clarity. Light generates life. Light is how creation myths in religious text brought life. Translucency allows me to see through to where doubt and fear fester. Light is shed, offering views into the darkest corners of the self.

Sometimes I use a headlamp to see down into the forms I am hollowing out. I work to reconcile my perceptions and thoughts as I dig, giving form to the sculpture. I excavate new understandings of weighty experiences buried in my past.

There is a difference when I am looking at you / talking to you if the printed silk is between us. When it is between us, I can still hear you, see you, I know you are here with me, but there is a distance to you. This softness is almost like being in a fog or a daydream. You are there but not fully because between us is a barrier, a dividing of two. I can press my hand up against this textile and make direct contact with what is on the other side. But I cannot touch you in the same way; I cannot be sure of your skin. Tactile perception is muted. If you had goose bumps, or your hair was standing on edge I would not be able to feel it. I would barely be able to see it.

The silk is like glass in how it creates a barrier; translucent between two things. In the space, the silk moves freely, in response to the movement of bodies. Glass falls quickly. Silk falls to the ground slowly, taking its time to grasp the memory of how it was hung. It folds upon itself, into a pile on the floor. What does translucency reveal and conceal?

PORTRAITURE—PHOTOGRAPHS—AUTOBIO—INFLUENCES

Ann Hamilton's 2000 *Reflection Series* are photographs taken from the Venice Biennale where she is photographed through a sheet of glass (see fig. 5). These self-portrait images were shot within a two-hour window of time and each print is titled

according to the time

of day it was taken.

Hamilton stands in

front of a hand

blown/kiln formed

sheet of glass—this

type of glass forming

creates irregular

peaks and valleys in



Fig. 5. Ann Hamilton, *Reflection Series*, 2000, Set of Twelve Inkjet Prints, 46 x 34 in.

the surface of the material and distorts what is seen on the other side. Because these photographs are taken outside during mid-day, the clouds create shadows—blocking the intensity of the sun and shifting the light from sea foam to emerald green on the glass and the resulting photograph. Inside this image, there is a human portrait from the chest to the top of the head of the artist herself. What she might be experiencing emotionally is unclear, due to the amount of distortion created by the glass. Her identity spreads out across the photograph in vertical ripples. These ripples separate her into small islands.

As a child I discovered that I could make a mark with my breath. I wanted to touch it, to leave my signature on the surface not only with the condensation but with my hand, my signature, my name written with my fingerprint. The initial fascination grew to day

trip doodles on the way to the grocery store, grandma's house, the laundromat, etc. The windows of my mother's van were the pages of my first sketchbook.

BODIES OF WATER

Where is the surface? Starting at the center, the ripples of my touch against the surface expand out, becoming softer as they grow across the surface of the water. I blow bubbles



Fig. 6. Gabrielle Graber, *Pool Study 3*, 2017, underwater still image from Hero3 GoPro video

out of my nose; stretching my hands, arms, and legs outward from my core—reaching (see fig. 6). I am weightless and wet. As the ripples widen, my body glides back towards where it initially entered. It's going back to the surface without me

forcing it to. Lungs once again fill with air, the chest rises, face appears on the other side, no longer submerged in blue.

I cannot focus visually on my body in the water; instead, I listen and feel how my limbs push the liquid around. How my body mass feels weightless but it cannot move as fast as it does out of water. It is slowed down, and fluid, like I have become liquid.

Two Oceans Collide (see fig. 6)

Tiny grains of sand fill the gaps between my toes. The smell of salt fills the air as I walk towards you. Each step submerges me closer to you. I am trying to hold onto the sand between my feet. Curling my toes deeply into the sand—I am clinging—afraid of the drift. Inching towards submersion, I let go and become weightlessly suspended—floating. The tide cleans but never forgets you.



Fig. 7. Gabrielle Graber, *Two Oceans Collide*, 2017, underwater still image from Hero3 GoPro video

BEING IN THE CLOUDS

Looking through the small oval window of an airplane. I am going through the clouds with you.

“Oh my god, we are on top of the clouds”, says a child to her mother across the center aisle from my seat. Yes, I thought, we are above these white pockets. As I sat there in the air I reflected on how fast we were moving, seated in this cabin in the sky, moving from one place to another in a three-hour window of time. I can move so fast across the earth but my body is not taking on the same exertion as this machine. I remain seated, with my seat belt fastened, inside this plane.

Standing outside in my yard, I study the build up of frozen water on the tree limbs. The sheer weight of the snow has broken one of the limbs off the crab apple tree—it lay there next to its trunk in the blanket of thick white snow, sinking into the inches of snowfall from the night before, into the frozen earth. Standing there in my long underwear I realize that the landscape is a part of me. The fracture is the broken limb of tree lying next to the tree's body.

TRACING—TRACES (OF MOVEMENT AND PRESENCE)

When someone leaves a space and their smell lingers behind, or the curtain is still moving after a person exits the room, they are leaving traces of their presence. Marks on the clay are traces.

Often I take my transparent drawings out of my sketchbook and hold them up to the light—to a landscape outside. I am layering my drawings, my interpretations of the world up against life in that fleeting moment. I draw on tracing paper to understand reality. I trace to understand, go back over the drawing, layer additional drawings on tracing paper over it and with these layers a new experience arises.

The movement captured in a still image is in transition. In that moment the area is blurred—there are still whispers of the figure.

Installation (In the World)

My inner reality is mostly pictorial and non-linear, floating, transparent, translucent, overlapping, past fragments of my life, sometimes in the realm of myth. The physical world is in front of me. It can be described in words, and engaged with my body. Through installation the whole space becomes activated. My body is in the space and also of the space. The sculptures interrupt the space, as a group. They offer their vulnerability. They are choreographed to confront and tell stories, my stories, in the space. I want the installation to engulf you, to surround you. We are inside it, our bodies moving in the space. Because our bodies are present, we understand the figure, the images, pockets of experience.

I was raised with stories of Moses parting the Red Sea, David killing Goliath with a sling. As a child, I blurred my beliefs and literal understandings of these stories with my experience of reality. The language of ceramics offers a framework for my experiences, being both plastic and distinct. Through ceramics and printed textile, I am investigating the world around me in the hopes that the transparency of one part will help verify the density of the other.

PARTS: LANDSCAPE—NARRATIVE

I move my fingertips across the ridges of my ribcage and become the translator between flesh and material, how the skin stretches and conceals the interior anatomy of muscle and bone. I seek out parts of my self, going beyond anatomical correctness. The sculpture begins to hold the body's mysteries. I build sections intuitively; the process of self-portraiture invites me to discover forms, ideas and emotions through the making. I

see myself in parts. The formation of the self is an act of construction. Construction is the formation of something from smaller parts. It is reconciliation.

Appendix

THESE ARTISTS continue to inspire me:



Fig. 8. Ann Hamilton, *ONE EVERYONE*, in process shot, 2015



Fig. 9. Berlinda de Bruyckere, *Into One-another III, to P.P.P.*, 2010, wax epoxy, iron, wood, glass, 76 x 71 x 33 in.



Fig. 10. Cathy Wilkes, *Untitled*, 2013, installation



Fig. 11. Cecily Brown, *High Society*, 1998, Oil on Linen



Fig. 12. David Altamejd, *UNTITLED 9 (WATCHERS)*, 2014, steel, plaster, burlap, polystyrene, expandable foam
219.7 x 134.6 x 134.6 cm



Fig. 13. Dorothea Tanning, *Rainy Day Canapé*, 1970 Tweed, upholstered wood sofa, wool, Ping-Pong balls, and cardboard, 32 1/4 x 68 1/2 x 43 1/4 in.



Fig. 14. Francesca Woodman, *House #3*, 1976. Gelatin silver print. 12.9 x 16.3 cm.



Fig. 15. Marlene Dumas, *Young Boys*, 1993, Oil on Canvas, 39 1/2 X 118 in

Technical Statement

The armatures I use in constructing ceramic figures consist of steel plumbing parts that are assembled by linking angles and a variety of pipe sizes together (see fig. 16). These parts provide an internal structure of support for the solid mass of clay that will be packed onto it. They are the temporary bones of the work.

The process of creating the human form in clay is a commitment to the figure as a whole being and not only its shell. I work with the heaviness of the wet clay, its plasticity and strength. I create solid and flexed feet to hold the weight of the mass that grows up into thigh muscles. Tense and strong, the form balances the weight of the pelvis and holds up the spine. Each part builds off of where it came from and continues to offer a certain gravity throughout.

During this process I am questioning how the physical



Fig. 16. Building process image

relationship between the material and myself come into being. The figure emerges from a mass of clay, layer by layer, until I reach a moment of clarity in the form. I can then begin to dissect it into parts, hollow, and re-assemble it. This process is a personal catharsis and bears equal weight of importance to the installation as a whole.

The act of opening up a form by cutting the sculpture off the armature into parts. These solid fragments need individual care. Volume enters the work, time is spent with each part—hollowing it out evenly, compressing the dark interior walls. Taking my time to care for these interiors.

Selected Bibliography

Agamben, Giorgio. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy, Kommerell, or On Gesture*, 1999

Campbell, Joseph and Bill Moyer. *The Power of Myth*. HighBridge Company, 1992.

Hamilton, Ann. *Reflection Series*, 2000. NYSCC at Alfred University Electronic Integrated Arts all rights reserved.

Hamilton, Ann, Lynne Cooke, and Karen Kelly. *Ann Hamilton: tropos 1993*. DIA Center for the Arts, 1995.

Moon, Shinji. *The Anatomy of Being*, Lulu.com; Second Edition, 2013.

Palm, Ann-Karin. *The Body and its Stories, Francesca Woodman: On Being an Angel*. Koenig Books, 2016.

Scarry, Elaine. *Dreaming by the Book*. Princeton University Press, 2001.

Schmitt, Jean-Claude. *Fragments for the History of the Human Body Part II: The Ethics of Gesture*. Edited by Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi, Zone, 1989.

Solnit, Rebecca. *The Faraway Nearby*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2014.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*. Duke University Press, 1993.

Stewart, Susan. *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses*. University of Chicago Press, 2001.

Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 90-91.

Vigarello, Georges. *Fragments for the History of the Human Body Part II: The Malleable Clay of the First Years*. Edited by Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, and Nadia Tazi, Zone, 1989.

List of Figures

- Fig. 1 Gabrielle Graber, *Cygnus*, 2017, Stoneware, 58.5" x 34" x 56"
- Fig. 2 Gabrielle Graber *In Between the Whispers*, 2016, Earthenware and inkjet printed silk organza, dimensions vary
- Fig. 3 Gabrielle Graber *Sway Me*, 2017, Digital photograph
- Fig. 4 Gabrielle Graber *Your Body Holds You In Its Arms 2*, 2017, Earthenware, 17.5" x 13.5" x 29.5"
- Fig. 5 Ann Hamilton, *Reflection Series*, 2000, Set of twelve ink jet prints, 46 X 34 in.
- Fig. 6 Gabrielle Graber *Pool Study 3*, 2017, Underwater still image from Hero3 GoPro video
- Fig. 7 Gabrielle Graber *Two Oceans Collide*, 2017, Underwater still image from Hero3 GoPro video
- Fig. 8 Ann Hamilton, *ONE EVERYONE*, In process shot, 2015
- Fig. 9 Berlinde de Bruyckere, *Into One-another III, to P.P.P.*, 2010, Wax epoxy, iron, wood, glass, 76 x 71 x 33 in.
- Fig. 10 Cathy Wilkes, *Untitled*, 2013, Installation
- Fig. 11 Cecily Brown, *High Society*, 1998, Oil on linen
- Fig. 12 David Altmejd, *UNTITLED 9 (WATCHERS)*, 2014, Steel, plaster, burlap, polystyrene, expandable foam, 219.7 x 134.6 x 134.6 cm
- Fig. 13 Dorothea Tanning, *Rainy Day Canapé*, 1970 Tweed, upholstered wood sofa, wool, Ping-Pong balls, and cardboard, 32 1/4 x 68 1/2 x 43 1/4 in.
- Fig. 14 Francesca Woodman, *House #3*, 1976. Gelatin silver print. 12.9 x 16.3 cm.
- Fig. 15 Marlene Dumas, *Young Boys*, 1993, Oil on Canvas, 39 1/2 X 118 in
- Fig. 16 Building process image