

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

*Yogurt Yoga*

*Nora Arrieta*

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

(2019)

Nora Arrieta, MFA

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Nora Arrieta".

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*“Nora and I are good friends, I think. Maybe even lovers. Me, resilient, fast drying, first soft and smooth, then cracked, and her: the impatient, the restless and crude, thoughts constantly rattling like an old and ramshackle chariot on a wobbly pavement. I often need to cover my ears. Sometimes she is good and tender to me but mostly not: jittery hands, she is knitting and pressing me, satisfied easily, happy about results, afraid to destroy the direct and natural grown, avoiding extensive treatment. I’m thrown in a gloomy chamber to be silent after, not able to participate anymore. She coats me with a sticky layer and after a second or more enduring in the heat we are melted together for an eternity, watching her beginning the game again and living happily ever after.”*

***“Awakening is a graduated process that goes on in the life of the individual as in the life of generations. Sleep its initial state. A generation’s experience of youth has much common with the experience of dreams.”<sup>1</sup>***

*My sister and I are sitting on the floor being in full contemplation about our game involving a Playmobil dragon, little plastic dogs, an oversized oven baked clay figure wearing pants made from socks and another Playmobil knight. We think about who should be swallowed by an indulgent dragon.*

...

*I sit in my studio. It is a bit lonelier but still a similar feeling of sitting on the floor for hours and being absorbed by play. Fragments of names buzzing around were given to knights and stuffed animals, we are repeating texts from the endless watched VHS. Painted card board buildings are the background noise, plastic figures and DIY toys the actors in the ephemeral performance. The cabinet is a tower. The bed is the ocean or better the sky, with the pillows as a Luck Dragon. Between two chairs a gorge, and whoever falls in is lost.*

...

*The morning is dark and cold when I was walking to kindergarten with my mom, my stuffed animal stowed in my knapsack. I was whispering to him and explaining our missions of the ventures at my job today. Toys are thankful listeners, projection screens for monologue that nobody else is supposed to listen to.*

...

*Snow is glittering in the light of the street lantern. The future is as far as its dim up there. Childhood is a serious matter but it is muffled in a warm coat of dreams. Fears and dreads are fed by fantasy, equally wishes and desires. The magic world seems to be reachable and tactile -its seduction goes deep in the coat pocket, and disappointment of its emptiness occurs later after years of scrabbling and digging.*

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin, Walter, and Rolf Tiedemann. 1999. The Arcades Project. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press., p. 388

## Imaginations

To think about childhood is to think about memory through the lens of sentimental blurred glass: Remembering creates sentimentalism and objects are seen in the soft and dim light of the past. It is not necessary for artists to talk about their childhood. For me it is one starting point.

Longing is wanting to be somewhere else. Regression is a term for inappropriate and infantile behavior. Rather than further investigating that phenomenon I explore the fantastic perception of reality that we experience in youth. Surrealist artists were looking for reality transforming substances to manipulate their perception and to create artificial dreams. By working in clay I am more excited about the subjective experienced relationship between memory, emotion and history. As a grown up the images and themes I am visualizing are not necessarily from my childhood. Nonetheless, I want to create a gaze that judges, doesn't grade, that is innocent and omniscient, a gaze full of emotions without even knowing what these are.

My figurative sculpture is relatively close to fantastic realism. Throughout history, sculpture has been always connected to magic. Artists create a picture of longing, or they translate longing in an object of contemplation. Rather than forming a picture from reality, fantastic imagination creates an image of deformation, a "*dissolution of the form.*"<sup>2</sup> According to Walter Benjamin, "*The world of new manifestations that thus comes into being as the result of this dissolution of what has been formed has its own laws, which are those of the imagination.*"

Clay dissolves. My work is in a tension between figuration and abstraction as material by itself obtrudes. In the working process with clay actions of adding and removing, growing and shrinking are in a simultaneously constant dialog.

Material is filled with aura--ceramic aura that is mostly shaped by our imagination about its making processes. To the question of what aura is, Benjamin observes that it is "*a strange tissue*

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<sup>2</sup> Benjamin, Walter, Marcus Bullock, and Michael W. Jennings. 2004. *Selected Writings*, Volume 1, Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, p. 280

*of space and time: the unique apparition of a distance, however near it may be.*"<sup>3</sup> Looking at ceramics, distance is experienced by the imagination of the former state of the raw clay, including firing processes, heat, labor and time.

Time is a crucial factor anyway. Sculpting involves active engagement. The dialog with the material and creating are mentally related with aspects of play. However, other than its performative quality, ceramics, so long as it is fired, contain the active choices of its maker, forever. Moments of the present are conserved, and thus become history. Nobody can deny the strong fascination that a many thousands of years old shard still has on the viewer. We see a finger imprint, how the clay was pushed, and the irregularity of painting at the surface. It is possible to imagine its moment of creation. The transition of the soft material to the vitrified object is carried by the aura: The two lives of clay, its soft state of making and its silent life of existing.

Play is not only present in my haptic relationship with clay. Imagery is built in the way toy bricks are shifted around on the floor. I create a subjective perception of reality using different scales that are merged in one object. Scale can refer to the importance of things and it can translate perspective. Most visual choices are made simultaneously with conceptual intent. Scale, repetition and ornament can support the absurd moment where mundane motifs are celebrated.

### Imagery

Mundane objects are connected to experiences that are cheap and easy to get. The familiar is the most magical. Smelling a dusty old cabinet or watching an old cartoon might bring us back to forgotten and buried memories.

Images and meanings are everywhere. The noise of objects rushes through walls. A water faucet is a well, the river goes through the pipes like Smetana's Moldau throughout Bohemia greeting a

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<sup>3</sup> Benjamin, Walter, Howard Eiland, and Michael W. Jennings. 2006. *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility: Second version*. Selected Writings, Volume 2, Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, p.104-105

farmer's wedding and the mermaids in the moonshine. Bored and dry home plants are listening, spending their lives behind the window with fly screen dreaming of strong trees, Romanticism and German forests. The mundane magic spell is served on a daily base by moving and bright images on flat light displays. Reality is transformed by seemingly endless options to overcome time and space, not only with these handy ingenuities of technology and the invisible interactive space behind the glass surface, but also through spanning distances with aluminum-made tons weighting birds. These daily and common idiosyncrasies might make forget us not only the vulnerability of our own bodies but finally the violability of the environment we are originally from.

The things I am sculpting are ordinary as they are essential: doesn't a human soul look like oil dripping warm fries spilled with a load of ketchup that pastes to someone's lips and sticks to the fingers leaving a glossy fatty film? Souls have been always unfathomable. Where is the paradise that we don't believe in and that we never saw? Maybe it is under the Yoga mat, in a gym or hiding in the shower cabin of the changing room. Or maybe it is in a shopping mall where the short satisfaction of a shopping binge is glowing in the short light of bliss and fears of mortality are covered with purchasable objects. Maybe it is on Instagram and it gave you a Like, promising salvation. More likely redemption rather happens in the gut flora consuming right-and left-handed lactic acid cultures in a prebiotic yogurt.

Artificial environments are so familiar that we don't even recognize any more their notable sense of singularity. Sensory overload in urban environments is one of the main characteristics of contemporary life, with abundance its origin. The urban landscape and architecture cities are housing these collective and constantly vibrating oscillations of people. Benjamin concludes that these environments are "*dream houses of the collective: arcades, winter gardens, panoramas, factories, wax museums, casinos, railroad stations.*"<sup>4</sup> I capture pulsating abundances in clay and squeeze them to candies, hot dogs and pasta, subway seats, cars piled like puppies, dinosaur skeletons, dogs, patterned tights, and bicycles—dreamlike environments. Guy Debord comments that "*the spectacle is the stage at which the commodity has succeeded in totally colonizing social life. Commodification is not only visible, we no longer see anything else; the world we see is the*

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<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, Walter, and Rolf Tiedemann. 1999. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press.,p. 405

*world of commodity.*”<sup>5</sup> In sculpture this reality seems to transform into fiction. Fiction is true, at least for the author.

Time is short living today. Ceramics are the opposition. It is slow, takes time, needs testing, needs to be dried and fired. It is so much work and so much effort.

I am driven by the idea to take a slow but eternal material and put all ephemeral experiences of life in it. An active choice turns ordinary motifs in the space of history and in the materialistic chronicles of time. Not only the motifs are representing a fast pace of the present but also the traces of speed: cracked clay, Egyptian paste and glaze spilled like vomit, food, labor and images that are fast digested and excreted, sleeplessness in always awake, rattling nights on a highway in the light of endless honking cars in a traffic jam.

Throughout history figurative sculpture has been connected to iconography. Stories and how these are encoded creates symbolism which gives a special meaning to objects and persons. Advertisement is using pathetic imagery to create iconographic meanings to mundane entities with the purpose of capitalistic profit. Surrounded by these images, we are absorbing them and digesting their meanings deeply. Here, my work becomes humorous as I visualize the paradoxical relationships between fast-consumption and over-celebration, between the real use of an object and its commercialized idea of it. Through the remission of religion the present is confronted with the absurd of existence. Albert Camus states: “*Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.*”<sup>6</sup> This silence might be fed with purchasable goods. Finally it is unfortunately just a matter of more profit, almost tragic. But as Camus suggests we can encounter the lost sense of existence with empathy for each other instead of committing collective suicide. By humanizing objects I emphasize with human weakness (which doesn’t exclude myself) and explore the longing for paradise, even it is hidden in the mercenary substitute products.

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<sup>5</sup> Guy Debord. 1967. *Society of Spectacle*. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/guy-debord-the-society-of-the-spectacle.pdf>, p. 20

<sup>6</sup> Albert Camus. 1942. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, <https://www2.hawaii.edu/~freeman/courses/phil360/16.%20Myth%20of%20Sisyphus.pdf>, p.10

## Collections

Ceramics by itself have had a long history of being consumption objects and its history is connected with the history of collecting. Through amassing ceramics, collectors have had created environments that have become an immense cultural memory of material. *“Collecting is a form of practical memory, and of all the profane manifestations of “nearness” it is the most binding.”*<sup>7</sup> Collectors are artists who rather than creating objects, collect and arrange them to achieve integrity. Benjamin describes this separation from original function as the *“diametric opposite of any utility, and [...] peculiar category of completeness. [...] It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object’s mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressively devised historical system: the collection. And for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch [...]”*<sup>8</sup> Because of their popularity, ceramics have been even produced by manufactures in order to exist as a collector’s item for all social classes,<sup>9</sup> present today in a vast commercial supply.

Vessels have been always provided space for artistic expression. Other than painting and sculpture they contain the possible option of practical use. Thus, imagery has been strongly integrated in daily life, and styles have ranged from folklore to royalty, the same as the objects, their authors and owners. Looking at the imagery from the present point of view it is only possible to guess the purpose and content of their visual communication as every aesthetic is made for the present and the present culture that knows how to decode them.

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<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, Walter, and Rolf Tiedemann. 1999. *The Arcades Project*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press., p. 205

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin, Walter, and Rolf Tiedemann. 1999. *The arcades project*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press., p. 204-205

<sup>9</sup> One popular example from Germany is the tradition of “Sammeltassen” (“Collector’s Cups”) that have been produced widely since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century from different ceramic manufactures in order to collect and represent them in vitrines.



Objects of the past are sleeping. Disconnected from their origin utility they can only represent silent and implicit knowledge. The contemporary viewer projects both history and story on them: *Geschichte*,<sup>10</sup> one silent, the other vibrant in each viewer's mind.

Looking at historic objects I enjoy projecting imagination on them. When making my sculptures I leave an open space for the viewer's appropriation of the imagery and his or her own interpretation. By doing so I create a possibility for dialog with the object and the viewer. The imagery is left with some silence; not everything is outspoken, with the question of "How much do I need to show?" My imagery is subjective and might decode differently to every viewer who is finally encouraged to finish narration in his imagination.

#### *Comparing two collections:*

##### *1. Porcelain collection, Dresden, Germany*

###### *Memories of the porcelain:*

*"We live in a beautiful city in a valley next to a big river. Green wide meadows are verging on the shore. From the "Karl's Bridge" it is possible to see the panorama of Dresden, baroque towers of churches, opera, the art academy and the stone terrace in the front. Sometimes the water level increases and almost touches the bridge. The valley is surrounded by sand stone mountains and almost all buildings are made out of these, equally our home, a stone palace. Outside is a courtyard with water fountains, green grass, horses at the walls that are spewing water in pools. All walls are covered with sculpture reliefs of figures, fauns with the maddest faces that Nora had ever seen. She visited us very often. We looked at her, silent but pleased to see her again."*

Abundant ceramic collections of Chinese porcelain were not only present in Europe but in the Near East from where they possibly inspired the ideas of porcelain chambers. These turned, at the shift from the seventeenth to eighteenth century, from rooms where things were displayed to the room itself as a display.<sup>11</sup> The German term *Gesamtkunstwerk*<sup>12</sup> was adapted in English to describe this aesthetic desire for completeness.

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<sup>10</sup> "Geschichte": The German word for "history" is identical with "story"

<sup>11</sup> Michael Yonan Igneous Architecture: Porcelain, Natural Philosophy, and the Rococo cabinet chinois, Cavanagh, Alden, and Michael Elia Yonan. 2010. *The Cultural Aesthetics of Eighteenth-century Porcelain*. Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT;: Ashgate Pub., p. 72

<sup>12</sup> Engl. "synthesis of the arts"

Located in one of the most famous baroque buildings in Germany with an elaborate exhibition design,<sup>13</sup> the Dresden Porcelain Collection is equally represented in an architecture that speaks to the aesthetic of the objects: Elegant forms and materials representing royalty with a both playful and wealthy display. The Chinese Vases are presented in niches with silk tapestry, and the remains of the menagerie<sup>14</sup> of Augustus the Strong are enthroned on a golden iceberg under a velvet cupola. Figurines of laughing, dancing and jumping people are behind glass on white pedestals. The aesthetic seems so contemporary as the smooth, white surfaces of this fragile porcelain happiness have almost something in common with the representation of the self behind the filters of beautified Instagram images.

## 2. Museo Larco, Lima, Peru

*Memories, 2018: "I am in the museum Larco in Lima and wandering through walls full of vitrines full of thousands of ceramic vessels. It is the archive and contains 35.000 of them. The space is a labyrinth; behind every wall is another path presenting another collection of a certain spout or decoration. It takes some time to walk through the whole space. It feels like paradise. Everything looks simply beautiful and perfectly made. All vessels are sorted by style. Looking at the left there are hundreds of cat vessels. Looking at the right there are hundreds of corn vessels. I am looking for guinea pig vessels but I only find three. It seems like the Peruvian cultures had spread out the whole imagery of their life in their pots. This is only half true as the images are not just decoration but filled with deep meanings and symbolism that might have determined their use. A deer sitting on his butt and gazing with a friendly expression at the viewer has been a symbol for the ritual hunting and killing. Indeed, most of the innocent looking pots' imagery refers to brutal rituals and holy use. It is frustrating not being able to decode these images. However, they feed imagination and it is exciting to think about the illustrations and their meanings, and fantasize about the makers and their intents.*

The museum tries to create an order through classification of style and motif. That might be possible as styles are connected to a special time and history. However, South American culture was extensively destroyed and history vanished before it could have been explored. These objects are indeed silent with not much history left.

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<sup>13</sup> The exhibition designer is Peter Marino who is mostly famous for his space creations for showrooms like Chanel and Armani.

<sup>14</sup> Augustus commissioned a large group of life-sized animals in porcelain in 1731-36 for the Japanese Palace in Dresden.

Especially Moche ceramics are extensively elaborate and the shapes of the vessels are almost all sculptural, showing animals, people, food and landscapes. However, Rebecca R. Stone argues that

*“they do not comprise an encyclopedia of daily life , since cooking, childrearing, farming, and so on, were not illustrated.”*<sup>15</sup> The diversity is seen *“to have been of importance to the Moche, no doubt stimulated by complex ritual needs.”*<sup>16</sup> She adds: *“All types of these ceramics have added decoration, [...] Moche sculptors were often boldly virtuosic in their modeled additions, casually defying the risks of solid suspended clay parts drying, shrinking and breaking off.”*<sup>17</sup>

The drawings are so extremely complex and difficult to decode that it was possible that they were intentionally made only for a privileged high class, *“a political hierarchy [that] can exploit illegibility as an exclusionary strategy; an esoteric or mysterious image may be read only by the privileged few.”*<sup>18</sup>

I chose to describe both collections from my experience as they show quite contrary aesthetic concepts of the objects by themselves and the display in a museum. Here I am interested in the question how the aesthetic of display affects the single object and how the aesthetic of the object affects the display, and moreover which role quantity plays. Both collections contain vessels with figurative and sculptural decoration within the range of high fired white porcelain to low fired and slip decorated earthenware. They both transport different implicit knowledge about material and its relationship to the maker, the viewer and about the culture and society that produced them. In my final installation and exhibition I investigated the question of presentation, quantity and display with objects that I had made within the two years of the Master’s program.

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<sup>15</sup> Rebecca R. Stone. 2016. Art of the Andes. London. Thames and Hudson Ltd., p.92

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p.111

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p.111-112

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p.113

## Exhibition Statement

In the space, the ceramic objects turn into protagonists of experience that the viewer has primarily with space. I work with the concept of abundance and seek a sense of sensual overload in my installation. The narrations are created playfully. I work with different materials and media including pillows laying on the floor and hanging from the ceiling and film on a display and on a projection. The printed fabric and the film are extensions and translations of the stories, images, and aesthetics that are shown in the ceramics. They answer to those pieces in order to create new meanings and insights, e.g. by transferring the surface of the glaze into the fabric print or making an animated film, with the ceramics as the main protagonists. I create an open dialog without having some very specific in mind at the beginning but with a rhythm of meanings and connections that structure the space. Display plays an enormous role. It changes the narrative potential of an object and forms the relationship between the different sculptures. In the making process of the pieces I have vague idea of the whole space in my mind. However, the display is mostly still open until I start to install. When the sculptures leave the studio, they start a different relationship to each other in the gallery that becomes a stage, a market place or a playground that I enjoy to fill with imagery and meanings. I chose to make ceramic pedestals to extend the material sensuality to the floor and don't distract the experience of them with other material or white pedestals. Some ceramics are standing on pillows to provide a layer between the sculpture and the ceramic object underneath.

I address motifs of abundance, childhood, dreams and city environments through a playful, light and dreamy perspective. I speak not only to the present but also to the past by referring historical shapes and the succession of ceramic objects. I celebrate mundane motifs because of their non-meanings and because of the reason of absurdity. Through creating I don't find answers but joy.

## Technical statement

Fear is viscous and sticky when flying in the night over the Atlantic Ocean, joy runny like a waterfall in a river, shyness covered with a crumbly crust that might peel off, the not swallowed and digested anger not fully vitrified but pleasure well fluxed. Blood is as thick as porridge and *“time has the speed of yogurt.”*<sup>19</sup>

I visualize my subjectivity and emotional approach to my motifs with colors and the viscosity of glazes. To me, ceramic surface treatment is magical and its possibilities to use and combine different glazes make it an endless field of investigation. Ceramic glazes are melted layers. They cover form underneath, hiding the original thought and form. Fired clay and glaze are vitrified memories. Whereas the clay remains the mark of the maker the glaze maintains traces of gravity and frozen moments of the heat. Its colors and viscosity are the result of chemical reactions and processes.

The Loevheim cube of emotions describes the emotional relationship of the neurotransmitters serotonin, dopamine and noradrenaline. Can glazes too, be seen as a metaphor for the synaptic interaction of fluxes, oxides and glass formers again creating emotions and colors?

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<sup>19</sup> Andrés Monzon

## Recipes:

### Nora's Beads (04):

Custer Feldspar:	37.87
Silica:	21.27
Whiting:	1.53
EPK:	8.49
Strontium Carbonate:	4.3
Gerstley Borate:	19.17
Zinc Oxide:	5.46
Bentonite:	1.91

### Andrés' Birthday (04):

Slightly crystalline, blue glaze.

Needs to be applied thin, can run. Be careful with the amount of Cobalt Carbonate.

Nepheline Syenite:	17.91
Whiting:	15.99
Lithium carbonate:	10.73
EPK:	8.61
Silica:	17.96
Frit 3110:	4.43
Barium Carbonate:	7.87
Minspar 200:	14.76
Cooper Carbonate:	0.25
Cobalt Carbonate:	0.05
Bentonite:	1

### Blue Foam (Cone 6)

Very blue, thick, chunky glaze. Can be poured in molds (Silica: Plaster, Volume 1:1).

To make the foam, mix the glaze and weight it (creamy consistence) and add the same weight of silica to it.

Without the extra silica it is a very runny, blue glaze (Jason Green's recipe collection).

G-200 Feldspar:	42
Gerstley Borate:	11
Soda Ash:	6
Whiting:	8
Barium Carbonate:	6
Lithium Carbonate:	6
Silica:	21

### Melted Cheese (Cone 6)

Goopy paste. More Silica can be added which makes it stiff.

Minspar 200:	86.5
Frit 3195:	4.5
Veggum:	9
Silica:	10
Stain:	7

### Snot (Cone 6)

Altered recipe from “Marshmallow” (Jason Green’s recipe collection). Foamy with lots of air bubbles. Try different stains.

Custer Feldspar:	40
Frit 3124	9
Whiting:	16
Talc	9
EPK	10
Flint	16
Tin	5
Silicon Carbid:	0.3
Stain:	5

### Alfred Winter (Cone 6)

White crawl glaze, very smooth but might craze when applied thickly. Looks like melted snow.

Nepheline Syenite:	36.59
Magnesium Carbonate:	9.76
Om4 Ball Clay:	1.46
Zinc Oxide:	0.98
Custer Feldspar:	19.51
Frit 3124:	4.39
Whiting:	7.8
Talc:	4.39
EPK:	4.88
Silica:	7.8
Tin:	2.44

### Clay:

I used not very special clay bodies and worked a lot with the recycled clay. This slip is very good for covering the clay, it works well at cone 04 and cone 6. Applied on leather-hard piece.

EPK:	40
OM4:	30
Silica:	15
Custer:	15

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