

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Material Vocabulary

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In Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for
The Alfred University Honors Program

May 12, 2014

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As artists, I believe we have a responsibility to learn about material. It becomes a vocabulary crucial to communication. It creates an aesthetic experience, visceral and engaging, inspired by personal and universal connections to practice. Materiality is an inherent part of my artistic process, informing and inspiring the how and why I make work. I find that today, artists are generally categorized by material; painter, sculptor, printmaker, performance artist; and I believe that this can become dangerous. Why limit artistic expression to a singular material vessel? I feel that material exploration should lead to creation.

I have worked in many mediums. Before coming to Alfred University I considered myself a realistic drawer, strictly working on a 2-D plane. I felt a need to recreate the natural world but was unable to translate this dimensionally. As I began taking classes at Alfred I worked in metal, ceramics, paper, cardboard, drawing, painting, video, sound, new media, and even performance. I found conceptual importance in all of these materials, but I found myself unable to translate what I wanted.

I was first introduced to thinking about materiality to inform my work during my sophomore year, in a sculpture class titled "Material and Poetics". It was a new experience to take a class where projects were based upon conceptual prompts instead of material ones. I had been introduced to a new form of inspiration and approach to making. Taking a conceptually focused class gave me a chance to openly think about my processes, with an emphasis on activating the material's qualities instead of vaguely referencing it. The "Material and Poetics" class allowed me to use mixed-media to communicate.

Every small step in my creative process is considered, just as every material I use is considered as well. I feel that in school, precedence is sometimes given to honing skills of craft instead of gaining the vocabulary to speak through material. We are making objects and focusing on those objects

aesthetically instead of on what one can say through the work. While I believe there is importance in pure aesthetics, and in no case do all students overlook concept, I believe that material should more-so strengthen the work conceptually, and inform the way the work is made. Concept should not be overlooked simply because one “wants to make” a certain object.

My work generally focuses around dualities and perception, centered in topics of the natural world. I am a personal collector of natural archival objects like bones, skulls, and animal pelts. I often bring these objects into my work, using their specific material and conceptual qualities similarly to how I use glass.

I found glass casting the second semester of my junior year. I had previous glass blowing experience, but could not communicate with the material in a way I found successful. Glass casting opened up new doors. Through material exploration, I found connections between glass and the way I work and the things I wanted to express. I cannot stress enough the importance of material exploration before diving deep into the artistic process. Glass has very unique properties, and is highly influenced by the way one works. It can be transparent, opaque, solid, porous, colorful or neutral, flat or dynamic. Sheets of glass can be slumped and fused or painted on and stacked. It can be cast into any form and controlled or be allowed to flow freely without boundaries. I had found a material that related to my conceptual desires and began exploring exactly how I could harness it and relate it to the other materials I felt connections to, like bones and pelts.

When I first starting exploring glass, I began making thin sheets by fusing frit, small particles of glass available in a multitude of colors. I was entranced with the texture and transparency of the things I could create. These thin, fine pieces had a delicate appearance. They were made of tiny particles fused together by the power and heat of the kiln. Each tiny piece held onto the next and created a solid

connection, creating the appearance of extreme fragility, but each connection made the sheet decently stable. I began thinking about the duality of this new form of material I had discovered. The beauty of glass and its ability to take on many forms depending on the way you work it gave me many new possibilities to speak through its materiality. I had found a form that could be defined not as singularly fragile or strong, but an inspiring combination of the two.

I began drawing connections between these frit sheets and other aspects of my practice and personal life. Looking at the texture of the sheets, I was reminded of bone. Conceptually, these two materials draw many of the same conclusions for me. The glass sheets are both fragile and strong, just as the bones are. They are also aesthetically very similar. I had a moment of revelation when I realized that the texture and color of bone could be replicated through the frit sheets. I began doing tests of color to find the perfect match.

I used my tests to create three final pieces, one with a broken Ram's skull, the second with a broken deer, and the last with multiple mouse skulls. The skulls required different color tests and blending, as well as different techniques to build them back up. The ram required a lateral layering technique, creating volume through layers of shards. Transparent shards built up layers, creating a crystalline feeling; catching the light and drawing attention to the mended sections (See figures 1 and 2). The deer, however, was built up with tiny sheets of frit, creating a more delicate, soft feel, with color variations to match the weathered bone. Opalescent glass filled in the spaces, blending smoothly with the skull creating tiny details to catch the viewers' attention (See figures 3 and 4). The mice were the most delicate because they are extremely tiny and fragile. The frit pieces I made were shard and crystal-like, similar to the Ram's skull, sprouting out from the back of the skull and abstracting their

overall shape. This generated a focus on not the shape of the skull, but on the material qualities of the combination of bone and glass.

The final product resulted in conceptually and materially interesting objects. The skulls speak about the fragility of life, but also the lasting impressions that one can leave on the world. Although the animals these skulls belong to are gone, they have left tactile traces of themselves behind. The skulls themselves are fragile, broken when I found them, requiring love and attention to mend them. This speaks about life as well. As humans, I feel we have an inherent desire to fix the broken. I acted upon this desire to mend, and although it is impossible to bring them back to their original form, I still tried. I used to duality of these frit sheets to reflect upon the skulls I attached them to and the tender, intensive process of mending. I find that the skulls are similar to Annette Messenger's "Les Repos de Pensionnaires" (1971-1972) (See figure 5), where she clothed tiny dead sparrows in hand knit sweaters. She is concerned with mending the broken, appealing to an aspect of human nature that I am exploring through material and process.

Through the layering in the skulls, and my personal interest in the perception of movement, I became interested in the layering possibilities of sheet glass. The transparency allows for multiple layers to be simultaneously visible, and the ability to alter the back side of the glass allows for play with perception. I began by sectioning off the visuals of a running wolf into five parts, painting them in black enamel and positioning them vertically in a tall frame. I repeated the process with a flying eagle. The vertical positioning read similar to a book, left to right and top to bottom, but I wanted to create more depth.

I then wanted to explore different layering techniques, and decided to layer the enameled glass sheets one behind the other. I wanted to use the imagery of a running wolf

pack, playing on the fact that a wolf pack functions as a unit made of singular entities. Wolf packs function as a unit, running as one to hunt down prey and protect territory. I layered 12 sheets of glass, a common number for a large world pack, each enameled with a single running wolf, one on top of each other in a wooden frame. The red oak frame mimics the environment wolves live in, framing them both literally and contextually.

Through material exploration, I found that the power given to my layered enamel paintings came not only from the images I used, but also the texture given to the back side of the glass. Firing the sheets of glass on primed kiln shelves gave the backside a smooth texture, while firing the sheets on top of kiln paper produced a textured back. The sheets with a textured back layered gave the final piece a foggy feel, alluding to a vast amount of space between the wolf pack, making it appear almost infinite. This is easily seen in my piece, “As One” (See figure 6).

I believe in the importance of familiarizing oneself with materials to gain the vocabulary necessary for expression. My work, therefore, is centered upon material exploration, and personal connections with material. For me, these are generally glass and natural objects like pelts and bones. I believe I am able to create pieces that are conceptually significant to me and my body of work. Material exploration has led me down new roads that I otherwise would have not found. I feel that all artists should develop an intimacy with material, and use this intimacy to inform their work and expression.

Figure 1:



Gracia Nash

Mend Series, Ram

Ram Skull, Glass

2012-2013

Figure 2:



Gracia Nash

Mend Series, Ram

Ram Skull, Glass

2012-2013

Figure 3:



Gracia Nash

Mend Series, Deer

Deer Skull, Glass

2014

Figure 4:



Gracia Nash

Mend Series, Deer

Deer Skull, Glass

2014

Figure 5:



Annette Messenger

“Les Repos de Pensionnaires”

Sparrows, Yarn

1971-1972

Figure 6:



Gracia Nash

As One

Glass, Enamel, Red Oak

2014