

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

The Lost Forgotten

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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

2021

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## Acknowledgements

I want to start by thanking my parents for encouraging creativity and curiosity in everything I did. I will be forever grateful for your unconditional love and support through every up and down. I want to thank Maygen Janneta for encouraging me in highschool to pursue ceramics in the first place. Without her this journey may have never started. A huge thank you to Steven Godfrey for his belief in my work and his support and encouragement through my undergrad. He was the one that put the idea of graduate school into my head in the first place.

I am so grateful to Meghan Smythe for providing a space to be honest and vulnerable and for supporting exploration into areas of my work I had been too scared to go to; Matt Kelleher for being there with calm and thoughtful guidance when I emerged from a very transformative moment in the final semester; Shawn Murrey for all the technical support and for keeping the ship afloat on a daily basis; As well as Dale Mott Slater for her incredible editing power. This thesis would be a disaster without her phenomenal ability to wield language. Additionally, I have so much gratitude for *The Book Club* and all who brought their thoughts and observations to the group each week. Our conversations greatly informed this thesis.

Most importantly, I am so grateful to have been a part of such a wonderful cohort. The Lucky 7! Your friendship and support are what made graduate school posible. The conversations we had over the past two years have been critical to the work in this thesis and have changed how I look at art and life. This has been an experience unlike any other and I couldn't think of a better group to go through it with.

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## **Abstract**

Through hand built sculptures of trees and rocks as well as life casts of roadkill animals, and video performance, I engage with our collective entanglement to contemplate human behavior. Narrative is built as I place singular images or objects together, building relationships through their proximity. Through the glitches caused by abject disruption, my work causes a moment of pause to allow for contemplation of our values. The instantaneous distribution of unreliable information across much of the world has desensitized many, including myself, and made it difficult to make sense of what is actually happening. I am reaching for an understanding of our collective entanglement that has been forgotten in the chaos of today. I use abjection as a glitch to help the viewer find landmarks in reality. Abjection does this by going beyond the expected and into territory so unacceptable to society that it gives us a chance to consider what we have decided to leave out of our moral equation and therefore clarifies what we value. My current work uses mortality as a glitch to cause disruption, and then offers space for contemplation.

## Forward

The summer before graduate school, on a fishing boat in Ugashik, Alaska, I was about to witness a series of environmental disasters that would fundamentally expand my understanding of our collective entanglement. Early in the season we found multiple dead walrus who were thought to have died in a stampede. The event was not observed; however, the going theory was that due to warming air temperatures the permafrost was melting, which was causing shore erosion. This shore erosion meant that the walrus had lost their usual haul outs, the beaches where they come out of the water to rest. The lack of haul outs may be causing overcrowding and thus deadly stampedes. We found their bodies on the beach.

The next to come were the dead salmon (fig.2). The water in the river was too hot, creating a thermal barrier that the salmon could not pass through without dying on their way to spawn. In the warm waters infection spreads between the fish, killing them off in mass. They floated by our boat by the thousands.



fig.1 Short-tailed Shearwater, Ugashik AK.



fig.2 Red Salmon, Ugashik AK.

Next came the birds (fig.1). The Short-tailed Shearwater, a common diving bird that is rarely ever seen on shore, started landing on the beaches and dying. It appeared they were starving. We later learned it was one of the largest die-offs in Alaskan history (“2019 Alaska Seabird Die-off | Alaska Region”). They were dying for the same reason the salmon were. The water in the Bering Sea was too hot, which meant that the plankton had not bloomed, which meant the fish they ate were not around to eat the plankton. They started to starve. On their search for food they would eventually fall from the sky, strewn across the sand, feathers tossing in the incessant wind. I became brutally aware of my entanglement. I could not escape or turn away because on every side evidence was quite literally piled around me.

### **Hypernormalisation**

The constant bombardment of extraordinary and unreliable information creates a fog of understanding in the world that makes it difficult and exhausting to stay informed. The effect on society is complacency or reactionary behavior because the ability to contemplate is overwhelmed. Through the lens of entanglement and an effort to create space for contemplation, I use ceramic sculpture and video installation to explore subject matter that dominant western culture has cast off and become detached from. I am reaching for societal understandings of our collective entanglement that has been forgotten in the chaos of today.

We sat on squeaky wooden stools around the blue tile kitchen counter, my dad cooking hotdogs and frozen veggies. The grey radio with a coat hanger antenna was tuned to NPR. President Bush had announced the invasion of Iraq a few days earlier. It was going to be a fast operation. In and out, just disarm Iraq of weapons of mass

destruction and free the Iraqi people. On May 1<sup>st</sup> 2003 President Bush announced the end of major combat operations in Iraq with a large banner reading “Mission Accomplished” flying behind him (Bush). This invasion marked the beginning of a very complex conflict that has been reduced over and over again to a simple and confusing version best suited for those pushing for its continuation. Years later there are still no weapons, and we will never be able to ask the dead if they are free.

Twenty years from the start of the war on terror it is hard for me to keep the dates and names straight. Who are we fighting and why? How did we get here? I remember the first time I heard about a suicide bombing, but now I barely glance at the headline as I move on to today’s mass shooting. This constant stream of information has made me numb to it all. There are too many perspectives and possible truths to begin to untangle any of it. The same facts are being used on every side of any argument so that understanding is an exhausting and time-consuming process. Instead, a simpler version of the world is being offered up, again, every day.

The opening of the BBC documentary *HyperNormalisation* succinctly lays out our current cultural state:

“We live in a strange time. Extraordinary events keep happening that undermine the stability of our world... Over the past 40 years, politicians, financiers and technological utopians, rather than face up to the real complexities of the world, retreated. Instead, they constructed a simpler version of the world in order to hang on to power. And as this fake world grew all of us went along with it, because the simplicity was reassuring. Even those who thought they were attacking the system - the radicals, the



artists, the musicians, and our whole counterculture -actually became part of the trickery, because they, too, had retreated into the make-believe world, which is why their opposition has no effect and nothing ever changes.”

The instantaneous distribution of information across much of the world has desensitized many, including myself. The unreliability of this information has eliminated any understanding of the entanglements of what is actually happening. We have become accustomed to the extraordinary as a daily event. As Fred Moten puts it in Legacy Russell’s *Cyber Feminism* “The normative is the after-effect, it is a response to the irregular”. Hypernormativity reduces the extraordinary to nonexistence while fetishizing the mundane.

Fifty years ago my childhood experiences may have been normal in middle class America. Yet now these commonplace practices, such as spending time outside, subsistence hunting, raising livestock, and gardening, have become less and less common. I see this as a result of a loss of understanding of the complexities of our existence. These experiences have given me an awareness of our entanglement even if I became swept up in hypernormalisation later in life.

The paradox of talking about these expansive topics is that I can not account for everything in this paper or within the capacity of my own mind. So there has to be some acknowledgement that I know I will never have a full grasp on every factor in every situation, but more importantly I can become aware that everything is interconnected and that there is always more to learn. A simple acknowledgement of the possibilities of complexity helps to keep my mind open.

To see through the barrage of daily information, I must allow space for contemplation and investigation into what is real. My work offers a new level of awareness by triggering a glitch in routine thought patterns. “A glitch is an error, a mistake, a failure to function...an accident triggering some form of chaos...Glitches gesture towards the artifice of social and cultural systems, revealing fissures in a reality we assume to be seamless” (Russell, 2020).

A glitch offers a break in the fog of understanding. This break forces those affected by the glitch to see one or more landmarks in reality; events, or complexities that would have otherwise been left out of the narrative. This reorientation can be extremely jarring in an otherwise disorienting world, for when stuck in fog it is easy to make assumptions about your orientation without basis. When a landmark is revealed, it causes our internal compass to rapidly swing towards true north, which may cause physical sickness or a reconstruction of self. In my work I use abjection as a glitch.

“The term abjection literally means ‘the state of being cast off’. The object is a...psychological, philosophical and linguistic concept”, developed by Julia Kristeva in her 1980 book *Powers of Horror*. She was partly influenced by the earlier ideas of the French writer, thinker, and dissident surrealist, Georges Bataille. Kristeva herself commented: “refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live”(Tate). Abjection, as a source for glitch, offers an opportunity by going beyond the expected and into territory so unacceptable to society that it may cause a moment of clarity. In opposition to the over-simplified world, abjection gives us a chance to consider what we value and shows us what we have decided to leave out of our moral equation to help simplify our lives so we may live.

The pandemic has been my glitch. Isolation forced me to slow down and confront myself and the world around me.

In my work I use the ceramic casts of dead animals and burned-out carcasses as a vehicle for abjection. I also harness abjection in video by placing my own body in proximity to decay. I aim to use the ordinary, such as the natural decomposition of a wild animal, because it exposes the fetishizing and aversion to the natural world by dominant American culture. Additionally, I do not place any emphasis on shock or action. Each animal is in a state of rest, which allows for contemplation. I develop a relationship with the animals in my work through each stage of making. Many of the animals seen in the video work are then used to make casts. After working with them to make casts I cover them in a clay slip and fire them on solid three foot tiles. They are glazed black and hang on the wall as a final resting place and a mirror for reflection. This is a process bordering on ceremony that keeps me in relation with the animals as they decay and then are returned to the earth through cremation. To stay in this relationship I must be willing to participate in their decay, working with their softening bodies and experiencing the changes in smell, weight, and texture, learning to appreciate each stage without judgment. The sculptural form of these animals become abject when this relationship is forgotten.

The third aspect of disengaging from hypernormalisation is giving time for reaction. If I am able to give myself space to process information, then I am better able to consider complexity. To do this there must be a consideration of time and how we as individuals and as society fit into larger existence. This takes the pressure off of the need for immediate judgment by placing the current event next to a larger framework. I split this understanding of time into three categories which are represented in my work in the

sculptural forms of decaying animals, plants, and monolithic structures. What remains consistent in my work is a use of narrative across surface and form. Narrative is built as the works relate to each other, building relationships through their proximity. This space gives the viewer room to layer their own experiences and conceptions with my work.

First there is time on a scale shorter than a human life, such as livestock and many household pets. The birth and decomposition of these creatures give us an understanding of cycles because we are able to witness multiples within our own lifetimes. Because they are shorter than our own, they do not threaten our own timeline, which makes them a great tool for teaching about loss. Their passing is expected throughout our own lives. I take molds off of roadkill animals such as foxes and coyotes in various stages of decay. These casts are then arranged together in a tangled mass on a low pedestal (fig.3). These casts pause the animals' decay, allowing for extended observation of a brief moment in their decomposition. Within this tangled mass there are also several hand-built human skulls. These skulls start to draw connections between the animal's life and that of our own. The cremation tiles on the wall behind leave physical evidence of this passing with the presence of bone on the tile, anchoring the work in the realness of these creatures.



Fig.3 Foreground: *An Expansive Nutritious Death*, 2021, Stoneware, 72" x 36" x 20"  
 Background: Wall Tiles, 2021, Stoneware, 30' x 44" x 4"

The second category is one that may start before or after our own, but which we will not experience the other end of unless it ends in extenuating circumstances. This would be events such as the planting of a tree and its eventual rot and decay. Most often we will only experience one stage of this tree. This inability to conceive the previous or post stages is cause for wonder and expands our understanding of time. If we plant a tree, it will see many things we will not and if we encounter a mature tree, it has experienced an unknown period before our existence. The other potential for this mid length period is a catastrophic event such as a wildfire or clear cutting. The sudden removal of time intervals longer than our own may be shocking because something permanent relative to our existence is suddenly removed which may bring up questions about our own mortality. My use of plants is the newest form to develop in this body of work. Using

coils and urgent gestures I build intuitively, following the balance and flow of the limbs as it grows. The tree in my thesis exhibition rises well overhead; the end of each limb is left open as if it is still unfurling with new growth. Deep swirling black glaze covers the trunk, but the tips of limbs are a fresh green that runs down into the black (fig.4). Most importantly, my use of plants represents the possibility for growth. Whether just budding, or heavy with some fantastic fruit, they speak to what comes next and the curious exploration of hope (fig.5).



Fig.4 *Resting Place*, 2021, stoneware, 91" x 67" x 63"

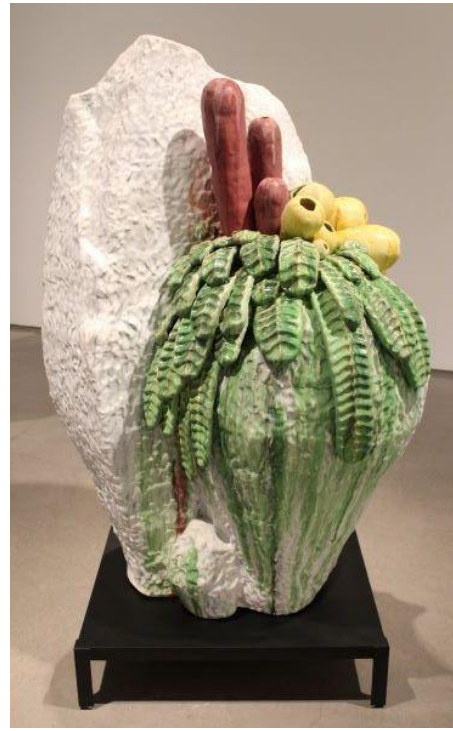


Fig.5 *Lemon Bloom*, 2021, stoneware, 57" x 37" x 37"

The third time frame is somewhere between the start of written history and deep time. The earth is a fluid body, forever in flow on a scale so large that only the after effect is perceptible. This flow is slower and longer than we are capable of grasping and threatens the significance of our brief existence. In my work I reference this geologic

formation through the heavy solid slabs of clay that freeze my touch on their surface and sculptures of rocks topped with fantastic plants to bring together multiple timelines. Geology has movement and change but on a scale beyond human comprehension. A sculpture with geologic reference pauses its fluidity if not momentarily. Additionally, I use the monolith as a geologic symbol in relation to people (fig.6 and fig.7). These architectural forms stand at or above human height and their metallic black geometry stands alone or is embedded in organic geologic formations. A monolith is a human construct that outlives the context of its creator. This human connection in a distant way adds to the potential relatability. The monolith is immovable, and within the gallery creates an environment that must be navigated visually and physically. This creates a sense of stability in its stillness and apparent weight.



Fig.6 Monolith #2, *Emergence*, 2020, stoneware, 70" x 45" x 43"



Fig.7 Monolith #3, *Offering*, 2021, stoneware, 83" x 31" x 16"

These three time frames create greater perspective within the glitch which allows for consideration of the complex world we live in. It is important to note that I am not interested as much in the reality of these objects but in the examination of them as placeholders for ideas. I use deep black glazes to create a virtually monotone environment that keeps the focus on form and reduces the likelihood of the work becoming shock art. This color choice evokes a stillness in the work that brings it closer to ceremony and respectful contemplation. What color is appearing in the work is very new and is used sparingly. These colors, found within the plant and rock sculptures, speak to growth and possibility. As a metaphor for contemplation, the work is lifted from the floor on short steel frames. This space between the earth and the work places the idea in the metaphorical hand of the viewer. What does it mean to have a monolith hover off the ground (fig.6)? It is not a coyote, it is about a coyote. It is not a tree, it is about what the idea of a tree can teach. The monolith you see, although heavy and imposing, is fragile and easily broken. This acceptance of the work being symbolic relieves the imaginative limitations of *trompe l'oeil*<sup>1</sup> and allows for a more expansive understanding of the value of each metaphor and what it has to offer.

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<sup>1</sup> Definition of *trompe l'oeil* from The Merriam- Webster dictionary

1: a style of painting in which objects are depicted with photographically realistic detail  
*also* : the use of similar technique in interior decorating

2: a *trompe l'oeil* painting or effect

3: something that misleads or deceives the senses : ILLUSION





Fig.8 *Immersion*, 2021, video still, 1920x1080p

The impressionist realism of my ceramic objects is contrasted with the video work. Video is not reality, but it offers a perspective that has the capability to mix reality and fantasy to a point where a new level of emotional engagement is possible. My exploration of video and performance is new and came into being within a virtual pandemic environment where the value of physical interaction has been questioned and deemed dangerous. I am interested in the paradox of video which allows the audience to explore potentially dangerous or taboo topics that they may not otherwise be willing to participate in if it was a live performance or exhibition of the same content (fig.8).

Similar to the video, the casts of animals and burn out tiles further remove the content of the work from the real, which allows each viewer to engage at a level they are comfortable with.

The physical representations of time create a space for greater perspective within the disruption, which allows for consideration of the complex world we live in and appreciation for the familiar, which has been lost to our overdrive existence. Through a

range of mediums, including ceramics and video, I engage with individual and collective entanglement, critique human behavior, and create a space for contemplation.

### **Time Warps and Collapses**

The greatest casualty of my participation in hypernormalisation has been my connection to the natural world. I was fortunate to grow up in a family that taught me to pay close attention to my surroundings and learn from my environment. I spent much of my childhood in the woods and observed closely the animals that move within it. My father taught me to notice small clues and pay attention. I learned to watch for the delicate crush of an oak leaf from deer, and the difference between how a deer and squirrel move those leaves while searching for acorns. I learned to follow a fox for the safest path across ice. These differences were important, however small. I was taught to watch for patterns and see how each creature influenced the other, like the interdependence of the coyote and rabbit population. I feel fortunate to have grown up in such close connection to the natural world. Growing up, the cycles of life felt very normal and were not something to be feared or avoided, but to be understood. This close connection to birth, existence, and death has cultivated a deep respect and honor for the world around me and has grown into spiritual accountability for my actions and how I treat my environment. If I don't water my garden it will die. Therefore, I am responsible for its cultivation. If I take a life I must use as much of that body as I can to further my own survival. Because of this lifestyle I grew up around tools and ceremonies unfamiliar to many. When my father would shoot a deer, we would gather that morning in celebration and pan fry the heart right away. This was the most precious part of the animal and was shared in celebration of what the deer had just given us. This is one of

many small acts that reinforced our respect for the land around us and our gratitude for what it provided. These daily rituals built empathy for and trust in the land.

I learned so much about being human through my life with animals. I learned anatomy when we butchered chickens and deer. I learned about social behavior watching the chickens and pet fish. I learned to be respectful of community, because those who were not were ostracized. If they were dogs, the aggressive would be bitten or chased off. If they were chickens, we ate the disrespectful. I could lose my head for violence towards my community. The rules were simple. I learned about compassion and how to care for other creatures. We did our best to nurse the injured and sick back to health, and if not possible we ended their suffering fast and painlessly. This was always hard, but if I were not to kill the suffering animals who was I really protecting? Was I protecting them from death or protecting myself from bearing the full weight of my responsibility?

Because these events are all critical to the continuation of life on this planet it is important for me to figure out how to actively participate. How can I have empathy for a planet and a system that I am tied to if we have built a society that encourages me to avert my eyes, and that hands out simple answers to complex problems? How can I build empathy without proximity? How can I build empathy for myself and the planet if I have no understanding of how it functions?

My childhood was filled with this deep connection to nature that taught me to pay attention to systems holistically and seek out the interconnectedness of every space. However, the world brought its traumas and I have spent my adult life learning to survive the fallout of a chaotic and traumatic childhood. This has been my identity, and I have

held onto it tightly. I have isolated and self-medicated as a way to protect myself from what I perceive as a dangerous world.

On some level I knew that if I was able to create a life structured around intensity that I would be able to keep my life together because there would be no time for me to feel or think beyond basic needs of eating and sleeping. This was a survival mechanism that worked quite well. It kept me alive. However, this lifestyle has left its scars and has finally come to a long-awaited turning point. Over a period of 10 years, I had lost touch with my ability to listen and contemplate and had instead got lost in the chaos. When school was shut down from COVID-19 I sought refuge in rural Vermont. I started to go on walks and explore the local woods and streams around our house. This brief moment of pause may have been the beginning of my glitch, which caused me to see through the artifice of my life.

Returning to school in the fall, I spent the semester confused and disturbed by what I was making. I was pounding my feet into heavy slabs and casting roadkill animals. I got conflicting feedback and statements about how much anxiety was in the work. The semester ended. Exhausted, I retreated to my apartment. Without the distraction and chaos of school, I soon remembered the pain I have spent years trying to avoid.

My world came crashing down around me.

Time warps and collapses.

I was alone in Alfred, NY during a pandemic, isolated in my apartment. My whole identity and understanding of the world began to fall apart. The power in my constructed self as an independent, hard-working man dedicated to his craft began to crumble. Days passed in a catatonic state. I was not eating and was rapidly losing weight.

I was alone and forced to sit with myself without distraction.

Tears,

I knew something had to change.

For the first time I saw how I had made myself invulnerable.

For the first time I saw how alone I was.

For the first time I wanted to change and be open to the possibility that there was more to life than chaos.

For the first time I wanted to take care of myself.

My old way of being was not going to work anymore. I wanted to stop running and causing chaos.

I went to a dentist and got my teeth cleaned.

Baby steps,

I started walking,

meditate, journal, eat, sleep,

I started to accept help and be honest about how I was feeling with others.

It marked a change.

This moment of isolation tore open the veil covering my trauma and exposed the architecture underneath. There has been a tectonic shift in my understanding of myself. I am in the process of reconstructing my being and my belief systems. I have come to realize that most- if not all- of my belief systems are not my own but from other people who I respect. I have rarely asked myself what I actually value. Like many during the pandemic, I had to radically alter my behavior and focus on my mental health, committing to reality.

For years I have been living as a simplified version of myself. Over winter break I glitched and this has made room for possibility. I have been exposed to my participation in hypernormalisation and forced to confront myself and what I value. Through my own death I am making way for new ways of being.

An expansive, nutritious death.

## **Moving Forward**

In my experience, the cultural demand to physically produce in the studio does not exist symbiotically with a healthy lifestyle. This is unsustainable and ignores the vast range of human needs. Individuality and humanity make all research happen. To ignore the needs and experiences of the individual is counterproductive<sup>2</sup>.

A pioneer in digital activism, Aaron Swartz was an advocate for a world with enhanced transparency: A world where each person is aware of their rights and understands their participation within their local and greater systems, so that they could make sense of how these worlds operate and what their individual role was within them. With this, Swartz was also “an advocate for the first person account, as a way of addressing the user-participant-citizen” (Kholeif, 2020). “For too long we were left afraid to use the word ‘I’. We replaced it with ‘one’ (the third person) or some other amorphous

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<sup>2</sup> In June 2020 The Society for Cultural Anthropology published an article called *A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography* which builds on “long-held feminist and decolonial theorizations of the intertwining of the personal and professional, the theoretical and the methodological in research” (Günel, 2020). Domestic labor that allows research to take place is often ignored. Patchwork Ethnography proposes a way of working where both the home and the field are considered. By attaching value to my life outside of my physical studio I may begin to see how my artistic practice is a sum of all my experiences and not just the output of a physical space.

This is a personal and professional proposal for the health and sustainability of academic research. By bridging the worlds of home and field, a pathway to empathy is opened through the understanding of each individual’s unique circumstances. This opportunity for proximity to one another has potential to build equality.

figure, which felt surgically extracted from our being. This very notion of abstracting the self can be understood in post-colonial terms as a form of ‘othering’ - detaching the author from her subject because she does not bear the legitimacy to speak of it” (Kholeif, 2020). I write with Swartz’s words in mind in an effort to claim responsibility for my own behavior. I have many criticisms of the institutional culture of academic art but know that change starts with claiming responsibility for myself. Instead of reaching out to fix all the problems of the world I take responsibility for my own actions with the hope that it may create a space for those around me to feel comfortable.

I now recognize the entanglement of labor and rest and want to shift my values and place emphasis on the power of thought and contemplation as a critical part of studio practice that is symbiotic with care. With this shift in internal values there is so much potential for what I produce externally to change. A focus on care may open up new ways of seeing and making that I never thought possible.

Moving forward I strive to be accountable and in the words of Donna Haraway “Stay with the trouble”(Haraway). I have burnt my world to the ground and only now that the ground is clear can I build again. The content in my thesis work is the landscape of a forest fire in spring. Old husks of understanding stand quiet while underneath ash, buds are forming, waiting for the warm sun to beckon them from the rich soil below. It is time to listen for the crunch of leaves and pay attention to the small clues. The wind will always be there but can I hear the soft cautious step of a deer through the rustle.

I am moving,

Curiously searching with hope.



Fig.9 Panoramic shot of the left side of the thesis exhibition *The Lost Forgotten*, Fosdick-Nelson Gallery Alfred, NY. 2021



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## Technical Document

### Clay

<b>Modified Matt Wedel</b>	Cone 1-3
Foundry Hill Cream	75
Nepheline Syenite	50
OM4	25
EPK	12.5
Talc	5
20 Mesh Grog	50
35 Mesh Grog	50
Bentonite	5
2 ply toilet paper	10 Roles

<b>Stick-Up Slip</b> (adapted from Shawn Murrey's Cone 10 recipe)	cone 1-3
Foundry Hill Cream	40.28
Nepheline Syenite	26.85
OM4	13.43
EPK	6.71
Talc	2.69
Grog	10.04
Bentonite	2
Darvan 811	.5%
Water	40%

## Glazes

<b>Fuzzy Melon Base</b>	Cone 04	<b>VC Clear</b>	Cone 04
Lithium Carbonate	10	Frit 3195	73.5
Ferro Frit 3110	9	EPK	5.9
Whiting	8	Gerstley Borate	4.9
Barium Carbonate	16	Nepheline Syenite	7.8
Minspar 200	30	Lithium Carbonate	3.9
EPK	15	Zinc Oxide	2
Flint	12	Bentonite	2
Bentonite	2		

## Animals

<b>Mammals, (location found)</b>	<b>Birds</b>
Deer (Alfred and Rochester)	Starling (Waterbury VT)
Fox (Alfred)	Robin (Waterbury VT)
Coyote (Waterbury VT)	BlueJay (Alfred Station)
Mice (From apartment in Alfred Station)	other unknown birds (Alfred Station)