

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Ground

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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

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

Acknowledgements

For their unwavering support:

To my family, Kim, Duane, and Brent

To my grandparents, Marilyn and Alvoy, Sandy and Jack

To Emily

Origins of Ground

I remember the first time I picked up clay. I had walked along the ditch in my grandfather's field, and noticed that crayfish had kicked up small clumps of clay as they dug ever deeper into the Earth. I remember picking up the clay as if it were an offering: it remained in my small hands - smooth, green-brown, and cold. I remember the excitement of finding the source of this material. I remember my hands becoming dirty as I worked the clay. I remember I kept walking, gathering more offerings. I remember. I remember.

My hands are dirty¹

¹ Personal reflection on the realization of Ground

Like the flat fields that I spent my childhood exploring, I too wish to sprawl, to expand, to consider my existence between both Ground and Sky², and to claim my own place on this Earth. In the studio, clay is the material that enables these investigations. How can this clay, which has itself been mined from its natural state, then become a vehicle for investigating its original source? Through the exploration of one's relationship to Ground, one can recognize how the cycles that occur in a landscape are analogous to those who wish to lay claim to that space.

With the recognition of time as an indicator of duration and succession, a revisitation to memory counters the steady progression of a being into the future. Within the studio, there is a consistent reliance on memory to direct my acceptance of being removed from Ground. I embrace this repetitive nature of seeking validation and questioning. Akin to the renewal of seasonal changes and the daily procession of night into day, and day into night, my studio practice is an embodiment of this progression. I relate to these natural cycles and, at times, choose to explore themes of connectivity, opulence, and abundance. At other times, tones of individuality, solitude, mortality, and loss are at the center of my focus. In each of these, I recognize the cyclical nature of humanness, and the consciousness necessary to engage with the natural world. This engagement oscillates as a being continuously redefines themselves, just as I redefine my understanding of Ground through the vessel. My interest in the connectivity between domestic

² I understand Ground as an expanse that includes gravity, geological strata, minerals, and the uppermost surface of the lithosphere (the surface a person walks upon). The counterpoint to Ground is Sky, which includes atmosphere, weather patterns, day and night, fog, light, and shadow. Both Ground and Sky are interdependent and act as witness marks to each other.

spaces and Ground has led me to explore a few key words through this body of work; shadow, lineage, and landscape.

Shadow

Utilitarian vessels inhabit domestic spaces in service to the humans that choose to engage with them. These objects participate within the activities of a household, serve as aesthetic objects when not in use, and become integral parts in the consumption of food or drink. This pottery is often displayed in a household so that it is viewed in profile. Likely it remains in the cupboards or on a shelf, obscured from casual glances. As the light quality within the household transitions through the progression of the day, more or less of the pottery can be perceived dependent on its location. Light may only rest on one half of a form at a given time, and it is, ultimately, speculation as to what the hidden half could offer. It is through the use of shadow and light that I seek to raise questions about one's sense of perception: how well do we know each piece of pottery, and how accurate can our perceptions be if one does not have an intimate understanding of each piece? One's knowledge and previous experiences with the pottery can create false senses of familiarity.

I challenge those that use my wares with this false sense of familiarity. Like the wide base jars and plates that can be found in *Fig. 1*, each form in this exhibition starts with a broad base, creating an expansive point of contact with the surface



Fig. 1 Shelf 5

the object rests upon. Handles and finials have been omitted from the forms, suggesting that a visual and tactile investigation of the surface is necessary to gain accessibility into the interior of the forms. With dim lighting and matte surfaces, the point of separation between components requires an attentive investigation of the forms. The clay slips that are used on the surface, matte in appearance, absorb more light than is reflected, flattening the vessel into the dim lighting in which it resides. Here I ask if these vessels are claiming themselves as fixtures to their location, or if by removing the pottery from its concealed placement can one disrupt the works sense of permanence? In these ways, through an investigation of form and material, I suggest that pottery is analogous to humanness. One can embody the need to claim their surroundings and establish a sense of permanence upon the Ground, or one can choose to remain secluded, limiting accessibility to only those that offer a conscious attentiveness in their pursuit. I choose to use shelves as a way of limiting access to the vessels. Hid-

den in shadow and visually melding into the colors of vessels in close proximity, each vessel is intended to appear as both non-displaceable and begging to be engaged with. It is through displacing these forms that one can find a point of access into the utility of the vessels, and thus realize the potential for the vessels to operate as integral parts within the domestic setting.

Lineage

I am interested in variations that occur during the process of making vessels by hand, and are reminiscent of those described by Michael Simon. Simon, a successor of the Leach tradition in Minnesota, describes using cycles of firing and making to dictate the rhythm of his studio.³ With each kiln firing, the finished pottery would be examined and reflected upon before starting the next making cycle. This creates a series of forming, firing, and reflecting upon the finished work. This process encourages the evolution of forms by creating a blending of ideas from one form into the next. I have adopted this approach into my practice, letting an investigation of form encourage the further investigations. In this way, each vessel is a marker of a specific place in time, and reflects both the works previously formed and those that have yet to be created. When all of the work is viewed during a making cycle or after a kiln load, the work becomes self referential. This means that one cohesive thought or form is present in each piece, and each step

³ Simon, Michael J., Susan Stokes Roberts, and Northern Clay Center (Minneapolis, Minn.), *Evolution*. Minneapolis: Northern Clay Center. 2011.

of the succession stems from one core idea. During this process of exploration, any one piece can serve as a reference to another. For example, an investigation of the term Expanse⁴ in a series of plates readily gives way to a lidded vessel that continues this pursuit. While surfaces and utility vary amongst the forms, it is one investigation that serves as the nexus of the work in a studio cycle.

The vessels I create are intended to generate the idea of a collective consciousness by virtue of their shared origin in the desire to explore Ground. When viewed collectively, each piece stands as a counterpoint to another by drawing the viewers attention to the variations between each vessel, and the interdependence of each individual component within the larger body of work. Alternatively, by removing one vessel from its relationships with others of like origin, the characteristics of individuality are muted through non association. It is my intention to both recognize the individuality of each vessel, as well as suggest that the existence of each component in a collective is determined through the association of like vessels.

In other similar vessel making processes such as woodturning, metal working, or glass casting, a dialog is created between the interior force of opening a form and the compression that happens by the introduction of exterior forces. During the process of forming vessels on the wheel, the interior hand gives way to the

⁴ The term Expanse has been selected as a reference to both Ground and Sky, and the point of contact between these two beings. It is both and neither at the same time. I recognize Expanse as the idea of expanding, sprawling, becoming limitless, and an embrace of the infinite.

exterior, and an expanding form is then compressed by pressure from the exterior hand. Expansion becomes counterbalanced by compression, and the form embodies both methods of creation. The inner volume of the vessel itself is susceptible to these forces, and remains held in this tension of expansion and compression. In a similar way, the human consciousness can also be affected by interior and exterior pressures. The conscious act of making can become a subconscious motion by increasing the duration and rhythm of creative processual actions. A trance-like state of making can occur that enforces this repetitive making, but it is this that I choose to avoid. Remaining attentive to the needs of the vessels throughout the making process enables my hands to remember their previous motions, and to relive and bear as witness to the lineage of wares that have led to the present exploration. Through succession, I too seek a remembrance of my previous self, always moving steadily away from the origin in pursuit of new investigations in Ground. I must remain mentally present when creating the vessels so that a recognition of relationship between parts can be realized. Without this, each part begins to have less cohesion to the collective whole and acts solely upon individuality rather than collectively.

The potter's wheel offers a place of continuity, where I first recognize Ground and then build from the realized foundation. Like the actions deemed necessary to my forming process, memory and revisitation offer themselves as a sturdy point of origin from which I can launch new investigations. During the throwing process,

both hands serve as witness marks⁵ to each other as each new form takes shape. Philip Rawson states in his book *Ceramics* that evidence of the making process can be found in the striations that are left from the hand during throwing on the potter's wheel, giving evidence to the grip patterns that the potter has used, relating interior to exterior and inviting an understanding to the sequence of creation.⁶ Further, Rawson states that a surface devoid of the variation or unevenness typical to wheel-thrown pottery can feel tactilely 'cold' and 'repellant.'⁷ In response to this statement, I wish to deter the user, to repel them from the familiarity gained by using other handcrafted ceramic pottery that bears the finger marks of the making process. Marks created during this process are smoothed over with a rib to create a homogenized curvilinear surface. This aesthetic is a mixture of the Modernist belief in a "truth to materials," but also utilizes the sensibilities of purposefulness as it exists within the domestic world. This means that the vessels have the ability to function as utilitarian wares and also act as vehicles for my shifting exploration of vessels in relation to Ground and Sky. They are able to fulfill the various roles assigned to them in a domestic space, and embody the cyclical nature of humanness.

⁵ A witness mark is often used in assembly as a registration for the two parts or components. In the case of the potter's wheel, each hand acts as the counterpoint to the other, leaving the vessel as a witness to both forces.

⁶ Higby, Wayne, and Philip Rawson. *Ceramics*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984. 82.

⁷ Ibid., 86.

I seek to avoid the individuality and sense of scale that can be found in the marks created during the throwing process, as they speak specifically about one person in relation to the understanding of Ground. While the materiality and cyclical nature of making ceramic vessels is engrained within this body of work, I attempt to create surfaces that are uninterrupted motions of compression and expansion. These motions are analogous to my desires to understand the ever-wavering void between myself and Ground.

Landscape

The variation of the vessel represents the modes of the human body in relation to Ground. A jar offers a ritualistic approach to gaining sustenance within the household. Often in a state of permanence on a countertop or in a cupboard, the user must return to the location of the jar should they wish to retrieve the contents. Containing a volume larger than is necessary for one serving suggests that many visitations will be needed to deplete the jar of its contents, placing agency upon the user⁸. One must decide whether this performative task meets the demands of the vessel. In an opposing manner, the plates and lidded cups empower the user to take sustenance with them as they move through the daily cycles of the domestic space. The frequency of drinking from a cup or serving food off of

⁸ "It is less a question here of knowing what the work of art is before its performance than of knowing whether the performance meets the demands of that work-which, as a matter of fact, wants to be performed in order to offer itself as an aesthetic object."
Dufrenne, Mikel. 1989. Phenomenology of aesthetic experience. Evanston: Northwestern University Press. 23-24.

a plate is more sustained and consistent, potentially occurring multiple times a day.

This codependency of user and vessel is much like one's relation to the landscape in which they choose to live. Like the seasonal cycles that affect the cultivation of crops, how can one decide the time to nurture one's surroundings, and when is the time for harvest? This task of knowing and recognizing one's place on Ground revolves around these cycles of motion. At times, one might wish to remain stagnant, and at other times nomadic. The vessels we choose to use supplement these desires, and thus reflect our inner sense of self. For myself, I wish to seek space and stability. I rely on consistent cycles of making, memory, and revisitation to fuel my studio practice and lay claim to my place on this Earth as one that exist on Ground. The repetition of nurturing and harvesting ensures that I must steadily plant new seeds for understanding, while never losing sight of the bounty that was gained from previous endeavors.

When looking for artists who share a similar exploration, I am continuously inspired by the works of Robert Turner, specifically the piece *Shore*, Fig. 2. This piece seemingly rises out of the landscape, interacting with both atmosphere and Ground in one stabilized motion, as if the vessel was itself a product of geological creation. It is this balance and stability that I strive to find in my work. This notion of gesture and motion can also be found in works of T.S Elliot:



Robert Turner, *Shore*, Stoneware and glaze. Approximate Dimensions: 7.5" x 9" x 7.5" Circa 1970s. Collection of Alfred Ceramic Art Museum.

Shape without form, shade without colour,

*Paralysed force, gesture without motion;*⁹

My response to both the works of Elliot and Turner is to utilize form to investigate Ground in its entirety. As cognitive scientist Donald Hoffman states in a TedTalk addressing perception and reality, “we do not construct the whole world at once, we construct only what we need in the moment.”¹⁰ In my studio, I work piece by piece, limiting myself to explore each subject as the desires arise, and then later contemplating how to alter my perception of that gained knowledge. Through the use of clay slips, one can explore how senses of volume can be shifted by intro-

⁹Shmoop Editorial Team. "The Hollow Men Poem Text." Shmoop University, Inc. Last modified November 11, 2008. Accessed May 6, 2018. <https://www.shmoop.com/hollow-men/poem-text.html>.

¹⁰ Donald Hoffman, "Do we see reality as it is?" filmed March 2015 in Vancouver, British Columbia, TED video, 21:51, https://www.ted.com/talks/donald_hoffman_do_we_see_reality_as_it_is#t-8115.

ducing tonal values or shifts in the direction of the walls of the vessels. It is through these variations in form and surface that the vessels seemingly flatten upon the surface on which they rest, or, like Turner's work, rise and create a cohesion between Sky and Ground. The sense of space in which I inhabit is a constant dialog between these two entities. Where do I wish to place myself in relation to Ground or Sky?

It is important for one to notice that an absolute distinction has not been given to the transition between either night and day, or Ground and Sky. As can be seen in Fig. 1, gradations created by the use of directional lighting encourage the formation of shadows that act as transitions between the physical and the purely optical. One is encouraged to look: to question how much is perceived based solely upon sight, and what other senses are necessary to bring a comprehensive focus to these compositions. Should one consider other aspects of physicality as the vessel is used throughout its daily routine? Is there a sound that distinguishes one piece from another? How does the weight of a piece shift as its contents are emptied? This questioning of what one understands creates a parallel between the viewer and the potter. The intense exploration of form and self-examination that was present in the cycles of throwing and firing is then revisited during the installation of the work in a gallery. What is gained from this process of examining and placing distinction upon what one knows? Perhaps one should not concern themselves about giving names to what they are attempting to understand. Without a need for singularity, one does not have to place individualis-

tic importance on each of the components. Objects, ideas, and explorations are encouraged to meld with their next successor, and the viewer can oscillate between each with little interruption.

The movement, oscillation, focus, and attentiveness to nuance present in the vessels remains at the epicenter of the my searching to explore the idea of landscape. Just as a person moves through space and crosses the domestic threshold, I ask the viewer of my works to do the same. To gain access to vessels housed within the shelves, one must distinguish shadow from materiality, and confront that these are boundaries of human construction. One can access the work should they pass through this void of distinction. It is my goal to slow movement, slow the need for definitive answers, and encourage the process of searching as a way of leading a productive life. The work presented in this thesis exhibition enables new associations and rhythms to be made with each interaction between user and vessel. It is my goal that the user gains an awareness of their own searching, and then reexamines the nuances of their own existence.

Conclusion

As I alluded to in the beginnings of this text, I realized at a young age that while I could experience Ground and investigate its relation to myself. I, as a human form, was as removed from the Earth as the clay that I had dug. It is with a wandering sense of curiosity and a fluctuating understanding of the human condition

that I choose to place a reliance on the vessel. Whether it be the sustained reliance on a domestic setting or the seasonal changes that happen in my surrounding environment, there is a cyclical nature in being. The vessel serves as a witness to the humanness of this concern, giving a materiality to the notions of the expanse of Ground below, and the atmosphere of Sky as it levitates above.

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Excerpts from *The Hollow Men* by T.S. Elliot

Between the conception

And the creation

Between the emotion

And the response

Falls the Shadow

Between the idea

And the reality

Between the motion

And the act

Falls the shadow

Between the desire

And the spasm

Between the potency

And the existence

Between the essence

And the descent

Falls the Shadow

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralyzed force, gesture without motion;¹¹

¹¹ 1Shmoop Editorial Team, "The Hollow Men Poem Text," Shmoop University, Inc., Last modified November 11, 2008, <https://www.shmoop.com/hollow-men/poem-text.html>.

Technical Statement

Each vessel starts with the pottery wheel. It is first the recognition of ground that begins the process of building form and interacting with volume. Should I choose to contain volume, I choose to place limitations on dimensional aspects such as the gallery diameter, foot width, or height of the finished piece. These parameters ensure that some muscle memory is created through the exploration of form, and generates a cohesive series in which I can gain an understanding of the form. I recognize when a process becomes innately learned, and have chosen to limit myself to three or four days of exploring a form before moving to the next. This cyclical movement through my studio has ensured that each piece can be attentively formed, slipped, and fired. It is with succession that I am able to build familiarity, and in an exhaustive exploration of form that I can find variation.

This body of work is a reflection on a wandering interest in form over the duration of one semester. First, a small group of jars was created after looking at a tin canister of printmaking ink. With a broad and smooth surface, this canister captured my interest in surface and line. By recognizing the variations of the first series of ceramic vessels, I reflected on this form by then throwing dinner plates and small toast plates. Throughout the semester, my studio practice examined jars, plates, and lidded cups. These were not in any particular order, as I would move from form to form as a reflection of the last created works. It is not important to recognize one specific origin point when viewing the work as a whole, but

rather recognize the collective consciousness present in each piece as it relates to the pieces.

Firings

I have chosen to fire each piece in the outdoor gas soda kilns. With the high iron clay body it is important to keep the kiln in an oxidized or neutral atmosphere throughout the firing. A solution of soda ash and water was sprayed into the kiln using a weed sprayer with a metal wand. Variations in how much soda ash was introduced into the kiln was dependent on the work, slips, and capacity of the kiln. Overall, this ranged from 1.5 pounds to .5 pounds of soda ash per firing. The firing schedule length was between 16-20 hours, and again was dependent on the scale of the work in the kiln and the stacking of the kiln furniture.

Clay and Glaze Recipes

Nate Williver Clay	Cone 6
Cone 6	
Redart	40
Newman Red Substitute	40
Foundry Hill Creme	20
Flint	10
Bentonite	1

Nate's Clear	Cone 6
Frit 3134	22
Cone 10	
Wollastonite	22
Nepheline Syenite	22
EPK	16.5
Silica	16.5
Talc	1
Red Iron Oxide	1.5

Tile 6 Slip	Cone 10
Tile 6	70
Grolleg	15
Flint	5
Nepheline Syenite	10
Bentonite	1.25

Barnard Slip

Barnard Substitute	85
Nepheline Syenite	15

EPK Slip

EPK	85
Nepheline Syenite	15

Grey Tile 6 Slip

Tile 6	70
Grolleg	15
Flint	5
Nepheline Syenite	10
Bentonite	1.25
Mason Stain #6600	10

*Each slip is reactive to the atmosphere of the kiln, and can produce a multitude of colors. In oxidation, the Tile 6 slip and EPK slip are a creamy white, but can produce browns and red in reduction.

*Each batch of clay was first mixed in the large Shar mixer as a slip, and later dried on plaster slabs or in a plaster trough. This process thoroughly mixes the fine particles as well as adds elasticity to the clay.