

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

Waffolie
/wof-fuh-lee/

Brooke Cashion

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Signature Line

Brooke Cashion, MFA

Thesis Advisors:

Jonathan Hopp, John Gill, Jason Green, Matt Kelleher,

Walter McConnell, Linda Sikora, Linda Sormin.

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Waffolie Thesis Installation - Fosdick Nelson Gallery

Waffolie

/wof-fuh-lee/

Verb; To celebrate the unpredictable, unexplainable, and unruly tendencies of day-to-day experience by having a flexible and changeable mind.

A four year-old boy has a bundle of bouncy balls. He keeps them secure in a black briefcase which speaks to the serious nature of his collection. The boy favors a balance between quality and quantity. He chooses some specimens specifically for unique characteristics, but most arrive through happenstance. A few of the most curious balls seemed to have manifested from their own determination and he sees them through a fog of amnesia.

He lifts the lid, made of hide, to see if they might share their secrets, but this happens infrequently for safety's sake. The horseshoe handle is clumsy in his small hands but he lugs his collection everywhere, compulsively. Clenched tight, he drags the suitcase along despite the tedium, which is unnoticeable to him. On a dreary Monday, an uphill errand forces a sluggish, heavy pace. It weighs on him and he drops the suitcase. Terror grips him as it explodes open. The sun leaps out from behind the clouds and a rush of vibrancy stuns him out of panic. The graceful bouncing waves of color cascade down the hillside in ribbons of unbound joy. "My, how they bounce!" As his eyes drink in the vibrancy of the moment, his hand unclenches and finds new form, freed from his own tight grip.

Celebrating the madness of life, I form ceramic sculptures and installations that defy easy categorization. However, the ceramic process and content are decidedly primary to my studies. I sample from a variety of material registrations; from the ubiquitous to the specific. Roof shingle, decorative tile, architectural cladding, and the expansive space of the vessel serve as loose formats where I launch investigations. I sample and mix genres as I study the elasticity of the mind. These varied references have a common denominator as objects that live in the backdrop of culture; silently they hold ideas of ourselves, the world around us, and our place within it.

Works often contain erratic energy in animated landscapes. Fantasy functions to present possibilities previously unconsidered in subjects, like underfoot decorative floor tiles. The beauty that we walk over may have their own patterns of wandering, as in the installation “Waffle Flower (Stadium Arcana)”. These ceramic “tiles” stand on an ascending structure which opens up interpretations - from hillside to staircase to stadium seating. These associations may speak to the tiling of landscape or invert the conventional spectation of nature. I dissect the 2-D decorative elements to allow the pattern to become the form. From high above it registers still as flat, unassuming, patterned tile. A closer view gives agency to each part to drift out of their prescribed places, subverting the association of decoration as background. I find contemporary resonance with the egalitarian ideals of the pattern and decoration movement.



Waffle Flower (Stadium Arcana)

The system, which generates form, is the springboard from which I can explore shifts of logic and common sense. While common sense may seem innocuous it is also “the seedbed [...] of conformity”¹. Conventional wisdom forms biases and locks concepts and patterns into place. I toy with the comfort of pattern, exploring opportunities for misbehavior. In “Lectures on Literature” from 1941, Vladimir Nabokov provided this enduring rallying cry to creators;

“Anybody whose mind is proud enough not to breed true, secretly carries a bomb at the back of [their] brain; and so I suggest, just for the fun of the thing, taking that private bomb and carefully dropping it upon the model city of commonsense. In the brilliant light of the ensuing explosion many curious things will appear”.²

¹ Maria Popova, "Against Common Sense: Vladimir Nabokov on the Wellspring of Wonder and Why the Belief in Goodness Is a Moral Obligation," Brain Pickings, , accessed January 2019, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2018/12/02/vladimir-nabokov-the-art-of-literature-and-commonsense/>.

² Vladimir Nabokov, Fredson Bowers, and John Updike, *Lectures on Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt/Bruccoli Clark, 2002), 372.

With a light heart, I enthusiastically wave sparklers to illuminate the infinite wiggle room for resourcefulness and innovation within any system. Material and process pull me back to the studio as I see my ideas mirrored in the plasticity of clay and transformation of material. Clay accommodates adventurous exploration. I begin with a hunch which builds momentum through labor-intensive processes.

Years of experience has made me cautious of over planning content. I become like the mad conspiracy theorist, quickly losing control, stringing together unconnected concepts in a chaotic web in the walls of my mind.

The other side, under-planning, can result in me jumping off the starting block too early. This failure results in reclaiming days of labor. However, an enduring rule of attentive optimism allows the material to reveal the direction either by limitations or extensions. It is here where I fight my urge to see failure and flip-flopping as negative events. I must choose to waffolie, to celebrate “failure” as an opportunity for new cognitive pathways. I choose to follow what springs up before me.

The coil is a recurring element in my work. It has primacy in clay and it also shares the overlooked situation of it. The form of coil is all around and within us. Often hidden, it is the pipes, wires, pylons, and vessels which carry our energy, information, and waste. I use the directionality and repeating pattern of the coil to convey transportation. I suspend them across subterranean walls which the coil bends over and accentuates. In *Vibraphone*, the form simultaneously holds many varied references from

landscape to human anatomy. The ear, (specifically the inner ear) is the mechanism which balances our bodies. Within the body of work presented in my thesis show, I asked the image of an ear to give thematic balance, offering a counterpoint to the natural themes and extending an invitation to the viewer to clue into their physical senses. *Vibraphone* also exhibits my interest in objects which explore the fluidity of scale.



Sidekick and Vibraphone (L to R)

Scale increase creates greater distances where the transporting qualities of the coil can unite with formal perspective. In *Lifeguard*, the floating topography spans fifteen feet of wall space allowing for many perspectives to unfold. The information shifts depending on the perspective of the viewer. For instance, a field of small spheres changes subtly depending on where the viewer stands. Peripheral vision is filled and detail is offered on an intimate scale. I wonder if the rules of perceiving physical information apply to other

more abstract data, which can also change depending on how one looks at it. The coils act as charged conduits, vibrating as they provide visual travel, speaking to the accelerated landscape of interconnectivity in the age of information.

Lifeguard also displays my interest in the intersections between order and entropy. Order conveys comfort, showing that the understanding of the world is only a matter of organizational strategies and pattern recognition. However, entropy destabilizes this view. It reminds of our lack of control and pushes beyond “sense made common”³ to offer a message of liberation. I challenge myself to welcome unknowing, inviting the work to bounce off into new territories or genres so that the idiosyncratic might come forward.



Lifeguard

³ Vladimir Nabokov, Fredson Bowers, and John Updike, *Lectures on Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt/Brucoli Clark, 2002), 372.

The *à la carte* type collection of objects and installations in *Waffolie* reflects my investigation of the interior and external impacts of improvisation. Internally, I approach parts of myself that are otherwise inaccessible. Externally, improvisation imparts a freshness to form and color approaches. In a series titled “The House that Brooke Built”, I responded to lines of the children’s nursery rhyme *The House That Jack Built*. The result was a semi-narrative facade of 35 tiles in the format of a brick face. I repeated selected textures, colors and motifs occasionally to provide recurring actors. I added other parameters to flex the elasticity of image, accommodate scale changes, and explore a diversity of perspectives.



Mixing Metaphors

More recently, methods for improv rise more loosely out of the idea. The structure of comedic improv theatre (popularized by Viola Spolin) can give an understanding of the role of spontaneity in my process. The core tenet is to say “yes, and” to your partner. Tina Fey writes this example in *Bossypants*;

“If I say “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you just say, “Yeah...” we’re kind of at a standstill. But if I say “I can’t believe it’s so hot in here,” and you say, “I told you we shouldn’t have crawled into this dog’s mouth,” now we’re getting somewhere.”⁴

The framework of “yes, and” is an efficient vehicle for allowing research to enter and exit the studio. Early on in the program, my research centered on modern American studio pottery and sculpture by artists such as Karen Karnes, Ruth Duckworth, and Isamu Noguchi. I’m drawn to work that exaggerates interior spaces, heightening them as a focal point. They bring forward the importance of interiors which is easily forgotten in pots and people.

During my time as a grad student, the Alfred Ceramic Art Museum unveiled Stanley Rosen’s life’s work in clay. The show entitled *Holding the Line* displayed his ceramic sculptures from the 50’s 60’s and 70’s. *Untitled*, pictured below, is on view in the ACAM open storage where I always take notice of it. It tells a different story every time. I see connections between his piece and *Waffle Flower (Stadium Arcana)*. Seeing work in person is a more potent experience than viewing an image.

⁴ Tina Fey, *Bossypants* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013), 84.



Stanley Rosen (b. 1926)
untitled, circa 1968
stoneware, unglazed
h: 4" w: 11" d: 11"
gift of D. Philip Baker and David R. Bender
ACAM, 2018.2
photo by Brian Oglesbee

A pair of unusual earthenware jars (Bucaros De Indias) in the permanent collection at The Metropolitan Museum of Art called me from across the room with their stacked swelling volumes. On further investigation, they hold a unique history of cultural transference. Italian and Spanish aristocrats collected these water jars in the 17th century. Prized for their exotic origins in the new world (Tonala, Mexico), the porous red clay gave water a floral fragrance. In ingesting another culture, the female aristocrats went one step further when they snapped off small pieces of the jar to eat them. The ‘purpose’ was to ‘aid digestion’ but the side effect was a highly-sought beauty standard: pale skin. From a contemporary standpoint this might seem bizarre. However, these jars are drenched in

femininity. How different is this practice from the lengths that women go through to achieve fashion and beauty trends today? I might eat some too if I thought I could catch a hint of the feminine power that these jars exude. However, the story of these jars goes much deeper than obsession with image. It speaks about connections between magic, earth and identity that are less common in contemporary thought. Indirectly, oddities like these jars hint at my interest in qualities that are highly consumable by the senses.



(R) Kim Kardashian, Met Gala, 2019
(L) Covered Jars, Metropolitan Museum, ca. 1675–1700

If vessels whisper values, buildings broadcast them. After the fall of Rome, architects abandoned terra cotta for many centuries. In America, it was not seen as a viable material for large-scale buildings until the 1860's. Susan Tunik's *Terra Cotta Skyline* outlines the set logic of architecture practices which valued natural over man-made materials. Intuitively, the logic follows that humans could not produce an

architectural medium superior to mother nature's. John Ruskin, champion of the arts and crafts movement, originally condemned terra cotta as a pursuit of cheapness which offended his truth to material doctrine. Terra cotta faced technological shortcomings early on as practitioners tried to emulate the processes they used with stone. Pioneers who embraced the material and worked with its distinctive characteristics changed the landscape of architecture. It embraced terra cotta as it was fire resistant, lighter, less expensive, more malleable, and it offered inventive color. While its hayday was short, terra cotta opened the door for other non-traditional manufactured materials.

I combine my research on clay's cultural history with my interests in ecology and environment. The discovery of our impacts on shifting the materials of life is a relatively new field of study. Elizabeth Kolbert hypothesizes in *The Sixth Extinction* that human restlessness is the main attribute that encourages the state of our climate and diversity crisis. In my restlessness, some of the work I make surrounds contemporary feelings responding to new knowledge and awareness of our devastating impact on our neighbors and home.

In *Masticated Rubber*, I toy with material registrations in a wall work that references arts and crafts movement aesthetics. Clay reads as metal, texture relates to wood, some of the leaves are car air fresheners, and fruits are rubber band balls. Chewing on the unanswerable questions of material desires, plant knowledge, and oneness with nature nourishes the work.



Masticated Rubber

Side Kick further explores the dynamics of animal and plant decoration.

Stalactites grow on the underside of a “tile” and with contrary attitude, one takes a u-turn to extend the motif. A bright yellow top has quatrefoil opening, communicating both caution and cheerfulness.

Rude Awakening blurs the line between still life painting and sculpture, offering absurdity grounded by gestural power. It illustrates where the “yes, and” mantra sometimes gets me into a bit of trouble. In studio explorations, I do not always question the images that arrive before speeding into formal investigations. I lose balance when imagery tips the scale heavily in one direction and minds are unable to veer far from one track.

Offering the Yin to *Rude Awakening's* Yang, *Belly Flop (in a pool of leaves)* explores endless entertainment in a context of veneration. *Ruby* and *Coral* also exude auras of reverence with animal and landscape qualities. The wild and restless adventuring has naturally disclosed these spirits which move me.

The thematic patterns that travel through my thesis exhibition, *Waffolie*, center on celebration of surprising elements. Through uncategorizable objects, these are the types of experiences that I wish to generate in the world. I applaud unexpected, unruly and unpredictable moments for their capacity to open minds.



Rude Awakening and Belly Flop (in a pool of leaves) (L to R)



Ruby and Sidekick (L to R)



Cowabunga, Lifeguard and Coral (L to R)

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Technical Statement - Standard Color Run Guide

This is a guide for a standard color run. This method is an organizational system for blending ten different ceramic recipes with each other. It yields many results quickly. In this guide I have used it to blend ten colored slips that all have the same base recipe. The formulated ten colored slips will be called parent batches or **PB**.

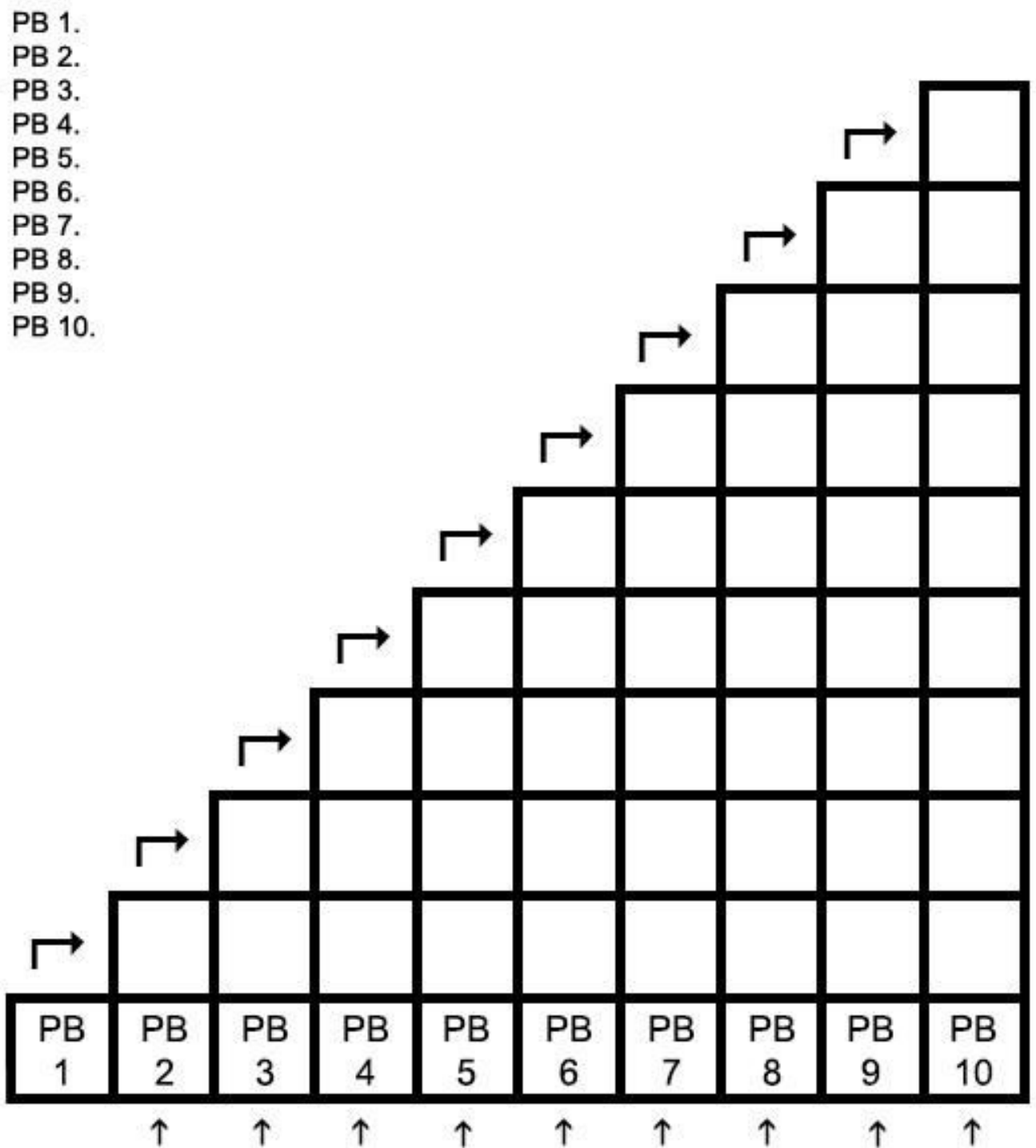
Supplies:

- ML Measuring Cup
- Gram Scale
- Chosen colorants
- 10 pint containers with lids
- 45 2 ounce cups (plastic are reusable)
- Spatula
- Medium size paint brush
- Chosen measuring spoon (1/2 Tablespoon)
- Immersion Blender
- Sieve; 40-60 for slip, 80-100 for glaze

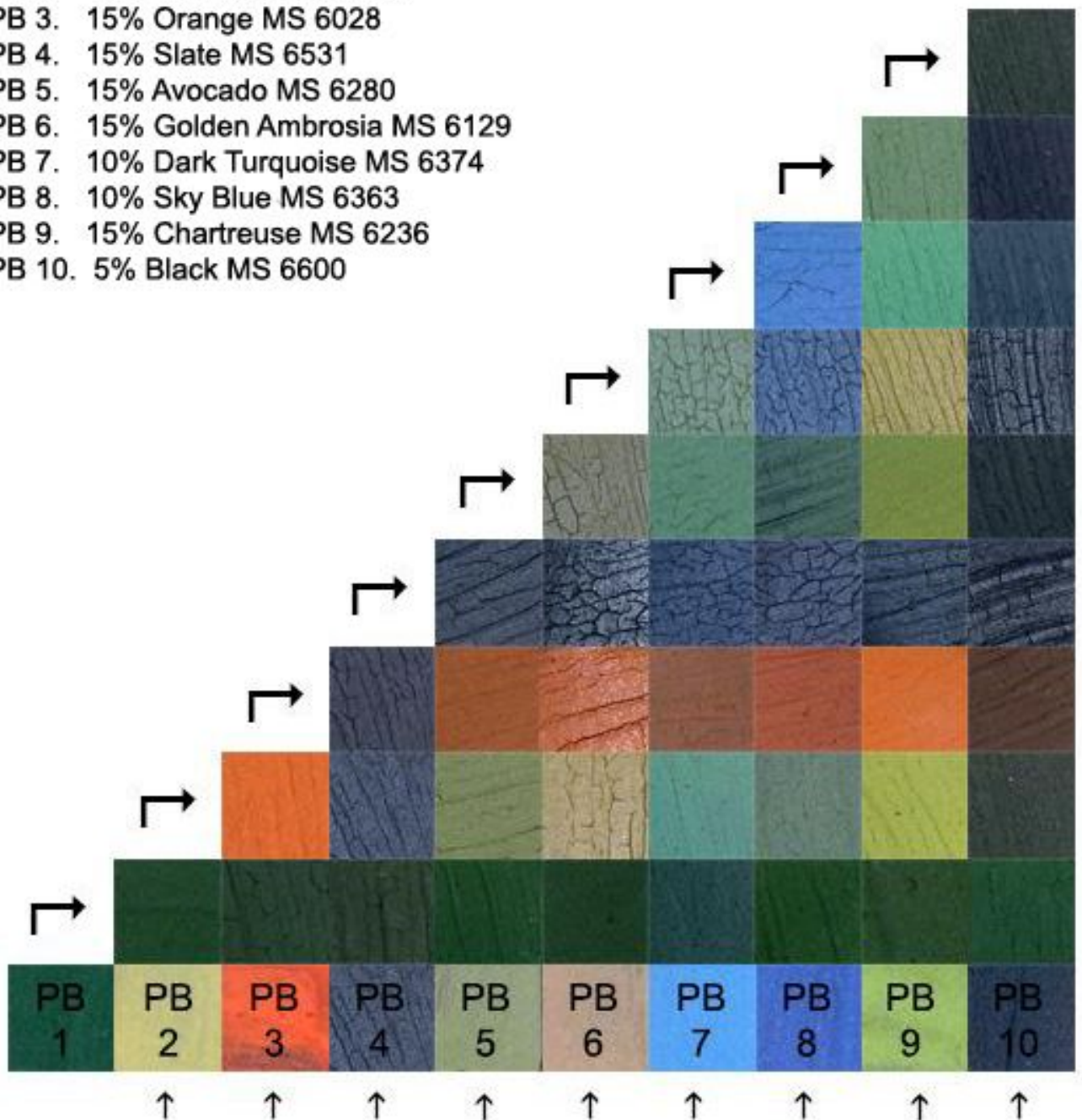
*In this guide I use Cynthia Bringle's Wet Dry Bisque Slip (abbreviated to WDB)

<u>WDB Slip</u>	<u>100g</u>
EPK.....	20
Ball Clay.....	25
Nepheline Syenite.....	25
Flint.....	30
Gerstley Borate.....	5
Bentonite.....	2

Figure 1.
Standard Color Run Chart



PB 1. 5% Chrome Oxide
PB 2. 15% Vanadium MS 6404
PB 3. 15% Orange MS 6028
PB 4. 15% Slate MS 6531
PB 5. 15% Avocado MS 6280
PB 6. 15% Golden Ambrosia MS 6129
PB 7. 10% Dark Turquoise MS 6374
PB 8. 10% Sky Blue MS 6363
PB 9. 15% Chartreuse MS 6236
PB 10. 5% Black MS 6600



Methodology

This is a test done using volume (ML) of wet material. In order to use this method, the answer to this equation is needed;

$$100 \text{ grams of dry slip} + 100\text{ML}^* \text{ of water} = ? \text{ ML of wet slip}$$

*Every raw material displaces water differently so this should be done for every new base recipe.

*100 ML of water is best for slips (or high clay content glaze). If making glaze try 60ML-80ML.

Step 1: Find ML of wet slip

This step allows for wet distribution of material and big batch screening vs screening each individual small batch. If you do not need to screen you can skip this step and do step 2 with dry material that you dry mix thoroughly.

*This step is useful for future ease of mixing. Great for studios which have large wet batches of your base around the studio.

- Measure out 100 grams of your base recipe into a ML measuring cup.
- Dry mix and level by tapping the cup.
- Pour 100 ML of water into the dry mix and let it slake completely. Wait until there are no more bubbles rising to the surface and the slip is completely saturated. Move on to step 2 and come back to take note of how many ML of wet slip are in the cup.

*For WDB slip there are 100 grams of material in 135 ML of wet slip when mixed with a ratio of 100 grams dry material to 100 ML of water.

Step 2: Mix large batch, measure and distribute into parent batches

- Decide how many parent batches (PB) you want and how many grams in each to determine your overall recipe size. (8 PB x 100g batches = 800g)
 - 200g is advisable if you will continue using the PB for further testing
- Add 100g to your final number so you have wiggle room for mixing/screening.
 - Use the extra 100g from step 1.
- Mix large batch with the same water ratio you used in step 1 and screen if necessary.
 - 40-60 mesh for slip 80-100 mesh for glaze.

- Using the information from step 1, distribute into pint containers.
 - Use a spatula here to leave little material behind.

*For WDB slip I measure 135 ML of wet slip 10 times and distribute pint containers.

Step 3: Choosing your colors and percentages

Each resulting test is a 50/50 mixture of two of the PBs. When choosing your percentages of color, keep this in mind. For example

$$\begin{aligned} & 1 \text{ Part PB with } 10\% \text{ Lobster Red} \\ & + \quad 1 \text{ Part PB with } 12\% \text{ Vanadium} \\ & = \text{Slip test with } 5\% \text{ Lobster Red and } 6\% \text{ Vanadium} \end{aligned}$$

A Plethora of Colorants:

Chrome Oxide Red Iron Oxide Cobalt Carbonate Copper Carbonate Manganese Dioxide Rutile Tin Zircopax Zinc Barium	Titanium Dioxide Yellow Iron Oxide Cobalt Oxide Copper Oxide Manganese Carbonate Yellow Ochre Red Copper Oxide Spanish Red Iron Oxide Ilmenite	Industrial Stains - Mason Stains - Cerdec Stains Rare Earth Elements: -Neodymium Oxide -Erbium Oxide -Praseodymium Oxide -Cerium Oxide -Holmium Oxide
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*Not all of the above mentioned materials will produce color on their own.
Research before settling on your colorants.

*Industrial stains will produce the most stable colors. Oxides are more volatile than Carbonates.

* A carbonate is generally about half the strength of an oxide.

* Not all mason stains work in all bases. Check the [Mason Reference Guide](#) to make sure your base and stain are compatible.

Step 4: Weigh and mix stains into parent batches

- Measure your stains, carbonates or oxides and add to your PB
- Label your containers
- Use immersion blender to mix color into wet material.

Step 5: Set up and distribution

- Figure 1 shows the layout of your test station. Align the PB along the bottom and place 2 ounce cups where the rest of the squares are.
- Place numbered test tiles next to cups.
 - The printable worksheet at the end helps to keep track.
- Choose a volumetric measurement like a $\frac{1}{4}$ tablespoon to consistently distribute your parent batches into the dixie cups.
- Follow the arrows to place contents in each cup directly above the PB and into the row indicated by the arrow.
- Follow this pattern until all PB have been distributed
 - Each cup now has equal parts of two PBs

Step 6 Application:

- Use a paintbrush to mix and then apply to test tile.
- Wash and remove excess water from paintbrush before repeating.
- Put it in the Kiln!

Test Results

- Once you get your results you can calculate recipes of only the results you want to repeat.
- Example, a tile number 42 will have resulted from a 50/50 mixture of PB 7 and 5.
 - Divide the recipe of each PB by 2.
 - Add the 2 divided recipes together to produce the new recipe.
 - If parent batches are from the same base, do the math only on the added colorants.

