Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Tide

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When I observe these works, I interpret them as three-dimensional drawings, or maps of movement. And I ask myself, what moves like this? A bird in flight, or an insect crawling. A fish, in a school of fish in the sea, or a bee dancing directions to a flower.

Do I ever move like this?

Clay is one of the most abundant materials on earth, and it has shaped history and civilization. So how does one ever begin to truly hone in on any manageable portion of that? I think one of the biggest challenges for me as a ceramic artist is staying focused. There is so much history, technical information, and practical hands-on tacit experience working with clay, that I know I'll never be short of challenges in this lifetime. However, it can also be hard to focus on one specific area of such a massive field; there are so many amazing things happening and it's easy to get distracted and jump from one idea or technique to another. There was a profound moment in my first semester at Alfred, where I had an opportunity to explore the permanent collection at the Museum with a colleague. At the conclusion of my visit, walking out of the museum, I had a feeling that anything was possible with ceramic. After several visits, I had to completely re-frame what I knew about clay.

There was also a point in the last couple of years, where a preparatory drawing of a pot, became one of the most interesting parts of my process of making. Drawing quick, gestural, flowing designs, on a white board had all of the energy I could ever want. When i thought about drawing lines in relation to ceramics, the most obvious connection is one of surface decoration, but that never felt like the right choice for my work. I eventually realized that the concepts of pure line and curve, volume and weightlessness, that I searched for in throwing pots could be expressed in a different way. A more economical way, that didn't require the pot at all. It meant I could also work in a way that defied my greatest struggle with clay, that being time.

Perhaps time is the most formidable challenge outside of my studio practice as well. I move so that I may keep moving.

The composition of thrown and assembled parts always brought me the most joy in the studio, but working under the stopwatch of drying clay components, led to hasty decisions, that were irreversible once fired, and often regrettable. By making and firing components separately, I have more time to compose and re-think my choices. The work can exist in an ephemeral form, friction fit and held together by gravity, before being disassembled and reworked. Draw the line, erase the line. Creating form in this way has its own set of challenges, and re-assembling a composition isn't always possible. My intention is to make an object that can be oriented in any direction in space post firing. In the absence of any clear orientation, the objects may simulate floating freely in space or possibly suspended in liquid. The work is often arranged using cantilever and balance to create a fleeting moment in time, utilizing minimal contact with the floor or wall to suggest buoyancy, falling, or ascension. Gravity and small amounts of friction are the sole factors that keep the piece aloft, pulling the components down while holding them together. I produced hundreds of individual components without a definitive idea of what was going to be possible once I started assembling.

Closed line variation with yellow. 3' x 3' x 3'

A mindfulness is required when moving around the objects that comprise this work, a heightened sense of your own physical presence in the space, perhaps blurring the line between excitement and anxiety. Site specific installation influences these feelings based on proximity to the work, something that will be considered in the gallery. Although the objects appears playful, and may in fact gently rock or sway, it is not generally intended to be kinetic or interactive. It is intended to create a sense of atmosphere. It may simultaneously hover gently and unassumingly on the floor, and also rise up quickly to confront the viewer. The scale can be formidable, human sized.

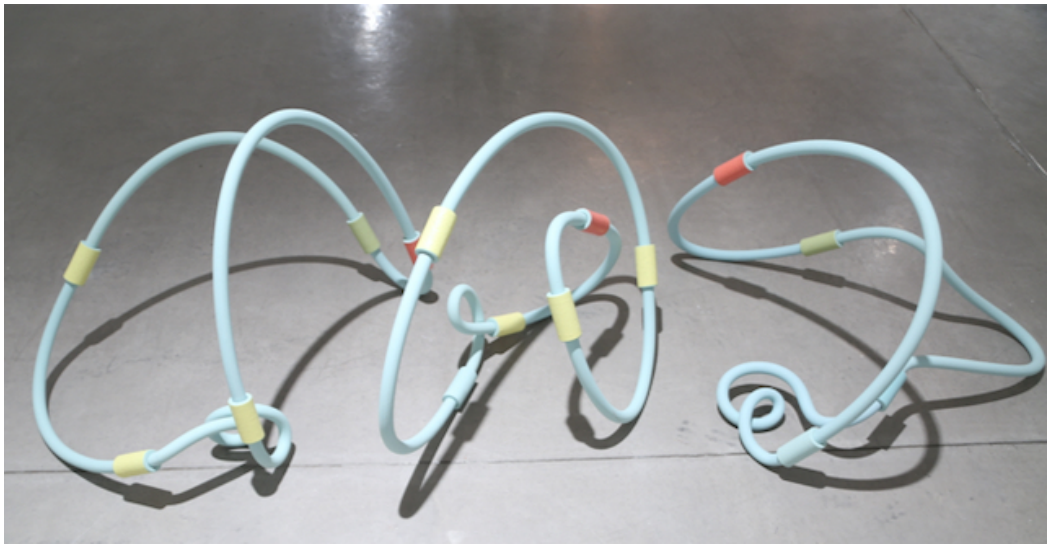
The blue-green color and fluid nature is like the sea, with tides oscillating every 6 hours, pulled by the gravity of the sun and moon. I feel heavier as I age, I am slowing down in contrast to time speeding up. Where is the balance? In the work, in the studio, in the life outside the studio?

The color choices are designed to both sooth and stimulate. Much of the surface varies from a cool blue to warmer green, a product of atmospheric effects on Vanadium and Praseodymium in the glaze. This can be manipulated so color transitions from one end of a component to the other, the more reduced the atmosphere in the kiln, the cooler the hue. The shift in color is so subtle that it is seldom noticed at first glance, and barely at all when photographed. Colors placed adjacently will influence one another, just as when forms are placed adjacently. In his book *Interaction of Color*, first published in 1963, the German abstract painter and Bauhaus instructor Josef Albers, describes the inherently shifty nature of color:

"*In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is - as it physically is. This fact makes color the most relative medium in art. In order to use color effectively it is necessary to recognize that color deceives continually.*" 1

1. Albers, Josef. Interaction of Color. 1963

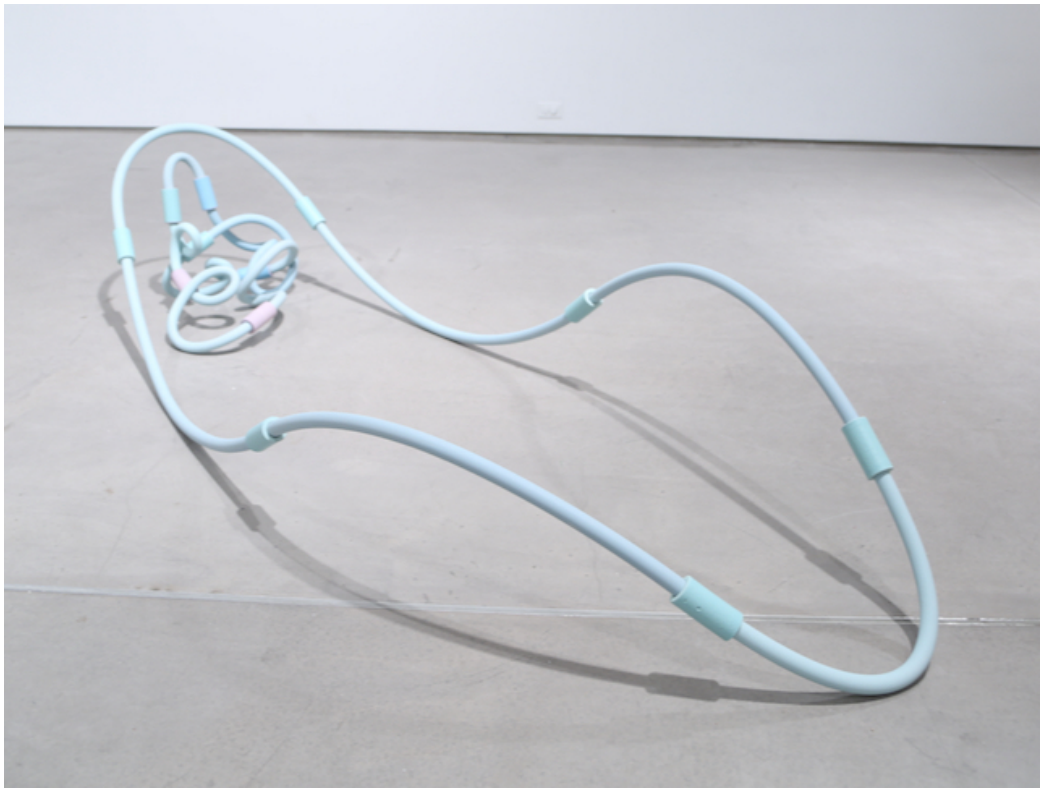
Depending on the light, the time of day, or the individual eye, color will shift. The color of Praseodymium Oxide in particular can vary depending on wether the light source is natural or fluorescent. Despite the eyes' built -in light meter, which is designed to maintain color constancy, we accept these variations as part of our daily environment. When one color is put next to another complementary color, we interpret a type of harmony or completion. Many of the color choices I'm making are designed to either enhance or agitate that sense of harmony. For example two contrasting colors, perhaps a vibrant glossy yellow placed next to a metallic purple, are designed to 'activate' each other. The lustrous purple metallic glaze will reflect back the yellow, and the two glazes each dynamic on their own, form a visual rather than chemical 'eutectic' of surface. Pairing warmer toned couplings with warmer toned green lines and cooler blue couplings with the blue lines emphasizes and enhances those subtle shifts, and pops of color create a sense of movement within the piece. By grouping like forms together, with the same specific mix of couplings, a sense of motion is created.



Closed Loop Variations, time lapse. 8' x 3' x 3'

The concept of trusting what you see, becomes an important part of my current work, and ceramic may not be the first material to come to mind. Initially the viewer may be drawn in by the playful color and energetic line, but upon closer inspection and material identification, would not likely want to engage such a fragile object. Subtle variations in color combined with pre-conceived ideas of what ceramic, can or should be doing, challenges the viewer to asses the object in front of them, and look closer. The soft sugary-matte surface is punctuated occasionally by crawling satin, and then smooth high gloss glazes, that may be the only indication that this is in fact a glazed ceramic surface. Although it is possible to create volume by offsetting flat components, there is a strength and variety added to the composition using a mix of more complex curves where the line enters and exits on two different planes. The line disappears from view into the coupling, and re-emerges on a different trajectory. A physical redirection, as well as a psychological redirection. We are currently in a time, where technology and media have advanced to the point where we are sometimes unable to distinguish reality from fiction. A.I. generated portraits are indistinguishable from the authentic and organic, optimized algorithms feed us idealized versions of ourselves, and denigrated versions of others. This is an incredibly bizarre time to be a human being. This is no longer a reality that you can trust. Political ideology has surpassed basic common sense, and the middle ground between left and right is an increasingly large, empty, and lonely space.

Function is one of the ways I apply parameters to my work, and those parameters allow me to focus on making a very specific type of object. This framework determines the scale and the interaction with the user; the pots have a job and a place in the world. Another parameter used in this work, is a specific system of production and assembly, where-in the individual components are produced without a specific outcome. Through multiple iterations, experimentation and experience, the compositions have been engineered to increase volume. Assembling the clay at its strongest possible form, ceramic fired to cone 9, allows for the greatest possibility of lift and scale.



Closed Line Variation, tight and loose. 8’ x 3’ x 2’

I’m interested in how adjacent forms activate one another. A single line with gesture can dance alone, but when paired with another, a choreography is generated between the objects. A story develops, movement increases, and the viewer can’t help but visualize a relationship.

Components within a piece; proportion.
Between pieces; interaction, scale, gesture.
The work relative to a person; function, ritual, domestic design, the body.
Intra-personal; interpretation, disfunction, connection.

Perhaps a gap in the line leaves room for imagination, or possibility.

The components are hollow, and extruded using a pneumatic extruder, allowing me to use both hands to manipulate the clay at it’s softest state. I’m thinking about the extruder as a drawing tool. Care must be taken to maintain the

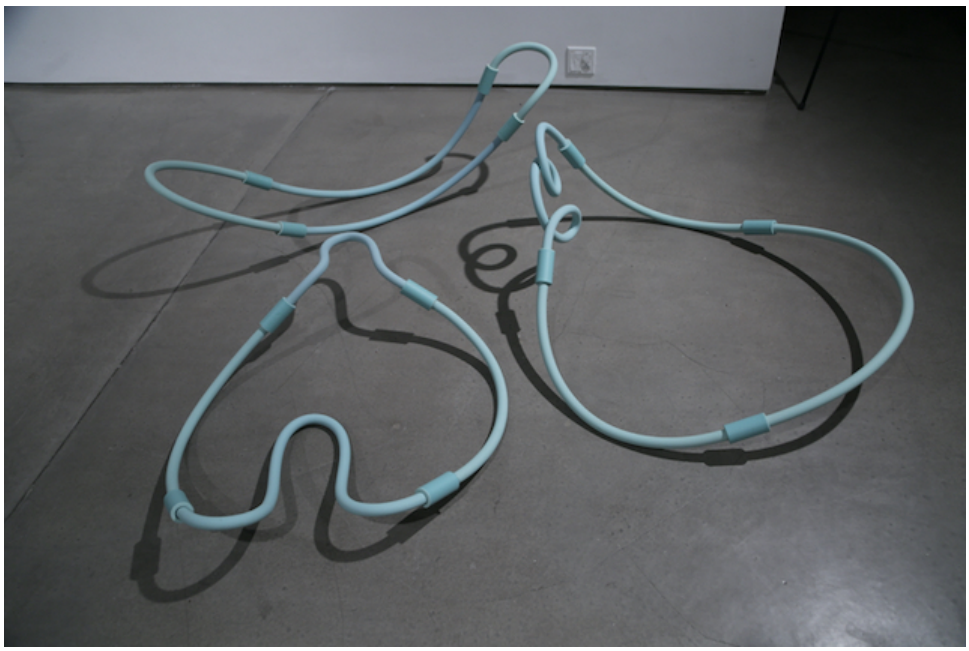
fluidity of the line, and I gently guide and twist the clay into shape. As the clay dries and stiffens, it creeps back to its previous form, and steps must be taken to mitigate memory and movement. Stopping and starting the extrusion mid-line creates an unwelcome interruption, and these pieces must be discarded. Each stage of the process from soft moist clay, to fully vitrified, presents possibility and challenge.

How can i best capitalize on each stage of the process in the moment? Can I capture that moment of softness in what is ultimately a brittle and fragile end product? What is a suitable soft color, or a soft surface treatment?

Working in a series is my trained method of production. Efficiency and repetition are advantageous, not only to making work in volume, but also in mitigating loss. A surplus of parts means that no single component is essential to the success of the piece. It also allows me to build something much larger than would be possible in one piece. Kiln size limits individual component scale, but a few 5ft components can cover a lot of ground in a short time. The closed loops are more elegant and rare than an open ended line, the composition can only be assembled with specific pieces.. A concise, efficient, outcome. The components are scrutinized for surface, line and proportion, and small adjustments are made for the next round of work. Through this process of analysis and synthesis, assembly and disassembly, I am constantly searching for energy and movement. The process involves sorting and analysis of curve, and generally starts with a particularly strong piece. The loop progresses through trial error, but also the memory of the hundreds of separate pieces in the inventory. Many of the closed forms are symmetrical, the piece must be assembled this way to return to itself. I know I have the perfect piece in this pile, I remember wedging the clay, and drawing a line with the extruder, and trimming and softening the ends, and loading and unloading it into the kiln, and stacking it with similar lines in the corner of the studio.

No, it doesn’t fit. How about that one?

A sense of exploration and play is a key component to my work. My 'shape library' is a test-tile collection of forms, bisque fired and then saved for future analysis and deployment. These objects are different, they are not evolutionary, but rather revolutionary to my process. I experiment freely, without preconceived ideas or fear of failure. I am not attached to the object, because it would have otherwise been recycled in a reclaim bucket. The negative space from one piece can become the positive space in another, adding another subtle connection between objects. When I am absolutely present in the studio, all of the clay, whether it's on the wheel, the table, the floor, or in the recycle bucket, has potential. It is all capable of amazing things, you just have to catch it at the right moment. Timing, observation, and curiosity become paramount to the process.



Closed Loop Variations. To 4' across.

There are aspects of the closed loop systems that reference the modern tubular steel furniture of Le Corbusier and Marcel Brewer. New materials such as tubular steel and concrete allowed new form in architecture and domestic design.

Low cost- high strength material gave lift and lightness to furniture and the buildings they occupy. Frank Lloyd Wright is probably the most well known architect to use modern building material and cantilevered construction in the early 20th century to create a sense of lightness and open space, inspiring a generation of designers and founding the Prairie School of Architecture. There is also an economy of material, that leaves room for imagination in the spaces between. As the maker I control the positive space, but the viewer dictates what happens in the negative space. How can I prescribe movement of the viewer in negative space? Draw them in with color, hold their attention with detail and craftsmanship, guide them along a line with directional indicators as you might with a diagram?

Clay: Low-cost / high-strength.

The early 20th century was full of technical innovation and materials, many of which were fast-tracked by the war effort. For example, designers such as Ray and Charles Eames worked with the US Army to develop field splints using new bent plywood techniques which would later revolutionize domestic furniture design. The Eame's and their friend and contemporary Aero Sarrinen were interested in organicism, an aesthetic that valued clean flowing lines, pure curve, and volume. This period of furniture production also introduced component based, flat-pack furniture, that could be organized and assembled in multiple variations.

Tide is expressly designed to push the viewer's idea of the boundaries of clay. Ceramic is a traditionally brittle, heavy, terrestrial material, that produces pottery, tile and architecture. By floating clay lightly off a wall, or energetically springing it across the floor, I bring into question the limits and possibility of the material. There is a sense of speed and rhythm to these works that is reminiscent of the Futurist movement of the early 20th century, in which artists such as Italian painter Tullio Crali, combined vibrant color with dynamic composition to create movement from stillness. Whereas the Futurists were concerned with speed as it relates to industrialization and mechanization, I am interested in speed as it

relates to the organic. Movement in nature; a creeping vine or a swift bird may follow a similar trajectory, but at very different speeds.

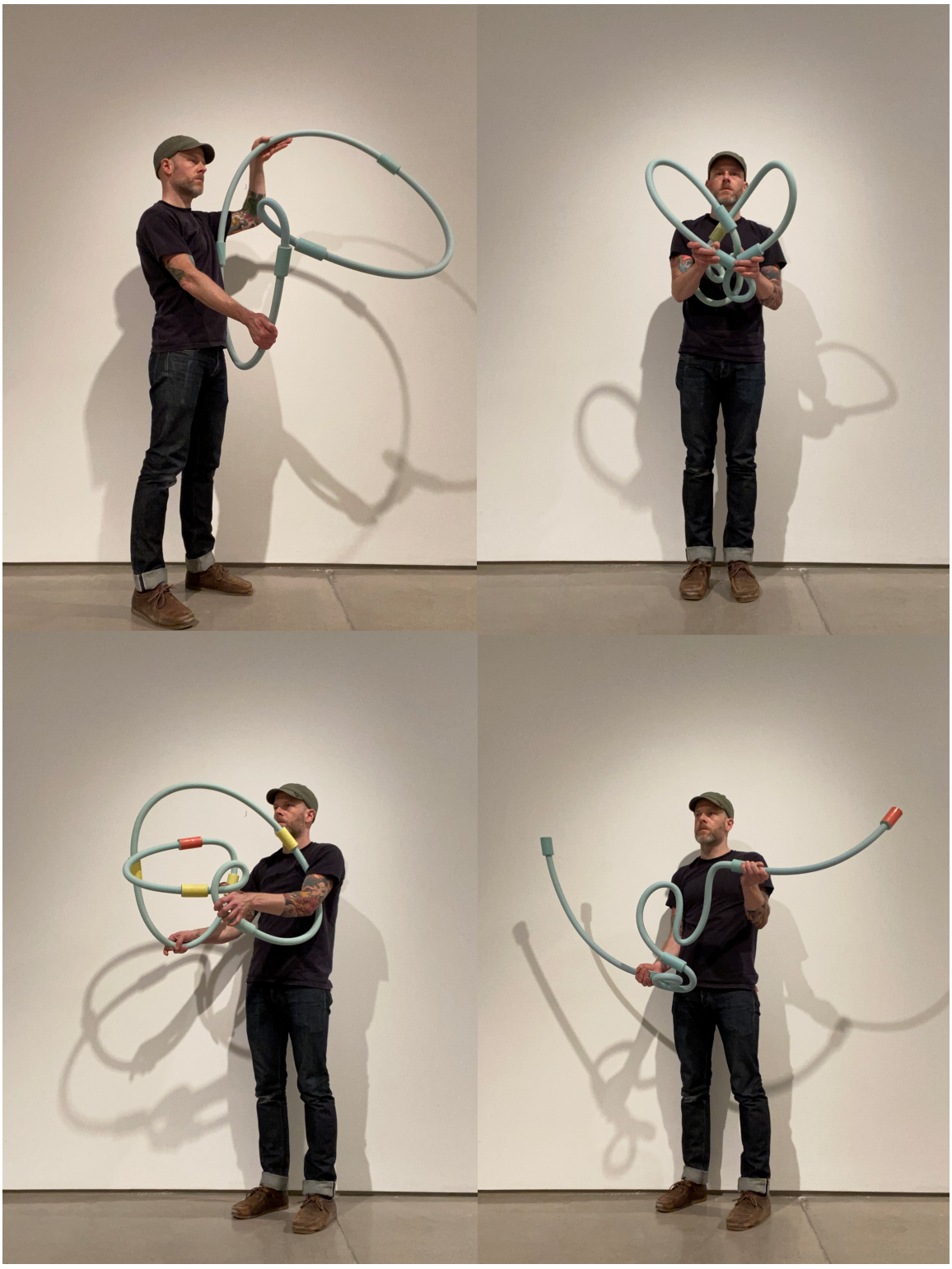
In his book Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi discusses the value of a ‘flow state’. According to Csikszentmihalyi in the simplest of terms, flow occurs during activities with a confluence of a high degree of challenge, and a high degree of skill. The absence of either will lead to boredom (ie: lack of challenge) on one extreme, and anxiety (ie: lack of skill) on the other. The component process I am currently using, involves creating a puzzle for myself. I have an equal number of each component, both line and coupling. One is a standardized form, the other is variable, and they are designed to fit together modularly. The components can be assembled into one large object, or several smaller objects which can later be grouped together… or not. Is it possible to prime myself for a flow state in the studio, by setting up certain parameters?

First comes the careful, methodical, monotonous labour, of producing hundreds of individual parts; satisfying but not particularly challenging. I’m interested in exploring the largest and smallest expression of those parts, and how each system operates in closed-loop and open-ended configurations. My observation to this point suggests that the most energy in this work exists in the ends. The open ended line has the most movement, culminating at the ends, particularly a weighted or capped end that suggests momentum, whereas the closed loop forms reincorporate that energy back into the loop. I can rearrange each piece, increasing and decreasing tempo and contrast, balancing and accounting. The greatest satisfaction is in closing a loop in as few pieces as possible, creating an economy of form and line. These forms only materialize after hours of hunting for compatible pieces. Longer open ended iterations can become monotonous, and less playful.

This series of work attempts to bridge several aspects of the ceramic domain. Parts of my work are forged in function; other parts relate to architecture and domestic design, the organization of space and the people who occupy that

space. The harmony of parts, wether they be thrown and assembled or extruded, is the most challenging and rewarding part of my process. Josef Albers model of ‘trial and error’ and ‘practice before theory’ may be the best description of my studio practice right now. It is a physical approach to problem solving that prioritizes experimentation and risk.

With a sense of speed, comes an acute awareness of time, or lack of time. As I get older, time speeds up. Years become relatively shorter, the longer I have lived. This work returns me to my first love, the most simple act of drawing. Before I knew clay, I had lines on a page. The challenge was always to bring those lines to life.



Variations of open and closed lines held by the artist.

Technical Statement

Closed loop variation labelled for reassembly. 4’ x 3’ x 3’

This work was produced primarily with the Bailey pneumatic extruder, using round hollow dies. The ‘line’ portions are cone 9 Laguna B-Mix, a highly plastic white stoneware, and the ‘coupling’ portions are a combination of Laguna 539, and recycled clay with added course / fine grog, as well as 20% Helmer clay. The course recycled clay used for couplings was short, and would not bend without splitting. The B-Mix can be aggressively curved, in some cases folded back on itself, producing a 180 degree ‘kink’ without splitting.

One linear foot of small tubing weighs 276 g. post firing, and each coupling weighs 190 g. Total weight of clay used for this series was approx 500 kg. of B-Mix and 100 kg. of 539/recycled clay, producing a combined 2326 linear ft. of extrusion.

The clay consistency needed to be very soft to move through the extruder, stiff clay was soaked in the bag by sectioning, dipping in water ,and then re-stacked in the closed bag to soften overnight.

Air pockets were problematic throughout the process, and blowouts often required wedging and putting the clay back through the extruder. I would guess that 30-40% of total linear feet was passed through at least twice to get a smooth wall consistency free of voids. Tubing was laid flat to stiffen, or supported on foam, then smaller voids filled and smoothed with a soft rib. Arched portions were produced in decreasing radius, nesting to maximize storage space on shelves. The longest individual component is approx. 5’ long, beyond that length my ‘wingspan’ makes it difficult to lay the extrusion down in a smooth arc, and it is more manageable to join two smaller components with a coupling. There is very little flexibility in the ceramic at the fired stage (although some does exist evidenced by the ring of a porcelain bowl when tapped). The small amount of adjustment I have is in the 1/16” of play between the inner diameter of the coupling and the outer diameter of the line, and the registration depth of line into coupling. The round extrusion is offset, the change of trajectory concealed inside the coupling, and emerging from the other side in a new direction providing volume to what started as two flat pieces. It is the consistent round profile of the extrusion that creates the illusion of one continuous line. The components are glazed in entirety, without a designated top or bottom, producing a finished object without any designated top or bottom.

All portions were bisque fired to cone 06, and then glaze fired to cone 9.

In some cases components were cold fitted with PC 11 epoxy inside the coupling, producing a fixed joint. The epoxy can be fired out at cone 08 but

produces a reduced smoky finish on the clay, and leaves a chalky residue behind. Most of the pieces are friction fit in order to simplify disassembly and packing. In cases of friction fit, each piece was labeled sequentially at the joint for reassembly. In some cases reassembly was very difficult, even when labelled. In order to maximize studio space many pieces were labelled, collapsed, and bundled for storage during production.

Closed Loop, labelled and bundled for storage in the studio. 30” x 15” x 10”

Surface on the line portions are a modified version of Bringle Slip, applied on bisque. Glazed portions are Bruces Crackle Shino. In both cases mason stains were used in 8-10% to achieve a variety of colors. The atmosphere in the kiln produced a range of blue to green colors depending on reduction. In some

cases a range was achieved on a single span of line. Most of the larger components were fired in Belinda (oxidation) and Sparky (reduction). The slip is similar to an underglaze, and will for the most part, not stick to the shelf. It does pluck kiln wash in most cases requiring some sanding/grinding. All slipped pieces were dipped rather than sprayed to achieve a more durable flat surface.

Bringle Slip Variation

Silica	30
OM4 Ball	25
Neph Sy.	25
EPK	10
Molochite	10

Bruce's Crackle Shino

Neph Sy.	37.6
Minspar	9.1
Spodumene	12.5
Grolleg	25
OM4 Ball	12.5
Soda Ash	2

Mason Stains at 8-10% : Bermuda, Chartreuse, Yellow, Lobster, Lavender, Turquoise.

Note: The addition of Soda Ash in the Shino will migrate to the surface upon drying and effect the sheen, a dryer surface could be achieved by leaving it out of the recipe.

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