

Master of Fine Arts Thesis



The Regular Unnamables

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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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*The dao that can be spoken is not the consent Dao.  
 The name that can be named is not the constant name.  
 Nameless— the beginning of the heavens and the earth.  
 Named— the mother of the ten thousand beings.  
 Thus, constantly desireless, one may observe its subtlety.  
 Constantly desiring, one may observe its boundaries.  
 These two emerge from sameness, but differ in name.  
 This sameness is called “mysterious.”  
 Mysterious and again more mysterious—  
 The gateway to all that is wondrous  
 — Dao De Jing<sup>1</sup>*

*Philosophy begins in wonder  
 —Socrates*

*O soft flower of the field  
 O green vigor of the sweet apple  
 O weightless burden  
 —Hildegard von Bingen<sup>2</sup>*

*Tonight the act of naming fell through the floor.  
 — Jonathan William Stout<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Laozi, *Book of Venerable Masters*, trans. Louis Komjathy (Hong Kong: The Yuen Yuen Institute, 2008), chap.1, 56.

<sup>2</sup> Hildegard von Bingen, “O Jerusalem, Sequence for St. Rupert” in *Hildegard of Bingen: Selected Writings*, trans. Mark Atherton (London: Penguin 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan William Stout, “On The Importance of Diverse Emotions” (master’s thesis, University of Iowa, 2016)

# Acknowledgments

First, thank you to my family for your unwavering love & support. Thank you Mo, Max, Cory, Brian, Wanying, Sooj, Grant, & the MFA classes of 2017 & 2019—I'm so glad it was you. Gratitude to Walter McConnell, Linda Sormin, Matt Kelleher, Linda Sikora, & Jason Green for your guidance & dedication: Thank you. Thanks to John Gill for your compassion, astonishing abstraction, & contagious generosity. Chase Folsom, thank you for your humor & thoughtful conversation. Im grateful to Wayne Higby, Meghan Jones, Andrea Gill, Anne Currier, Will Contino, Whitney Hubbs, & Karen Donnelan for your teaching & studio visits. Thank you Chase Angir—you are a force. Colleen Cully—thanks for your teaching, friendship, & salvation in the form of bodily realignment. Thanks to Keith, Shawn, Hannah, Luke, Chris, Freddy, & Billie. Jesse Plass, thanks for your patience & integrity. I am grateful to Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Grand Valley State University, NCECA, Alfred's visiting artists & scholars committee and the Bernsteins. Gratitude to my students - your willingness to plunge into the unknown but-tressed my doing the same. Special thanks to Ethan, Simone, Mac, Jenna, Grace & others who helped with the installation of The Regular Unnamables: you were the Athena to my Odysseus. Love and thanks to Owen Moon. Love and gratitude to Steve Sobeck, Spencer Ebbinga, and the rest of my Tacoma Family: the Petersons, Kellë, Tom, Andrea, Anna, Greg, Gary, Cindel, Reed, Andrew ("Jr."), Heather, Kaitlin... Thank you Mandi Salov. Deep gratitude to Louis Komjathy & Kate Townsend for showing me the threads of the Dao. Finally thanks to Jonathan William Stout for your unmatched love & friendship.

# Abstract

Like poetry, my work resists categorization. Mutually exclusive categories are mythical. I am not part of any movement. My primary motivations are curiosity and awe. Materials have transformative effects, have transcendent consequences.



*Viewfinder*

# Paradox and the Ineptitude of Naming

A dispersed cloud of mist rises from a grey-green canopy of foliage. The mist hangs in large sheets suspended and spinning in the air, dropping almost to the ground. Each reflects the light and image of the space around it. The canopy raises to large peaks in several places. Two oval spaces open up as two large floppy flowers push their way through the layer, their long, wavy wooden stems protruding from two bramble clusters below. Each stem of the clusters holds a glistening wet pod. The pods consist of flowers, chromosomes, fruits, cups, and latticed bulbs. Below the crisscrossing clusters and their pods are two black steaming pools surrounded by red moss. The undulating foliage whose ruffling folds reflect the light in soft gray-green becomes a tent, a dress, a stage, a forest, a garden, a womb<sup>4</sup>, and a series of protrusions.

The installation is feminine and masculine, not one thing but many. Viewed from above, the canopy reveals an image whose motif echoes throughout the space in varying iterations.

Two dense black ink blots reflect each other's imperfect symmetry on a white page. Their dark weight makes its presence felt as the organ-sized forms confront the body of the viewer. While the viewer settles into the gaze of the double blots, the black forms sudden-

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<sup>4</sup> Because of the biblical narrative, femininity has historically been associated with nature, as that which is fallen. Masculinity has been associated with recovery and inventions that ease human suffering. Through this work I mean to address and problematize these conceptions.

ly invert into receding voids and the surrounding white page leaps forward to become the new prominent image.

The investigation of paradox in my work problematizes perceived binary relationships. I ask whether and when it is possible for a thing (or being) to be itself and something else at the same time. Pairings are ubiquitous. When two like forms are placed side by side they conjure a sense of magnetism and of reflection. They may be read as siblings, lovers, multiple aspects of a self, as self and ‘other’, as cells dividing/multiplying, or as branches of simultaneous potentiality. Longing is inherent. The symmetry and scale evoke bodies, faces, eyes, and the psychological implications of the Rorschach test.

Equal in importance as the pairing of like forms in my work is the tension created by juxtaposition. Rigid geometric bars melt into pinkish soft ripples. A full volumetric, chrome-yellow limb flattens into an unglazed terra-cotta ‘shadow’. A room-sized ruffled fabric piece is entered as a sculptural installation from below and viewed from above as an image or ‘object painting’. The fabric appears again in the space as a photograph of its ruffles being penetrated by an androgynous face pondering an apple. This work tests the integrity of the borders between image, object, installation, painting, photography, and performance.

It calls into question the exclusionary categories we place on ourselves and on many of our sociocultural constructs: mind/body, male/female, self/other, right/wrong, etc. I aim

to recognize the inherent contingency of these perceived binaries and to contest an either/or model. I work to foreground the spectrum of complexity and the interdependence between named categories.



*Paradise in a Mirror (view from above)*





*Paradise in a Mirror (ground view)*



## Ecstatic Physicality

Yellow tendrils hang off a many-stemmed plant-like form whose limbs are capped with downward-pointing cups, as if to suction or drop some subtle vapor. A swirling blue and white coating sloughs over the surface of the hemispheres, leaves, and stalks whose structure is stilted from below by a dark architecture. Fluid pools as chrome yellow, blue, white, and lavender-gray merge into a single sheet at the feet of the entity. The upper region rises on one side into a curling mass of pinkish tubes, part plant, part animal, and the other inflates into an engorged peach-like bulb the size of a small melon — a foreign organ.

Materials have an embodying effect that amplifies our sense of physicality and evokes desire and longing. Small stimuli can trigger awe: the quality of cast light in a hallway, a perfectly balanced espresso, flecks of unlikely color in irises. In the studio I am repeatedly astounded by the binding power of dye, the stiffening potential of wheat paste, and ceramics: the crystal growth of a matte glaze, the acutely improbable hardening, alchemical changes from chalky powder to lustrous wet deep color, layered chromatic sheets suspended in liquid/non-liquid glaze, the pinging sound that belongs uniquely to cooling crystalized silica matrices, that tremendous heat, that penetrating light.



Foreign Organ

# A Personal History

As the daughter of a Lutheran minister from Montana, I was raised with a world view like a pair of glasses with mismatched lenses. One lens was blue and the other maybe yellow.

I spent a lot of time in the wilderness and knew that I was part of it. I was wild and dreamt of leaving society and becoming a wild horse. I wanted to gallop through fields and marshes, wind blowing my mane, a free, romantic creature.

I was taught an origin story about an early paradise called Eden. The idea of that place made me think of how everything in the mountains smells like huckleberries in Summer. Eve ate fruit that made her like God. God told them anything but that fruit — he set them up. She ate and knew she was naked like the animals. She was ashamed enough to cover herself with leaves. Adam ate it too —because of her.

What kind of story was that? What was the point? Was Eve more to blame than Adam? Was Eve me? As a little girl I felt guilty- like I was at fault for being separated from nature, that somehow I was to blame for the difference between girls and horses.

We were Lutheran so we had grace. I questioned all the improbable stories but grace made sense. It felt inherent in who I was the way horses felt inherent.

We were a part of nature, but were also fallen from God. God made nature and was full of forgiveness, was bigger than nature and bigger than love even. How?

They told me about heaven, a strange place that seemed so bright it might hurt- and if God was there you couldn't look at him for the radiance. Golden streets, many mansions, pearl gates, a river, and the bridge my father said he'd meet me at. I wonder if there will be some kind of bridge. I had so many questions.

A liberal arts education caused my questions to multiply. I was interested in everything and struggled to commit to a major. Eventually I chose art, resolving to engage a diverse set of interests through my work. I minored in art history and took classes in religious studies, classics, and the sciences.

Studying science stirred me. Enzymes pass through cell walls by being the exact right shape to fit into the 'revolving door' of the double lipid layer. The shared polarity of water molecules and skin is what makes the drops stick to bodies — electromagnetism. With fascination came a kind of reverence for, and attention to, the minute and the grand and the exacting complexity of the physical world.

Religion both in and outside of school captivated my attention as well. An interest in mysticism developed as I read the writings of Rhineland mystics. I learned about Bud-

dhist meditation and in the Tibetan Book of the Dead I read of adepts' visions of bardos<sup>5</sup> and deities. How could people, even those of the same religion, have such different 'direct' encounters with the divine? They told their stories with such conviction. Attending guided meditations in a veritable tour of the many Buddhist temples around the Seattle area, I began a dedicated practice of Vipassana<sup>6</sup>.

In the Spring of my senior year of college I found Daoism. Its worldview and teachings, rooted in ancient Chinese cosmology and geomancy focus on alignment with nature and quietistic practice as a path to realization. The practice is experiential, rooted in nourishing life (Yangsheng/養生), quiet sitting (jingzuo/静坐), and attention to the body as the foundation for spiritual growth. Complete Perfection (Quanzhen/全真) Daoism is the lineage with which I most closely associate<sup>7</sup>. Daoistic notions heavily influence my life and work as does a continuing curiosity about mysticism and spiritual practice in its myriad forms.

Art helps me examine the links and resonances between my interests. Material gives my ideas a body. It continues to serve that function as I delve deeper into various branches of my research and connect these to an ever-growing pool of life experiences.

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<sup>5</sup> The liminal states between death and rebirth.

<sup>6</sup> Vipassana is a Buddhist form of emptiness meditation.

<sup>7</sup> For more on Daoism I would refer readers to <http://daoistfoundation.org>



*Staring at Myself Staring Back at Myself*



# Artistic Motivations

*People say that what we're all seeking is a meaning for life. I don't think that's what we're really seeking. I think that what we're seeking is an experience of being alive, so that our life experiences on the purely physical plane will have resonances within our own innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.<sup>8</sup>*

— Joseph Campbell

Throughout history objects of contemplation testify to the human urge to have our inner desires fulfilled outwardly. Illuminated manuscripts, ‘ritual’ objects of stone from antiquity, and alchemical aspirations of achieving immortality through the transmutation of base metals evidence the human urge to seek completion and transcendence by physical means — to attain spiritual effects from material catalysts.

Transcendent experiences are often rooted in a heightened sense of physicality: ornate patterning on prayer rugs, the spinning of whirling dervishes, brightly painted filigreed pages, the touch of gold-tipped brush to parchment. Materials resonate with bodies and can amplify our perception of the physical basis of our lives. They can evoke immediate desire and sustained longing.

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, ed. Betty Sue Flowers (New York: Doubleday, 1998)

Reaching towards rapture is at the heart of my artistic practice. My motivating questions involve fundament, the nature of the phenomenological world, the human experience, spirituality, transcendence, cultural and religious practices, and scientific study. I draw on sources that document the ways in which humans seek, and the many paths to rapture.



*The Seer*



*Desire*



*Passion*

# Poiesis<sup>9</sup>

## Over and Over, Like I Did

I will never unimbibe    like I did over  
 & over deal with the remains  
 Trust in no        god        everywhere

A brush drags across    I will never unimbibe

Mallards mate for life    clean    clean the mark  
 Of your lines turned out    missing it

Nothing happens        for centuries  
 Read all the books        become everything else  
 In the trees        your dirty graphite        deal  
 With the remains        imaginary morning  
 Wishing  
 Nothing  
 The world        your face        make love  
 Where is        the sameness  
 Like I did        over & over

Counterpart        letting go letting go  
 Sleep    land around us    what is gone?  
 Green red        alive dead  
 Line blend        long wait  
 Satisfaction  
 Other  
 Mallards mate for life    green red

Over the edges    what is it?  
 Value  
 Crayon stuck in    my  
 Mate for life  
 Pursue    or home    set my apple core down

(If I) walk backwards in a line will the years start over?  
 Over    The dog        your black eyes  
 We could build something  
 Green to black    another        duality  
 Fall back        fall  
 You never finish all the milk  
 Work early        I'll get it later    crumble into ourselves  
 Contentment how are you attained?  
 Mouths covered    a pair        quite give enough  
 Completion        quite give enough        obsession  
 My long hair    reach out over and over    I

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<sup>9</sup> The following three poems are original compositions.

Lover Letting completion two  
 Off on leaving supple ample  
 Held up down

Enough what you gave me what once  
 Your drawings smoke cigarettes sickening  
 Eating an apple broken longing  
 I'm gone our land Is this the stuff of centuries ?

Isolate linger  
 Me longing  
 Maybe it was always me apple always  
 Impatient skin fall take your with me ]

In or out or in out what is  
 Marriage? another you're here you're gone  
 Probably you would go red to black  
 Broth in your soup dragonfly green  
 Name the thing without saying it  
 When is it over a promise

I always why see you tomorrow  
 Love I turned over we apart for different reasons  
 Even though you want to

Your face in the morning  
 I want to be you probably  
 In the doorway your presence it's over  
 Do anything to leave come home  
 Presence scattered  
 Over still light obsessed myself I don't  
 A perfect triangle

Other smoke in keep to yourself  
 Double double corpse eventually anyway  
 Myself I won't you again  
 The milk is in the bowls  
 Lover, every lover

## Foreign Organ

I oxidize

Under a leaf watching its curl loosen,

Spread over the elements I redouble a carbon offering

An unfastening extends to the waiting and it's made of the greenest parts

I, Wearing your eyes as a garment, lay down like a baby

I am leaving out syllables of what I wanted for you in a daughter

The cry in your belly goes as a tonal shift, a spreading asymmetry.

It goes as coins the size of eyes into a deep fountain.

Now your ballast is in place I can finally say this:

I am a darkness dancer, sporting fine light-eating intricacies.

My hair is a mile long and dragging on the ocean floor\ the ground

Is becoming a whole wave and a grower of a dream of arrangements

Along a metal line imperceptible but I sense

It always moving

Re-become (as if to make a shift.) I talk

To my lover in the morning Love(r)

In the morning to let go of what is enough to

Make a change completely dissolve

Your skin —incarnate object— makes mine withdraw into something

I don't recognize five phase key

Beneath reduced chrome crystals. In the chrysalis

The caterpillar completely dissolves before reforming

Into a new kind of creature

So slow one cannot see it moving even though it

Always is Rhythms bring observers

That blush of blood through your skin brings me

To see you unfurl foreign organ love(r)

In the morning- to let go

Half an hour before I'm awake yet the south

Pole holds still and a builder of a dream

Of a forest and everything beneath

Us moves around it still smell the rain

And step back through the sloped window punch the fighting

Spiders to determine a winner collapse



Like a sea creature under the weight      [wait]      unscore  
 What has fallen out    of this instrument      rattle  
 Down this perspiring loop

If a Silent Generation dancer can perform    through Millennial bodies      still  
 What more is possible (?)      to love    someone you've never met  
 Till now by looking in their eyes      to swell into a massive space  
 dust again,      weld the teeth to the ends of the fingertips, lay  
 Down like a baby,    become overtaken    by a swarm of peace.  
 Know something about love    by moving slowly.    love  
 Someone you've never met. look    at their eyes.

Pour a pool of water onto the floor    wash in it,  
 Like a desperate fish    hold your lung      in the palm  
 Of your hand

Hold a shell to the parts of your body you most wish  
 Could weep    foreign organ      weep with the body  
 You most wish you could embody    remember  
 To breathe into your stomach      your expansion    will continue  
 To hold you      you can trust this

## Origin Tap

Steady down, origin tap, my particular emblem. As a body  
 how you watered me down the days I slumped in dry dirt. I  
 bent under your wave particle pattern I was to fold under  
 white-tipped sacrament (My waist bends in many directions.  
 My knees and ankles and neck also bend)

Could I exorcise nostalgia? Trumpeter time, wounding tyrant  
 (brash mean queen) Universe, you have wrecked us, you  
 did it over and over Universe thaw and return arbiter  
 of one-last-tries selves mender,

Her fluid lines are amassing clusters, her rush slowed —the tunnels  
 that play that old rush-rhythm, scared of the day, and, yes, they  
 will turn off. Gush give up. Dammed river, log-tied flow strike

Aliveness discharge. I can see that star-built organ pounding in your  
 neck, the artery slightly flicking in horizontal light —it casts its own little \  
 sideways shadow. Who will be my surrogate when you leave?  
 I follow it, but cannot see its back. Deliverer, my other, stay.



*Part Bird Already*



*Ritual Object*



*Selves Mender*

# Glossary of Insights and Influences

**The unknowableness of the sacred does not relent.** It washes over again and again, a wave like the whole sea —some great force. It arrives at the window, a hungry bird that I do not know how to feed. I make offerings, motions. Sometimes I think it grows in silence.

*To know that you do not know is best. To not know that you are knowing is sickness.*<sup>10</sup>

*Deep and clear, it seems as though it exists.*

*I do not know whose descendent it is;*<sup>11</sup>

**Dao (道)** is a Chinese character most often translated into English as “way”. For Daoists, it is the unknowable ultimate sacred Source. Once I talk about it I am no longer talking about it. It is much too big for words and ideas. It is everything, and it is complete emptiness.

**Relativity:** there are no absolutes. Everything is contingent.

*But the serpent said to the woman, ‘You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then*

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<sup>10</sup> Book of Venerable Masters, trans. Louis Komjathy (Hong Kong: The Yuen Yuen Institute, 2008), chap. 71, 74.

<sup>11</sup> Book of Venerable Masters, trans. Louis Komjathy (Hong Kong: The Yuen Yuen Institute, 2008), chap. 4, 57.

*the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.*<sup>12</sup>

### **Apple:**

*Genesis 3 begins with ‘the woman’s’ temptation by the serpent and the consumption of the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. (In the Renaissance this fruit became an apple, owing to a play on the Latin word *bad*, or *malum*, which also means *apple*).*<sup>13</sup>

**Desire has everything to do with nourishing life.** It leads beings to consume, to regenerate, to thrive and grow and continue as species on their particular evolutionary lines. Overindulged, it can lead to dissipation.

**Roarschach** ink blots: the fewer fractal details existing in an image, the more variety of images people see. Complexity leads to specificity.<sup>14</sup>

**Division causes multiplication:** waterways, blood vessels, plants, evolutionary lines, our own cells - ground of our materiality. Differentiation begets diversification.

**Duality of the self:** In the Daoist tradition, it is thought that there are two aspects of the self. One is referred to as innate nature. This is the essential self, aligned, rooted in divinity. The other is the habituated self—this one is corruptible, is practiced and creates patterns that influence the type of being one becomes. Every action

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<sup>12</sup> Gen. 3:4 NRSV

<sup>13</sup> Carolyn Merchant, *Reinventing Eden* (New York & London: Routledge, 2004), 14.

<sup>14</sup> Ian Sample, “Why Do we See so Many Different Things in Rorschach Ink Blots?”, *The Guardian*, 2017.



(and every non-action) is an “opportunity for self-cultivation and spiritual clarification.”<sup>15</sup>

**Regret** is a good thing because it teaches you.<sup>16</sup>

**“I thought I finally found you, Joshua,** floating in  
your white boat in the ocean. I dove into the ocean to  
save you, but when I surfaced, the white boat  
was gone. The ocean was a flat red floor. I looked past my  
self standing on shore. I stared at myself  
staring at myself. And I stared back at myself  
staring back at myself. There is more than one  
world in the world, and when a world finds  
another world it finally knows to feel alone.”<sup>17</sup>

**Compassion:** putting on another life as a garment.

**What if the big bang were to finish and reverse?** Instead of dying you would just get  
un-grown in a womb. You would be pulled back into your mother with an un-  
fightable force, be absorbed back into her and be reborn through everything she  
would un-eat.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Paraphrase of a statement made by Louis Komjathy during a teaching at the Gallagher Cover Daoist Foundation in 2011.

<sup>16</sup> Eiko Otake (lecture at Alfred University, Holmes Auditorium, Alfred, NY, March, 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Zachary Schomburg, *The Book of Joshua* (Boston: Black Ocean, 2014), 26.

<sup>18</sup> Conversation with colleagues on a road trip from Alfred University to Grand Valley State University, October 2017.

**Shadows** — “the things that make me turn a little left when I’m makin’ a right turn.”<sup>19</sup>

**We leave more than we are.** Our marks and echoes outlive us.

**Ontology:** Some days, the moment I wake up, the astonishing improbability of being  
alive floods into me.



**This** is an image of the inside of finger lit by a flash.

**Rapture:** 1: an expression or manifestation of ecstasy or passion

2 a: a state or experience of being carried away by overwhelming emotion

b: a mystical experience in which the spirit is exalted to a knowledge of divine  
things.<sup>20</sup>

**Art** is a ground, an embodiment for ideas, a physicality for longing.



*Sisters, Not Twins*

<sup>19</sup> Maxwell Mittman about the artwork of Kara Walker, 2017.

<sup>20</sup> “rapture,” *Merriam-Webster.com*, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com> (10, February, 2018).



*Down That Perspiring Loop*

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*The Soft Body on the Inside of Your Body (Impossible Gate)*



# Technical Statement

## Sculpture Body ^04-10

Hawthorne	45
Nepheline Syenite	30
OM4	15
EPK	7
Talc	3

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100

Add:

Bentonite	3
20 Mesh Grog	30
35 Mesh Grog	30

TP (One stuffed 5-gallon bucket per 275 lb Muller batch)

Nylon fiber (One big handful per 275 lb Muller batch)

Notes: I mix paper, grog, and nylon fiber into this clay to make a super-clay. This clay is great for hand building, has a very high dry strength and can be built wet on top of bone dry, bisqued, or glazed clay. Some cracking at the joints between wet and fired clay can occur but this is fairly easily remedied by packing more into the cracks and firing a second time. It's a pinkish color when fired to ^04. I typically fire to ^01 to get rid of the pinkish bisque look and bring it to a light warm tan color.



**V.C.1 Low Fire Slip <sup>21</sup>^04**

Tennessee Ball Clay	20
Frit 3124	20
Nepheline Syenite	12
Kona F-4 Feldspar	10
Borax	3
Flint	20
Zircopax	15

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 100

Notes: Cushing suggests a dry application but I have used it on every state with slightly different effects. It adheres better to a bone dry, bisque, or glazed surface than a wet or leather hard surface. This slip has a glossy white glaze-like surface at ^04-^01. I have added paper to it and used it as a self-glazing clay body to build small objects. It has a high-gloss surface but will slump a bit even at ^04. It slumps a lot at ^01. I also apply it thick as a surface treatment to get a chunky “soft”-looking textured surface. It creates a broken gloopy texture over a glazed surface and lets some of the glaze show between the cracks (see image of *Foreign Organ*).

Another interesting thing about this slip/body is that with the paper a subtle carbon trapping can occur on the surface even in a ^04 electric firing.

This slip with paper added can be used to repair broken ceramic pieces, even functional work. Apply it as a “glue” and it will hold together when dry. It fluxes enough at ^04 to

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<sup>21</sup> Val M. Cushing, *Cushing's Handbook*, (self-pub., Alfred University, 1994).

bind and seal the pieces together but not enough for the piece to melt apart. I have used it to repair several cups that had broken into multiple pieces. Apply a little extra to allow for shrinkage or small pinholes and gaps will open up and you will have to add more and fire again. Keep in mind that any decals and lusters will burn off partially at ^04.

#### **V.C.7 Low Fire Slip<sup>22</sup> ^04**

Grolleg	30
Nepheline Syenite	10
Frit 3124	28
Gerstley Borate	11
Flint	20
Bentonite	1
<hr/>	
	100

Notes: Cushing says to add 6% bentonite if you want to use this on wet clay. I haven't tried that. I have used this as a ^04 body but it requires paper or it is impossibly short and has an extremely poor dry strength. Without paper it is similar to trying to build with Egyptian Paste (or wet sand). This recipe either as a slip or a body is translucent, fairly white, and slightly glossy. As a body it looks a lot like porcelain. It slumps slightly at ^04 and is mildly pinkish. At ^01 it is white but slumps significantly more. I only build with it when extreme slumping is desired. It works well with stains and small amounts of metallic oxides incorporated and can be applied thick over glazed pieces to create textured surfaces.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.



*Viewfinder (detail)*