

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

ATTRITIONAL YEAST

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This work is dedicated to
my partner Andrea Thomas Brown.
I am ever grateful for your partnership, love, and support.

-B.M.

PREFACE

The following is a supporting document for my ceramic art MFA thesis exhibition in the Turner Gallery at Alfred University in April of 2022. The purpose of this document is to articulate the language that my work uses to communicate my ideas, interests, and experiences. I will describe the actions that are necessary to my process and how the challenges that I have when working with materials offer new insight to what the work will become. I touch on how the work is received and explain ideas embedded in the finished work. I then move into a stream of consciousness and a poem, a list of books and artists that have influenced me in the last two years, as well as a technical section entailing details important to my process. I would like to thank the Alfred University School of Art and Design graduating classes of 2021, 2022 and 2023, the entire ceramic art faculty: Jonathan Hopp, Matt Kelleher, Walter McConnell, Linda Sikora, and Adero Willard; and big thanks to Jenni Sorkin, Meghan Smythe, Wayne Higby, John Gill, Keith Simpson, Shawn Murrey and Hannah Thompsett who all helped me with sound advice and generous support along the way.

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ABSTRACT



Ceramics is like yeast; it moves, transforms, and its material agency defines the meaning of its product. Like a rhizome and in all directions, a new set of openings and pathways rise and fall with the yeast. Whether contrived or not, every move, action, happening and ‘failure’ in

ceramics is fecund to new ideas. These new ideas are the affect of the attritional yeast. The push and pull, the emotional toil, the war of attrition that the technically complex and equipment heavy process demands can redirect the fate of the work revealing insight to larger questions about the entanglements of interior and exterior, life and death, body and mind.

Exploding, sliced, and withering—many of the sculptures in my thesis show take on the form of a sphere. Ceramic material research informs us that molecules behave and make space for each other as spherical bodies. Like our watery planet, the sphere is settled and smoothed by means of its own gravity; a quiet coalescence; busy and undisturbed; a comfortable condition of nature. In my work, lines between defining concepts begin to blur and I have come to realize that many definitions, such as the sphere, are only concepts—idealizations of the mind that in physical form cannot hold up to the critical evaluation of the criteria that defines them.

ACTIONS

I utilize many handmade techniques that take different forms from minimal and constructivist to figurative and abstract. Carefully articulated works using coil, slab, and mold-made parts co-exist in the studio alongside crass, spontaneous, and unorthodox approaches. I use these techniques to express philosophical and existential curiosities about the place and purpose of the human species on our infinitesimal planet within the overwhelmingly expansive, complex and beautiful universe. Vitrified ceramic and punky bisque, raw clay in various forms; an admixture of media including cast plaster, wood, metal, fabric, rubber, found objects, home constructions materials, ripe and withering fruit and other disparate elements are assembled, piled and exalted creating paradoxical, absurd, and often unresolved ideas in the form of sculpture and installation artwork.

My studio practice is informed by and originates from an ongoing series of repeated actions and reactions:

scooping	slicing	sketching
weighing	poking	scratching
crushing	carving	stirring
breaking	wetting	pouring
dumping	drying	spraying
spraying	lifting	splattering
mixing	moving	sintering
throwing	lifting	slumping
rolling	moving	shattering
shaping	dreaming	grinding
scrapping	dragging	lifting
sliding	jotting	moving...

The physical transformations apt to repeat over and over in my studio give me time to think and wonder. Amorphous broken shards, heavy earthen heaps, and fluffy fragments of clay matter are carefully or crudely isolated to be harvested in the midst of transformative stages like wedging, dumping and demolition; by convention these actions are simple means to an end and also spark new ideas. Ever mindful of actions and material reactions, manipulating and tampering with raw clay minerals echo the imagery of natural substance behaviors at cosmological, geological, and subatomic scales; the structure and pathways of planetary systems and the stars, the way that water and wind carve away at the earth over time, and the leaping, jittering quantum realm. Industrial mixers stir and jettison plastic clay to a texture and consistency like torn leavened bread or the momentous turbulent foam of a massive waterfall. I see these fresh, formless moments in the process as pure physical manifestations of unconscious human thought and effort; they are both found and created objects and their indexical marks initiate questions about the overlap of potential and expended energetic forces.

The larger scale work that I have been developing in my studio in the last two years is a co-creation between artist, material, process and many people. The presence or absence of slumping, flattening, warping and cracking charges the work with ideas about control, creation, interference and destruction. The resources needed for this endeavor begin to wear; tools are dulled, kiln shelves and ware boards break, structural connections in the clay sever, long straight

lines begin to shrink and waver. Gravity, air, extremely high temperatures, and other natural forces make themselves present, acting on the material and altering the course and trajectory of the work as it develops.

MATTER

I am moved and inspired by the tragically comedic underpinning of the adult existence that holds tightly to the comforts of modern society including all the lame, wasteful conveniences of travel, leisure, and domesticity while being acutely aware of the environmental impact and severe socio-economic divisions. My work plays with the conflicting position of the modern human individual with a daunting responsibility and the seemingly insurmountable task to make personal sacrifices and changes day after day after day in order to prioritize problems of hugely massive scale with project goals that extend well beyond the length of one's individual lifetime.

The first piece at the entrance of my thesis exhibition exemplifies how my work tells the tragicomic tale of the human existence. On a pedestal that brings the piece in line to

the viewers torso is an amassed, thick ceramic shell two feet tall, two feet wide and around 6 inches thick. The bowl like form has an opening in the front that allows the

viewer to dip their head into if they so desire. Oozing, dripping glaze and splashes



of dry powdered colorants reveal the rough textured surface of raw clay material underneath. By throwing large heaping handfuls of wet clay taken directly from the mouth of the Muller mixer, one on top of the other with viscous globs and impressed hardened chunks of glaze between as mortar, the walls of the piece were erected quickly in what came to be a type of performative dance. Suggesting the space around the human head, this piece attempts to materialize the psychological chatter of the busy, thinking human mind. The piece sits at rest awaiting the next individual bearer. The assumed task is daunting and the weighty presence of the piece emphasizes the challenge to be in the present moment with what is immediately around us—distracted from our physical world and tied so tightly to a society and culture whose operation depends so heavily on entirely conceptual agreements and entities.



My other abstract work is an ode and rebuttal to the ‘undoing’ that the transformative ceramic process brings to ideas that exist so pure and perfect in my mind. In contrast to the more articulated and clean styles in my work, the physically intense and speedy methods of making are not only an aggressive self-reflection and liberation from my formal and technical training, I’m making space for the material agency by letting go of overly contrived actions and intentions—I’m executing the inevitable trans-mutational doom of matter before it presumably happens when ‘out of my hands’; amassing the clay into uncomfortable sizes, unwieldy weights, and thicknesses up to twelve inches, climbing the kiln at 400 degrees per hour to high temperatures with low temperature glazes, and producing that hazardous-looking green flame out of the peep as the reduced flame pulls oxygen from the loose moving molecular surfaces and substrates. The physicality necessary to my process is present in the finished work and illustrates the conflict in our (human) desires to apply and insist order unto a world that continues to exemplify chaotic and unpredictable behavior.



Strewn about my studio are sliced, bitten, and partial pieces of dried, curling, and withering fruit and fruit skins. Fruit is a prime representative of life and energy—high sugar content and mostly sourced not from a seasonal plant but from the long-life and wisdom of a tree. I become informed yet confused about my ideas around potential and wasted energy when I see them rotting around me and consider the efforts and resources expended already through the supply chain for them to arrive fresh at my doorstep in the first place. It's also the skin, juice, capillaries and dimples which are so relatable and give them a likeliness to our own existence. The individual ego subject exists separated from the other objects of the world by a layer of skin which eventually dries out, wrinkles, and decays through pressure and time becoming one with the environment and no longer separate at all.



STREAM

The guilt. The hypocrisy. The rat race we keep returning to. All our own unbeknownst stories that gurgle and to think that there are almost eight billion! And that steep vertical climb.

Are not the beauty of destructive natural forces just as beautiful as the rest of nature? After all, we are as natural as anything else. And technology...

Ahhh...when you tear a strawberry in half with your fingers and the frosted texture sparkles in the sun's light. We are one with the entire universe.

And whether or not the tree makes a sound? With no one there, how can the tree be considered up or down or separate at all?

And the eyes and heart yearning the most obvious and important truths that are hardest to see and talk about.

The moon is a reflector and we rest in the light of extraneous stars drawn away by the dark.

SECONDS

a sunset is
the earth turning
watching spheres
light and triangles
and the freedom in my son drawing
chaos and lost at home
substance of time
enlightenment and the horror of it
the speedy trajectory of it

INFLUENCE

Below is a list of authors and artists that have informed my ideas and work in the last two years:

Authors:

Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens*

Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*

Timothy Ferris, *Coming to Age in the Milky Way*

David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*

Alan Watts, *Psychotherapy East and West*

Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*

Artists:

David Altmejd

Nairy Baghramian

Carol Bove

Constantin Brancusi

Wim Delvoye

Tom Friedman

Pierre Huyghe

Anish Kapoor

Piero Manzoni

Ron Nagle

Auguste Rodin

TECHNICAL

During my first year at Alfred, I was using various and acquired stoneware reclaim clay from the classroom clay recycling bins. For each 250 lbs. of dry (grey) reclaim clay added to the Simpson Muller Mixer, I would add 2 bags of grog and 9 rolls of toilet paper. With cardboard rolls removed I would blend TP in the shar mixer in a 10 gallon bucket with water at the level of the indented line a couple inches below the rim. This would be poured into the Muller after mixing the dry materials for 15-20 minutes. It was just the right amount of water so I could add it all at once and would then only need a couple spritzes from the hose to get the wetness of the clay just right. Often the muller would be coated and caked in red clay from the batch prior that would combine with my clay to make an orange colored clay that would deepen in color a bit when fired. In the last two semesters, I developed a reclaim imitation which begins to slump around cone 3.

Pieces would be brushed and sprayed when green or bisque with white slip to add gradients to the raw clay surfaces and to brighten up the colors of applied glazes. I have dipped bisque ware into this slip which produces a beautiful crackled surface, quite durable especially with glaze over top.

Reclaim Imitation Stoneware

Paper Clay with Grog

Hawthorne ___ 75 lbs

EPK _____ 25 lbs

Tile 6 _____ 25 lbs

Minspar _____ 25 lbs

Fine grog _____ 50 lbs

Medium grog ___ 50 lbs

Toilet Paper ___ 9 rolls/250 lbs dry

Shawn White Slip

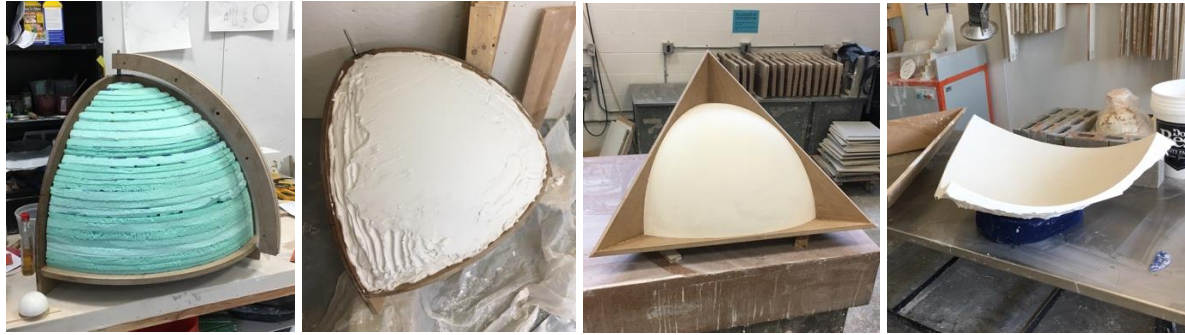
Grolleg _____ 30%

EPK _____ 15%

XX Sagger ___ 25%

Neph Sy _____ 15%

Silica _____ 15%



After coil building my first large scale sphere in the kiln for about three weeks over winter break to have it explode in the kiln at around 500 degrees due to moisture, steam, and pressure, I started a design for a sledging machine to make a mold. Because it stays straight and flat (where plywood warps and bends), I used $\frac{3}{4}$ inch Medium Density Fiber Board (MDF) that I cut using a router on an arm to acquire three, nearly perfect radial pie pieces that were assembled into a corner formation with glue and a nail gun. I attached a metal brace and welded on a vertical rod that held a $\frac{3}{4}$ inch bushing that was fabricated by the specialists at the university machine shop. The bushing was stacked on the rod with a rotating MDF arm that had a $\frac{1}{4}$ inch plexi-glass ‘blade’ that matched the profile of the side walls and slid across the bottom of the machine frame. Plaster would be poured and spread with fingers (quickly) onto the foam core when it had consistency of frosting and I would sledge the arm cleanly once or twice across the wet plaster before it hardened. I would do this in 2-3 plaster batches to fill the surface and all nooks and crannies. This would produce an $\frac{1}{8}$ sphere positive plaster shell about 1 inch thick. With a custom coddle board flask—three boards cut with a 45° miter and 45° bevel—I soaped the mold positive and frosted that with plaster to form my mold negative. The mold was reinforced with burlap or chicken wire mesh to withstand cracks and increase strength.