

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Arrested Decay

Cory Mahoney

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

2018

---

Cory Mahoney, MFA

Thesis Advisors:  
John Gill, Jason Green, Matt Kelleher,  
Walter McConnell, Linda Sikora, Linda Sormin

**“An organized search through chaotic terrain.” - Eric Blehm <sup>1</sup>**

My work seldom begins with a clear idea in mind. To know too much about what I am going to do is to lose all purpose in doing it. The need to induce surprising results is crucial. Permutations of construction, glaze application and firing are all essential aspects of my processes. Trust in the uncertainty of outcomes generates the most honest acts of creative expression I possess: the way in which I respond to panic, frustration and disappointment. Expectations are hedged and I submit to the inevitability of chance. These experiences are compiled into an empirical catalogue and utilized for future opportunities.

*The coil built wall, knotted and littered with my fingerprints has continued on its vertical path for long enough and I feel the need to interrupt it. The trajectory has become too predictable, but an abrupt shift or intrusion should remedy this. I think to alter its path by creating a burl, like the ones I have seen on lodgepole pines in the Tablelands of Sequoia National Park. Maybe it would be better to halt the wall's ascent entirely by installing a horizontal slab, likening itself to a factory floor imposed upon a rural hillside. Perhaps it is a combination of both. I choose the burl and proceed.*

*I come back to the piece after some time and realize that I have made the wrong choice. Burls just like this one have been made countless times before and now I*

---

<sup>1</sup> Eric Blehm, *The Last Season* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007).

*am using it as a crutch. I cut out the last few hours of effort with nothing to show for it and move on to something else out of frustration. But how could I be frustrated if I do not know what I wanted to begin with? John Muir's conclusion regarding the existence of poison oak comes to mind, "Why was poison oak invented in the first place if it has no apparent use or relationship with anything else? It might have been made for itself."<sup>2</sup> I find it hard to believe that poison oak could be so meretricious, but I sometimes have doubts about my own work. I come back to the piece and install the slab.*



---

<sup>2</sup> John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014).

**“What is this life if, full of care,**

**We have no time to stand and stare.”** William Henry Davies <sup>3</sup>

For most of my life the overpopulated urban and suburban environments of Southern California were all I had ever known, and are now the types of places I wish to be furthest away from. There everything moves too quickly. Days off feel as regimented as the majority of a week spent making ends meet. Solitude is a luxury. My simultaneous discoveries of ceramics and backpacking provided unobjectionable means to escape the huddled masses and my quotidian ambivalence. Both the studio and backcountry continue to nourish my affection and wonder for the earth that surrounds me.

In the wilderness my connection to the modern world is left behind and I become unreachable. All that appears still is very much alive and my only obligations are to take my time, appreciate, be curious, and above all, to leave no trace. It took millions of years of natural phenomena to create such a fascinating place, so why should I feel the need to understand it all at once, if ever? Though my obligations in the studio are more extensive, the call for patience is much the same. I am pleasantly alone and my focus is self-determined. Everything that grows and crumbles in this space is my responsibility. This is where I am meant to leave traces of my desires, curiosities and mistakes.

---

<sup>3</sup> W. H. Davies, “Leisure.” *Songs of Joy and Others* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1911).

*The collection of unfinished sculptures in my studio is overwhelming. The aching pain in my lower back has returned and is as sharp as ever, but there is still so much to do. I need to sit down for just a minute. I pause the Audible reading of Thoreau's Walden and take my headphones off for the first time in hours. The silence is deafening. I stand up and am taken aback by how different work looks in the quiet of 2:00 am.*

*Looking at the vertically dissected coil-built vessel perched upright on the turntable in the center of my studio, it becomes apparent why I have been reluctant to make progress with it. Everything else is precariously balanced in place and tied together by skepticism and worry, but this one is too stable. I need to disrupt its orientation. If I lay it on its larger swelled surface then the ensuing developments will be more genuinely responsive than contrived. Because of the new bottom's curvature, the balance of the piece will inevitably sway to whatever side is receiving my attention at a given moment.*



**“Desires are already memories.” Italo Calvino<sup>4</sup>**

Bodie is a ghost town preserved by the state of California under a preservation principle of “arrested decay”. This means that it will keep the former gold rush settlement from falling into ruin any further than it already has. Should a building’s roof collapse, it will be rebuilt according to photographs taken in 1962 when it was designated a state park.<sup>5</sup> I am torn between appreciating this act of preservation and finding it completely absurd. I understand that the intention to maintain such a site is a pursuit to preserve the very specific history it provides, however the continued reconstruction will inevitably leave nothing left of the original site.

Nevertheless, the current preservation of a ruinous Bodie is undoubtedly just as important to its history as the gold and silver it once mined. Ruins are fascinating because they tell stories of the past that reassure us of our mortality while simultaneously presenting a template with which to imagine the future. Yet there is no need to imagine Bodie years from now because although everything will have changed at some point, it will seem exactly the same.

It is impossible for me to ignore the relationship between humans and nature when exploring a legitimately ruinous site. The contrast between organic

---

<sup>4</sup> Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (London: Vintage, 2009).

<sup>5</sup> California State Parks, State of California, "Bodie SHP," CA State Parks, , accessed April 04, 2018, [http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=509](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=509).

prosperity and architectural decay is glaring. It provides me with a sense of hope that the earth will continue to find ways to overcome our territorial preoccupations. Instead of attempting to create an interpretation of a specific ruinous site or object, this body of work is an engagement with particular qualities that highlight the beauty of this duality. It blurs the line between object and location, landscape and architecture, desires and memories.

The expanding cratered glaze repeatedly utilized in the work acts as a surrogate for nature's fecundity in the abandoned site. In *Rimes*, two ceramic objects consumed by such a glaze, are placed directly on the floor with a little over one foot of space between them. There is evidence of the structures' previously ordered and balanced compositions that have succumbed to the intense heat and violently flourishing surface treatment. Once vertical weight bearing columns and cross beams are all either severely bent or completely collapsed. The excess glaze that ran off of the structures in the kiln creates an outreaching horizontal plane that hovers just centimeters off the ground at some points. It seems natural and alive while pieces' skeletons fall further into decay.



**“I generally prefer to go into places where no one else wants to go. I find that in contemplating the natural world my pleasure is greater if there are not too many others contemplating it with me, at the same time.” - Edward Abbey**<sup>6</sup>

I know only what I can assess from the current physical status of the abandoned factory I discovered on a walk through the Kanakadea Creek. From a distance, the colorful yet faded and rusting triptych of towering silos are what compel me to abandon my hike. I approach the weathered containers and realize that the iron girders they are perched upon are completely covered in concrete detritus, likely caked-on over years of its industrial occupation. This place seems frozen in time by the material excess of its own production. I romanticize the site as a modern Pompeii. Unlike the ancient city preserved by volcanic ash, however, this ruin had not met its demise by forces of nature; the modern world had simply moved on without the need of such a place, and now nature is taking it back.

Perhaps the most striking difference between Pompeii and the abandoned concrete factory in Alfred Station is not the disparity between historical values society has placed on them, but rather the extent to which one can experience the sites. I will never have the opportunity to discover the tragic city and conjure my own assumptions, nor will I have the opportunity to walk the grounds in the quiet of solitude. This understanding is far from discouraging as the myriad of

---

<sup>6</sup> Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010).



rural American ruins are available to anyone willing to pull over on a whim and will continue to be quiet and abundant.

*The large bisqued object, resembling a clustered stalagmite removed from the cave in which it had formed, stands in the middle of the kiln floor. It is taunting me the same way it has repeatedly for over a year, and the simple act of placing it back into the kiln is a powerful one. It means I am ready to finish what I started. I fill the object's cracks and orifices with extruded greenware rods that remind me of steel square stock, install cantilevered ledges, and tie sections together with nichrome wire. Once construction is finished I decide that it will not go through another bisque. Glazing it with much of the piece unfired will surely encourage a more dramatic transformation.*



*Completed construction before glaze is applied.*

The concept of a natural disaster is a pompous notion. Nature does not possess such ill intent. If a volcano erupts without devastating some human civilization, it is not considered a disaster, but rather a spectacle fit for the likes of *National Geographic*. Wildfires become tragedies when homes are incinerated, yet are an essential part of many prospering ecosystems. Those who care for such wildernesses utilize prescribed burns as a means to regulate and encourage growth. I find it arrogant to pass judgement on the events that have taken place long before humans developed the ability to consider them.

*Disappointment always comes before the recognition of opportunity. I open the kiln and see that the bulk of the piece is still standing, but there are many fragments on the floor. I notice that the large cantilevered slab at the top of the piece, which had already cracked before the firing, has now suffered a clean break. The surface is underwhelming, but I have the time to reglaze and fire it again. My initial feeling is panic, but I know better. I have dealt with worse than this. This is not a disaster. I collect the square stock shards and curate their new positions. The precautionary nichrome wires, attached from the fractured slab to others still in place, will now be put to the test. Layers of fresh glaze are added. More color this time.*



*Post-first firing with more glaze applied*

*Hardware cloth rolled into a cylinder and covered in slip and glaze represent grain silos who's foundations remain intact while the facade are slowly being stripped away. I know what temperature they can withstand, but I over-fire to watch them crumble and melt. Thin bone-dry slabs and rods bear reckless amounts of weight as a means to endure future breakage; the ironic surprise in this instance is when the structure actually holds up.*



*Post-second firing*

**“Is it better to last than to burn?” - Roland Barthes <sup>7</sup>**

My father built my brothers and I a jungle gym in our backyard when I was seven or eight years old: a three-storied playset comprised of matching royal blue monkey bars, two swings and a thick sheet of vinyl stretched overtop for a roof. A rope and wooden peg ladder in the back provides direct access to the second level and a plastic yellow slide in front is the fastest way down.

During my last visit to my parents it felt like I was seeing the jungle gym for the first time again. It is weathered now from the dry San Bernardino valley heat and sixty mile-per-hour winds that roar down through the Cajon Pass from the high desert above. The vinyl canopy has been gone for years, but its absence is much more evident now. The rest of the matching components have all faded or been stripped down by more than half of their once radiant paint job. The intense winds over the years have slowly caused the entire structure to begin leaning to the right. As a result, metal cables now anchor the left side of the frame to the brick wall a few yards away to prevent further movement.

The jungle gym will soon exist only in memories and photographs. It acts as yet another indicator that the only place that has ever truly felt like my home is now only my parents' home. Maybe one day it will be a ruin for someone to contemplate in the quiet of solitude. Until then I will always return to my former

---

<sup>7</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2010).

home a changed person. I have simply moved on without the need for such a place.

Much of the work made for *Arrested Decay* is constructed with a keen awareness of its many ephemeral qualities. Though ceramics is widely understood to be an especially archival material, the work I have felt compelled to make for *Arrested Decay* aims to avert this sentiment in several ways. The ceramic covered galvanized hardware cloth is delicate and precarious. It fractures with every touch and slowly becomes the very detritus it celebrates. Compositions will be ever changing with new components added and old ones removed. More volatile glaze can be applied as a means to further compromise structural integrity.

Ceramics acts as my homage to the natural forces that determine all outcomes. The famed archaeological sites that have informed this body of work will surely continue to exist beyond my lifetime while many of the roadside ruins of Allegany County will eventually wither away unnoticed by most. There will be no acts preservation to maintain the current status of the abandoned concrete plant on the outskirts of town. The ceramic sculptures in this exhibition will instead memorialize the sentiments of my experiences in ruinous sites momentarily arrested in decay.

## Technical Report

### **Paper Clay**

Before coming to Alfred the only clay I had ever used came from the local ceramic supply company. As a result, the need to develop a claybody that suited my sensibilities was an immediate priority. After researching many other sculpture bodies and testing out my own variations the buff white stoneware paperclay recipe I developed is as follows:

30	Tile 6
25	Kentucky Ball (OM4)
15	Goldart
15	Pyrophyllite (Pyrax)
12	Custer Feldspar
3	Talc

---

100

\* Toilet Paper

\* For a 275 lb dry Muller mixer batch I loosely fill up a 5 gallon bucket with dry toilet paper before mixing into a pulp with hot water.

My intentions for this claybody were to have a smooth texture, above average green and fired strength, the capability to be fired at cone ten in various

atmospheres, and the ability to be workable at all stages of the ceramic process. With this claybody in its plastic state, I am able to build on top of bone dry, bisqued and even glazed wares.



### **Calcined Kaolin**

As an undergraduate student I learned from friend and peer Mitch Springer that because calcined kaolin is more dense than silica sand its capability to protect kiln furniture from glaze is superior. Because of this I am able to apply excessive amounts of glaze onto a ceramic object, which then runs off in the firing and creates a pool around it. The calcined kaolin I use is EPK fired to cone ten (2345°F) straight out of the bag.



## Bibliography

Abbey, Edward. *Desert Solitaire*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2010.

Barthes, Roland. *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*. New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2010.

Blehm, Eric. *The Last Season*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2007.

California State Parks, State of California. "Bodie SHP." CA State Parks.

Accessed April 04, 2018. [http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page\\_id=509](http://www.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=509).

Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*. London: Vintage, 2009.

Davies, W. H. "Leisure." *Songs of Joy and Others*. London: A. C. Fifield, 1911.

Muir, John. *My First Summer in the Sierra*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014.