

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

*Sweet Rot*

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## **Abstract**

Sweet rot is an exploration of duality. The fantasy of allure, desire and grandeur while also capturing a sharp and aggressive sense of discomfort that lives in the handling of the clay. In this work I've been thinking about excess — where is the point of too much and is there a point of too much. The work hovers on the line of decadence and decay. Picking at wealth and social classes and how excess in those spaces can become a kind of moral decay. A space where the value of objects and things is more important than people. There is aggression in the way I handle the clay, but at the same time there is a deep admiration, perhaps a longing. I love the way clay responds to touch. It holds the memory of mark like a cast of my hands in motion. There is comfort and control within process that does not live on in the finished work. Nothing about the outward appearance of the work is comfortable. The objects have a cloying play between beauty and grotesque that speaks to the nefarious nature of their inspiration. This body of work is a merging of opposing forces, like when sweetness begins to rot.

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## *Clay as Catharsis*

I overwhelmingly desire chaos. It is intoxicating — the way I can be engulfed, and overcome by a room full of things, by objects. I like to be surrounded, to nest. I find comfort in this space. I love ornament because I love excess, decadence. Sitting at the edge of never enough, I want to be loud, to unapologetically take up space. To be seen and heard. I build with urgency because my touch is gluttonous, how wondrous it feels to indulge. I feed off the energy of desire, wanting more, needing more, being more. My touch in clay is both immediate and archival, lasting and tangible evidence of me.

The work is exclusively hand-built. Generally, I have two different building methods that are determined by the type of object I am making. One being what I call a “representational render” and the other a “fragmented render.” Objects that fit into the realm of a representational render are, *Armchair in Green* (Fig. 1) and *Clock* (Fig. 3). These objects are built with a definite set of parameters. I draw, I print references, I measure, I build. Building these objects happens fast, as my desired outcome is known. The fragmented renders, for example, *sweet seat of my emotions* (Fig. 2) comes from a place where there is not a specific outcome in mind. These objects are built more with the idea that ornament takes on form. Form is made through growing, through falling, through a trust in the material. Each coil morphs and adapts to fit the whims of growing sculpture. It is a repetitive process that transforms in rhythm with every pinch. In this format I am building intuitively, responding to the material as if we were in conversation.

All of the work is constructed under the parameter of bilateral symmetry. In order to work symmetrically, I build using both hands simultaneously. This process can be tricky but also quite meditative. It becomes a way to step outside of myself. I build fast. Quick globs of wet sticky clay piled together. When I am building in clay it is as if my hands speak before I do. It feels like a dance or a fluid conversation that I am having with the material. Each piece builds and grows reflecting my lived experiences and my emotional processes. There is aggression in the way I handle the clay, but at the same time there is a deep admiration. I love the way clay responds to touch. It holds the



(Fig.1)  
Representational Render  
*Armchair in Green*



(Fig.2)  
Fragmented Render  
*Sweet seat of my emotions*

memory of mark like a cast of my hands in motion. The physical act of making for me is so much about touch, it is challenging to put words to something that feels non-verbal. There is comfort and control within process that does not live on in the finished work. Nothing about the outward appearance of the work is comfortable.

### *Systems of Touch*

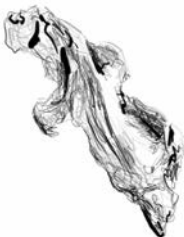
Building with systems of touch is like having catalogue of moves I can always go back to. This is a glimpse into the inner dialogue I have while making the work. These strategies might not make sense to you, but that is ok. The work is visceral. It does not matter if you know my motives. Touch is the luscious tangible and inescapable entrance to this work, for me. For you, touch is rigid and sharp. We both experience the fragility of material, but on opposing sides. We have the capacity to squeeze something malleable in our hands, to feel the satisfaction of imprinting ourselves. The work invites that memory of feeling. The intensity of mark overwhelms, me and you. It's physical, mental and all consuming. I'm overcome with the need for more— and maybe you, the desire for less.

*a brief sample of my ever-growing strategies:*



palm squish — a soft and gentle squish. My thumbs cradle the clay as I walk down the line of a coil.

angsty squeeze — how I build a center piece. It starts with a big ball of sticky clay. Bigger than a grapefruit, smaller than a cantaloupe. I wrap both hands around the clay, like how one might hold a phone to text. Thumbs front and center while the others get ready in the back. I SQUEEZE, inward and tightly wound the clay begs to be freed!



finger pulls— the clay fans out into form between my thumb, index and middle fingers. The ready stance is a “P” in ASL



thumb drops — snap snap snap  
my wrist whips back and forth as my thumbs slide upward through the clay



grip gushers - when I squeeze so hard my hands hurt. Squeeze so hard my nails almost break skin. The clay gushes out in thick globs between my fingers. I rest. Let my hands steal the moisture from the clay until it's firm enough to hold its own. Release and build.

ruffle — a ruffle is a reverse thumb drop.

ribbon pincher — must use both hands. A mirror image — I wrap both hands around thick coils, softly pinch the clay between my thumb, index and middle fingers. I wave my hands up and down or down and up as if I am a conductor asking the clay to follow my lead.

squeeze & scoop — I grab any amount of clay. Wring out a coil and bend it in half, this ensures an equal split. I squeeze each half as hard as I can. Rest. Open my hand, slowly. I take the lovely nugget from one hand and lay it in the palm of the other !but don't let go! With my fingers cradling the edge I gently slide and scoop the clay downward to match the curve of my palm.

There are moves in clay my hands do not yet know. They will be learned in time, as I grow. My lived experiences manifest through systems of touch.

### *Frameworks: Building Tension with Dichotomies*

To understand my current work I am going to tell you a little bit about my past. Alongside my ceramic practice, I have done extensive research in art history, predominantly focusing on frames. The research questioned why something seemingly integral to the understanding of an art object was not a part of the conversation. It led me to question whether it was a matter of representation and more specially, symbolic of a larger discussion, the hierarchies between wealth and status, art and craft, structure and decoration.

In an attempt to understand the condition of the frame, I looked to Paul Mathieu's, *Object Theory*. He describes the frame as the "ultimate object," as it occupies the two conditions of function, as both a tool and a container. <sup>1</sup> Mathieu suggests that because of the frame's function as an enhancement to our understanding of an image and its place as an object that holds no other representation than of itself, it will always be secondary to

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<sup>1</sup> Mathieu, *Object Theory*, 1-4.

the work it was made to contain. The frame is understood within its relation to function. Historically the lineage of frames, while these principles originate in antiquity, have largely developed alongside architecture. In an evaluation of framing in the Middle Ages, Henry Heydenryk writes, “painting did not have an autonomous existence, but was used in conjunction with architecture and sculpture, as part of a larger decorative scheme,”<sup>2</sup> suggesting there was once a period in history when ornament was not distinguished by a hierarchy. The frame serves as a transitional space that moves the viewer through the imaginary world of the painting to the reality of the wall. Ideas of framing and questioning perceived value are prevalent in this body of work, through expanding the

concept of the frame to theatrics. Thinking about the proscenium stage and how framing devices are used to construct narratives, I use furniture as a means to frame the body.



(Fig.3)  
*Clock*

The work has shifted focus from the frame specifically and moved to the broader idea of ornament and how that operates in our world. I am inspired by the intersection of gender and architecture within historical and cultural conventions. Shifting our understanding of architecture as a structural object, to architecture as a collaborative practice or experience. In my work, I am thinking about collaboration through an engagement with the viewer and also through an engagement with a historical context. I often think about how architecture can be a mechanism of both physical and mental control. It is an experience of and with the body that creates an

arena or a frame for those who inhabit the space. Architecture has the power to illuminate

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<sup>2</sup> Heydenryk, *The Art and History of Frames*, 8.

a particular value system within a given culture. With these ideas in mind I am creating divisions in space with carefully placed large scale furniture-like objects and objects in suspension. With objects like a 5'9 heavy leaning clock, I am attempting to use the anxiety induced to coerce viewers into a particular line of sight. I am creating a path that I want you to follow. The objects have a cloying play between beauty and grotesque that speaks to the nefarious nature of their inspiration. I am building tension with dichotomies.

### *The Silent House*

The work in many ways is a reference to furniture I grew up with. We had a lot of big and clunky polished wooden furniture. Every piece I can think back to had these animated claw feet that simultaneously fixed the piece in space but also gave this feeling that maybe the object was alive and could run away at any moment. My parents divorced when I was young and it was difficult. My mom moved out, took a good amount of furniture and my dad and I stayed in the house I'll always call home. From then on I lived with my dad and for whatever reason he didn't feel the need to replace the furniture we once had. A room that once felt warm and full by the character of the objects contained, became empty — a living room with a big mirror on the wall reflecting back a lonely folding table. Maybe part of me is making to fill that room, building objects that I want to surround myself with. Bringing to life things that bring me comfort and joy.

There is a security in the weight of my work but there is also a sense of searching for balance. Within the work there is a strong connection to utility or a lack thereof. I am making furniture objects, or objects in relation to furniture. The works hold representation but fall far outside of use. Like the furniture that once lived in my house they are meant to be looked at not used. We had a circular dining table with heavy wooden claw feet, but we didn't use it. It just filled space. The table and chairs sat there as if they were performing the action of togetherness for us. The furniture became pure ornament, decoration. Those objects, like a lot of my work, deceive. They read as one thing but act as another.

Looking at the period and style my family furniture referenced I started researching the Victorian era. Within this period of architecture, a pinnacle for gendered spaces, lies an inherent contradiction between the overall sense of home as feminine but the majority of actual living spaces in a home being designated for men. This world thrived on having more spaces to keep women from seeing and knowing too much. Secrecy and isolation linking to claims of power and dominance. These are spaces where women could receive others, sites of theater, where ladies acted of leisure in contrast to men of intellect and labor. In this world many facets of life were performative, dressing oneself or one's home in such a way that would convey a particular set of values governed by culture. While many of the conventions have shifted, performative practice is very much still a part of contemporary culture. As it did then, things like current trends in fashion, for example, are rooted in displays of wealth and pull at our desires to obtain it.

### *Threshold*

Thresholds as have an invisible presence. Yet they are the ultimate point of



(Fig. 4)

— *If I held up a mirror, into which people look (while people stare)*

breakfast, or sitting room considered as social, proper and public spaces.<sup>3</sup> A doorway is

confrontation. Transitional spaces, in-between states that resist categorization. Thinking in terms of Victorian era architecture, threshold spaces create differences and then collapse them as they serve to bridge together two opposing forces like the so-called masculine and feminine rooms. Rooms like the study, the billiard, and the gentleman's room associated with isolation, intellectual pursuit and privacy exist in hand with rooms like the drawing,

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<sup>3</sup> Rosner, Victoria. *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life*, 84-92.

liminal space that invites connection. The threshold is where the binary dissolves. The work is a merging of opposing forces, like when sweetness begins to rot. Within this body of work I am creating layers of in-between spaces. In one specific iteration of this idea, I take the traditional form of boiserie deconstruct it into parts both on and off the wall (Fig. 4). Thresholds distinguish the proper and the improper. They are symbols of the public and private, what is to be seen and known as opposed to what is not. They are not one thing or another, defined only through reference to their surroundings.<sup>4</sup> In my piece, layers shift from the wall to floating in space, fragmenting our understanding of traditional form. Warped lines of sight and a physical disconnect in space ask the viewer to contemplate their surroundings.

Approaching the work head on (Fig. 5), it is a picture of symmetry. I am orchestrating the viewer's experience to play with the perception of symmetry. I use symmetry as an aesthetic form and

unconscious tool. We are seduced by these forms as symmetry has been long understood as an ideal for beauty, by way of evolution and survival. In the way I am working with symmetry it unfolds and breaks down as you move off center and walk into the in-between. It's a space you gravitate to, because you want to look closer, to understand what you are seeing. But

with tight layers and objects looming overhead you can't help an uncomfortable feeling. Maybe you feel trapped, claustrophobic or possibly it is the anxious sense of knowing something bigger is behind you. There is tension in knowing what to expect as you enter the space and what you feel when you are inside of



(Fig. 5)

— *If I held up a mirror, into which people look (while people stare)*

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<sup>4</sup> Colomina, Beatriz. *The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism*.

it. I want to play with ideas of balance and harmony, disrupting the viewers personal boundaries while simultaneously creating a false sense of comfort. Perhaps the sense of comfort is in the symmetry or maybe it is in the reference to home.

*Spectacle of Grandeur (the game of gazes)*

In 1874 Pierre-Auguste Renoir painted *La Loge*, buttery soft painting of a young couple



*La Loge*, 1874  
Pierre-Auguste Renoir

seated in a box, in a Paris theater. In this painting the woman sits attentively, leaning against the railing looking downward, while the man sits in back gazing upward looking at the other people. The man is watching a different kind of performance, one of wealth, who's with who and who's wearing what. They function within a body of knowledge that enforces what social class you belong to based on how you present yourself in public. The theater box is space where you can simultaneously draw attention while also

providing protection. Seeing and being seen, knowing and unknowing relative thought in the same operation that shows the duality of representation.<sup>5</sup> It is a game of gazes.

Another Impressionist painting of note here is Mary Cassatt's, *In the Loge*, 1878. The theater is brightly lit suggesting the show is at rest. The woman so intensely stares through her binoculars across the audience. All the while she is being looked at by not only the man we see behind her, but also by us — the viewers of this painted space. There is a commanding tension in this painting between the power of a



*In the Loge*, 1878  
Mary Cassatt

<sup>5</sup> Colomina, Beatriz. *The Split Wall: Domestic Voyeurism*.





(Fig. 6)

— *If I held up a mirror, into which people look (while people stare)*

woman and her gaze. Cassatt found power and strength in this subject matter, as the opera was one of the social spaces where women could and did attend. With these ideas in mind, I have created a theater box of my own, an observatory! (Fig. 6) A vantage point within the gallery where the facade of the objects presents as a reality. This piece is an amalgamation of all my systems of touch. It is form built on intuition, symmetry and repetition. This object invites a spectacle, it becomes the place to see, watch and

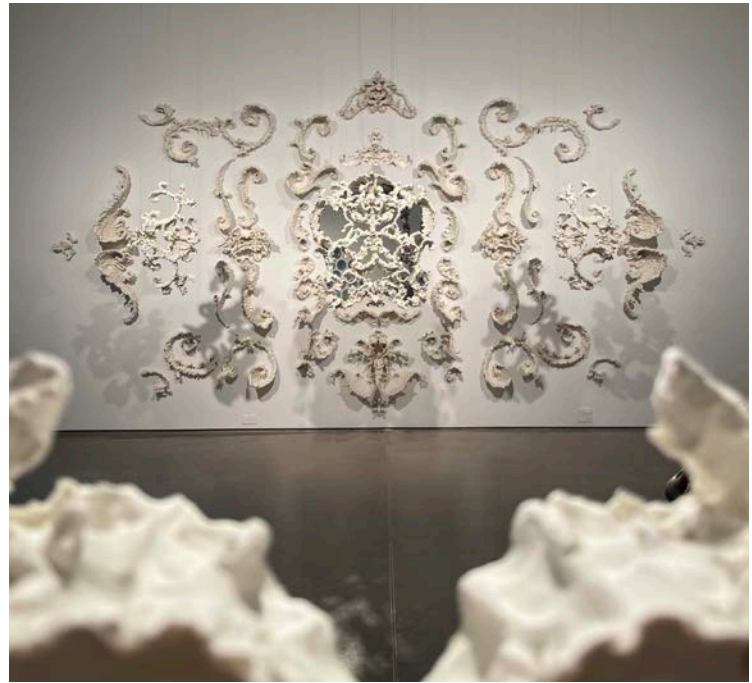
observe what the collective of objects appears to be. Staggered planes in space work together to present a picture of

boiserie. As viewers we place a certain level of trust in sight alone. We're inclined to believe what we see. I want viewers to discover that we are not passive in the experience of gaze, that there are layers of meaning to learn and unlearn. When building and installing I am thinking about stage design and the idea of framing. How architecture is a frame, or lens through which we see and therefore a signifier of value. In terms of performance I think of illusion and reflection, and how these concepts may have played out historically. The audience then and now see status reflected back through objects, activities, mannerisms and language.

— *If I held up a mirror, into which people look (while people stare)*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Kasmar, Caitlin, and E. E. Cummings. *Spring is like a perhaps hand*. 2000.

The centered object suspended in space is backed with a mirror I made (Fig. 7). The mirror solution was poured onto sheet glass and is two sided. The mirror is transparent in some points, where the solution is thinnest. This transparency highlights the duality of representation. As you step onto the platform and ready yourself to look



(Fig. 7)

and see, you immediately encounter a hazy reflection. The mirror conjures intimacy, the allure of pleasure curiosity

— *If I held up a mirror, into which people look (while people stare)*

and desire. I wanted the theater box to be a space for reflection, for people think about spectacted gaze. I want viewers to both acknowledge and consider that without me (the maker) explicitly asking, people willingly put themselves in that space to observe. What does it mean to be so powerless to our curiosities.

### *Melancholia*

Looking to literature, with the works of Jane Austin, the Bronte sisters and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, I am interested in the common theme of repressed desires. The fictional worlds created in these novels speak to historic gender roles, worlds run by repression and subjugation. Home as the domestic sphere, operating historically as a feminine space, is largely where women found expression. In 1892 Charlotte Perkins Gilman published, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, a story that details the decline of a woman’s mental health as she is sent on a “rest cure” in a country estate. The story follows her



growing obsession with the yellow wallpaper that lines her bedroom and her descent into a depressive psychosis. She believes she sees a woman alive inside in the wallpaper, changing the pattern and watching her, representative of her feeling trapped.<sup>7</sup>

For many, wallpaper is domestic and unassuming, but after reading this short story I now see that wallpaper isn't so passive, in many ways it can be political. Wallpaper is something I think about in relation to the arts and crafts movement, a decorative device. During the industrial revolution it was used as a tool by makers like William Morris, as a means to critique modernity. A response to industry that sought to bring nature into the living space, making the pastoral political.<sup>8</sup> The story of the yellow wallpaper has inspired the piece *Yellow* (Fig. 8). In this piece, *Sofa in Yellow*, a smaller than life sized ceramic sofa, stares quietly at the wall. The wall stares back, a field of yellow paint with globs of clay slip hastily smeared and arranged in a loose memory of pattern. The viewer enters the space and is immediately engulfed in boundless yellow. I want you feel the weight of this color, for there to be a gnawing, and kind of unsettling feeling. The sofa is framed on either side by two bronze sconces fixed to the wall. The sconces were made quickly with bodily gesture in mind, the arms to feel as though they could come alive and unfurl at any moment. The empty sconces like the empty sofa tell a story of loneliness and longing. The furniture object as a reminder of the absent figure.



(Fig. 8)  
*Yellow*

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<sup>7</sup> Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *The Yellow Wallpaper*.

<sup>8</sup> Boris, Eileen. *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America*, 20-44.

### *Technical Statement*

Building large scale work is an adventure and is not for the faint of heart. It takes a village, a lot of patience, and making the piece is only half the battle. Large kilns, heavy lifting and begging friends for help regularly. With large work it is very important to prepare — how will it travel to the kiln, how will you get it in the kiln. These questions determine how you should start. Most of my builds start on a wooden platform with



lockable wheels. The process begins with a layer of silica sand — this is to help with sliding the piece into the kiln— on the platform and then a layer or two of drywall depending on the assumed overall weight of a piece. Once the drywall is cut and in place I lay down another layer of sand— this layer of sand is to help with shrinkage. After that I tape down a paper template and begin building.

**\*\* always use sand not grog!! Sand has round particles - makes for easy sliding**

While at Alfred I came up with a method of building supports that allowed me to make objects, like a chair — a main body lifted solely by four legs. I always build the support before I build the piece. I use cornstarch instead of plastic or paper to create a nonstick



barrier between the piece and the support, because it burns out and does not imprint onto the clay.

### **Clay Recipes**

**Red Clay** (any cone) - formulated for a fast muller batch

- 50 Red Art
- 50 Gauge
- 50 Hawthorn
- 50 OM4
- 10 Talc
- 50 Fine Grog
- 10 Medium Grog
- 10 Super Fine Grog
- 3 Paper Pulp
- 5 Bentonite

Mini handful of flax fibers

**White Clay** (cone 04-3ish)

- 50 Tenn #10
- 50 Hawthorn
- 50 Tile 6
- 50 Talc
- 25 Minspar 200

12.5 Wollastonite  
12.5 EPK  
10 Fine Grog  
10 Medium Grog  
10 Super Fine Grog  
3 Paper Pulp  
5 Bentonite  
Mini handful of flax fibers

**Porcelain** (cone 6-10) Soldner batch of handbuilding porcelain

31.25 Tile 6  
31.25 Super Standard Kaolin  
25 Silica  
37.5 Minspar 200  
6.5 Silica Sand  
6.5 Molochite 80 Mesh  
6.5 Molochite 30 Mesh  
6.5 Molochite 120 Mesh  
4.5 Veegum  
4.5 Paper pulp  
Mini handful of flax fibers

**Glaze Recipes**

Shino Flesh (^03) the most painfully expensive glaze - test with caution you will fall in love

70 Neph Sye  
29 Lithium Carbonate  
11 EPK  
6 Rutile  
.5 Manganese Carbonate

Cowbell Aventurine (^04-03) MUST go on thick for maximum glitter - on standing clock

78 Frit 3269  
10 Silica  
8 Lithium Carbonate  
4 EPK  
15 Red Iron Oxide  
2 Bentonite

Barium Base (^04-3) this glaze has such a wonderful range !! Test at all cones !

30 Minspar 200  
16 Barium Carbonate  
15 EPK  
12 Silica  
10 Lithium Carbonate  
9 Frit 3110  
8 Whiting

Bronze (^2-6) generally use at cone 4 - on chandelier

57 Red Art  
22 Gerstley Borate  
14 Frit 3195  
7 Silica  
45 Manganese Dioxide  
7 Copper Carb

Snot Honey (^04) bubbles when thick - on yellow couch

84 Frit 3124  
10 EPK  
5 Strontium Carbonate  
6 Raw Umber  
2 Bentonite

Satin Black (^04-03)

30 Mahavir Potash Feldspar  
19 Frit 3124  
15 Barium Carbonate  
11 Whiting  
10 EPK  
10 Gerstley Borate  
6 Manganese Dioxide  
5 Copper Carbonate  
5 Zinc Oxide  
2 Red Iron Oxide  
1 Chrome Oxide

Burnt Marshmallow (cone 04-1) edge breaks get crispier the hotter you go

55 Gerstley Borate  
25 EPK  
20 Neph Sye  
10 Silica  
10 Zircopax  
5 Lithium Carbonate  
5 Tin Oxide

Bisque Slip (cone 04) crackles when thick - used on the yellow sofa

20 EPK  
20 Frit 3110  
20 Neph Sye  
5 Whiting  
15 Silica  
20 Zinc Oxide

Other materials: ❤️ PC11 ❤️, magic sculpt, matte finish house paint, powder pigments, plasticine

Epoxy is my favorite tool. Pc11, pc7, and magic sculpt. Half the work in my show has broken, either in the kiln or post firing because I dropped it or stepped on it or for any of the other wild reasons that come about when you're feverishly making in grad school at Alfred.

Epoxy + ratchet straps = magic

Plasticine is the last secret I will reveal. It lives in the hot box in the plaster room and it moves just like a water-based clay— only when warm, so move quick. The purple sofa in the show is half ceramic, half plasticine. Sticks to ceramic ~ enough ~ (Not at all structural) perfect for post fire finishing.

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