









# MEMORY: TANGIBLE DECAY & GROWTH

**Rhode Island School of Design - Ceramic MFA Thesis**

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**Memory: Tangible Decay & Growth**

*A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Art in Ceramics in the Department of Ceramics of the Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, Rhode Island, by Rebecca Jeanette Buglio 2016.*

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*For my parents, Bill and Alicia for being my tree that I grow on.  
To my sisters, Danielle and Alexis, for being the lichen that support me.*

“MEMORY IS A GREAT ARTIST. FOR EVERY MAN AND FOR EVERY WOMAN IT  
MAKES THE RECOLLECTION OF HIS OR HER LIFE A WORK OF ART AND AN UN-  
FAITHFUL RECORD.”

ANDRÉ MAUROIS



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## **Abstract**

*What if the objects we had as children grew up with us and showed the decay, alterations, and new growth that occurred to us?*

*Natural sciences focus, in part, on the endless cycle of growth and decay. Through re-searching this topic, the question of current versus past arose to question how the mind evolves with age. As a ceramic artist, clay offers a memory through touch by taking the shape and form the creator wills it to have while still able to have movement and force of its own through the molecular makeup and processes it goes through in firings. Just like the many factors that create a ceramic piece, people form memories that revolve around sensory activity, the situations they face, and the impact of emotion occurring at that moment. I use clay to understand a tangible way to represent the human memory of objects, stories, and personal history.*

*The art presented in this thesis aims for memories to take up physical space through ceramic sculptures, shifting and altering the way we think about our past. The ceramic pieces incorporate hand-built fungi and draped forms to evoke this sense of decay and growth. Fungi often need an external host to survive on, and when paired with the notion of draping, a way to cover and preserve objects, my pieces become ghostly ceramic shells of objects being altered in an endless cycle. Through this symbolism, I am able to show that while some situations decay from memories, they become hosts for new ideas.*

*In the pages that follow, you will find an in depth discussion of how I use clay to represent memory, decay, and growth. This will occur through three chapters where I talk through my process (encoding), the artist, influences, and theories behind my work (storing), and finally the success, limitations, use, and learning outcomes I achieved (retrieving). To conclude you will find a summary and the next step in my career (altering).*





## I. ENCODING: THE PROCESS

**“Things are changing too fast. When things change too fast and are explained entirely, there is no room to imagine, to create [stories] and believe in it.”**

**Diarmuid O’Giollain**





## **i. Idea**

*Before beginning any ceramic piece a backstory, or point of inspiration, must be found. I think in layers and cycles - organizing and reorganizing my process to add more detail or avenues of thought until satisfied. The body of work that accompanies this thesis stems from a love for natural decay, stories, and remembering the past as a way to come to terms with the infinite cycle we encounter as human beings every day.*

*Layer one is the origin. Finding inspiration in an object, person, fictional narrative, or sometimes all three. Then taking this knowledge, researching the history, meaning, and use before continuing on to sketching and thinking through how it can be applied as a physical object in ceramics. The research sitting on my desk in the form of notes, sketches or small fragments, pulled from childhood experiences or past memories that connect to a specific object that has the ability to hold those reflections in symbolism.*

*The child versus adult mindset forces me to see things two ways. One from a past imaginative perspective, and one from a more current adult perspective. I add these findings to my sketches and then proceed to the last layer before beginning the ceramic sculpture. In thinking about the past a symbolism for memory growth and decay was needed. Natural decay is a fascinating source of inspiration, specifically the parasitic nature of fungi on plants and*



other organisms. All the unique shapes, forms, textures, colors, and even significance of parts make each fungi unique to its location and choice of host. The ceramic parts that mimic fungi are used as symbols for growth, they may appear realistic but as Picasso once said, "Why should I try to imitate nature? I might just as well try to trace a perfect circle. What I have to do is to utilize as best I can the ideas which objects suggest to me, connect, fuse, and color in my way the shadows they cast within me, illumine them from the inside." (Ashton, 19). I am not intending to copy nature but more use its symbolism and knowledge. This is a large step in my process because I am giving physical shape to that moment of decay and alteration that occurs to our memory when we recall and restore information. I am letting nature literally create overgrowth and consume ideas - memories- in the form of ceramic art.





## ii. Form

*As soon as all the layering of research, sketches, notes, and essentially an image of what the piece should look like are formed, the three-dimensional representation of the object is started. Clay, like other mediums, is one you have to move with instead of forcing. Many people typically ask if a piece has turned out exactly as imagined, and the answer is yes and no. The original idea has been so far removed through each exploration, each added layer, or new obstacle in building, that the end product is often a hybrid of the original idea. The blueprints are stored in memory but as each day passes more information and thought is added, with the clay often guiding how fast, slow, or even in which direction the form will go. This is the beauty of the medium. As the artist, I give and it gives back. It has its own memory in a way, a push on my end to shape or form it a certain way alters the memory that exists within the clay's cell make up. It remembers the bend and pressure applied initially and if that angle is changed without proper compression, when the firing process is complete those small initial bends made and then altered, or the vertical force applied despite the horizontal tendencies at times, show through in the final representation, as if the clay is saying it enjoyed the initial stance rather than what was imposed in the end leading to warping or cracks.*







*Pinching, coiling, slab making, centering, pulling, and wedging are all terms I was introduced to in 2010. Since then, they have been part of my everyday vocabulary. Many of the initial pieces I made to explore themes in my thesis were built using wheel thrown vessels and adding hand-built forms to the exterior. These objects were small and explored the new range of glazes, clays, and textures available based on the understanding of materials learned from peers, professors, and exploration in the Materials Resource course graduate students are required to take at RISD. However, the limitations of form that the wheel offered, led to the thinking on my art practice; where I had come from, my background in the arts, and the future focus on what I needed as a graduate student. One solution for this was ceramic cubes. Simple, opposite from round shape, the ability to make them as small or large and they reminded me of playing as a child would with toys. I was imagining them on a larger than actual scale, similar to a child's thought process and opposite from what any adult would actually see.*





*Thinking back on childhood toys and experiences makes one feel as though objects were large, but if you were to go back to that object, place, or person they would appear different, smaller, less detailed, colorful, or imaginative. This experience is what Growth aims to capture. At the time, I was unsure why a large cube sitting on my work table made me think of childhood toys, but as the carved letters were mapped out, sketched, fungi chosen, deterioration and growth instilled upon the object, the memory of being small with large toys formed. As adults we grow up, the toys get packed away similar to how our memories get stored.*

*This exploration of form was a method of trying to understand how memory could be physically present and show tangible decay and growth in ceramics. Children's toys, objects that often involve imaginative stories and memories, are the perfect objects to represent who humans are as individuals. We all were children*



*once. The transition from child to adult happens at various times but a base object that is familiar to many allows for conversation and a chance to explore a past self for a brief moment to occur. As adults, we sometimes lose the playfulness and imagination we found so exciting as children allowing the stories to decay and be forgotten. Our minds are curious in this way though, they stored our memories from that time and all it takes is a simple object to jog our memories and make us remember a past self, one that led to who we are today.*

*From children letter blocks and the beginnings of trying to understand how nature fits into the larger picture of the form, I went on to explore my interest with nature and find ways of working larger and faster. This resulted in wheel thrown vessels resembling tree-like forms. Wheel throwing was the initial way for me to think larger while remaining fast in production. I reverted back to my comfort zone in order to explore the interest in nature and surface treatment of the forms I was creating. Hand building each fungal growth, stippling all moss, rolling all sides of a pieces so that my hand was able to take part in each aspect became important to try and understand the research I was doing on natural growths of fungi. The pots essentially were the host and my handbuilt pieces the parasite. Allowing my hands the time to do a repetitive motion of rolling a coil that turns into a slime mold fungus or pinch a mushroom top into shape, gave my mind a chance to recall why I am doing this. It allowed my imagination to wander and think back on the past.*







### iii. Balance

*“From each year the raker teeth pull little chips of fact, which accumulate in little piles, called sawdust by woodsmen and archives by historians; both judge the character of what lies within by the character of the samples this made visible without. It is not until the transect is completed that the tree falls, and the stump yields a collective view of a century. By its fall the tree attests to the unity of the hodge-podge called history.”*

*Aldo Leopold*



*In my process, I dig for that character and search for the in-between moments of change that are constantly happening to our memory, making us unique. Like the tree, we have archives, accumulations of little facts and samples that make us who we are, but unless we are asked to retrieve that information or recall it ourselves it isn't able to be seen. Unlike the tree however, our history, memories, and stories can't be collected by a transect of our minds. The neurons, nerves, and synapses are the ones collecting and storing in order to give us character.*

*Part of my being is perfection. I am a perfectionist at heart but through this process of wheel throwing large vessels and handbuilding fungi, I forced myself to build fast, limit my layering tendencies, and release my vessels to the kiln, expecting the imperfect to happen. Cracks, drooping, sagging, shrinking, I embraced them all when the piece comes out of the kiln. It was a test in making and letting go, allowing the cycle of decay, alteration, and growth to happen. Finding a balance of what my skills and techniques were when I built larger and how that reacted to the clay body and firing processes that were new allowed the forms to follow to be in sync on all levels. No matter how slow or how meticulous I am now, knowing the nature of clay, I know there is a chance of alteration that*

*occurs inside the kiln that is out of my control once the door is shut. I allow for the imperfections to have their say. Our memories are not perfect so why should one of my art pieces be that way? Many of the pieces that are included in this thesis have imperfections that I am perfectly happy with. They tell the history of the piece, of the struggle it went through, the movement it had during the whole process while also showing my hand and my expressions. My sketches not only are altered from the images on the page, they are altered in my memory, the physical presence of the room, and this thinking extends to the altered view of the object in the viewer's mind as well from what they remember.*

*I am never one to sit back and make a piece over and over, and call them all the same. I believe that is what makes the tree form such an interesting stepping stone for me in my thesis work. If one looks at a forest they see trees, a common object repeated over and over, but the closer you stand and really look at the object the more you get to see its beauty, flaws, growths, stories, and decays. They all speak for the character of that tree which is slowly growing yet dying just as Leopold attests to in A Sand County Almanac, which is quoted above.*



#### **iv. Objects.**

*This uniqueness is what pushed me past the tree forms and into old found toys. The aspect of every human being having unique memories despite the commonness of an object's appearance, such as a rocking horse, dollhouse, toy block, etc., made me curious about how those objects exist on their own, outside of our memories. Of the toys I have found and brought into my studio, they tell of a history of being forgotten, discarded, and this death of the object lends itself for instances of growth. The decay of childhood is one aspect it comments on while the growth of that child into an adult is another. The owner of the found object has outgrown the need for that toy, moved passed it for a more challenging object, or used it to the point of brokenness or decay that renders it useless. The object is not truly useless. It is simply left somewhere until a person, such as myself, stumbles upon it and remembers all the memories I had playing with a similar toy. It grounds me and reminds me of the person I was and am now. It is through this act of memory that I am creating new growth on top of my once forgotten memory. I am giving it a new layer of meaning to my personal history as it does with many others who stumble upon old objects. Our memories are constantly in flux, reinventing themselves depending on the stage of life we are in and the mood we have at the time of remembering. Our brains never truly forget objects they simply just store them in hard to reach places.*

*The location of memory brings to mind an article by Patricia C. Phillips on the effects of various illnesses on memory that discussed how parts of the mind shut down and block memory. One notable quote says, "Memory is understood and represented as an ordered proscenium of a comprehensive and locatable system of chambers. Its classification and organization provide a navigable map where something momentarily lost or astray can reliably be found and retrieved" (Phillips, 2). This moment of retrieval is what my art aims to bring about. Things are lost, forgotten and decayed to certain degrees until a new thought or memory allows for the old one to be 'found and retrieved.' The forgotten toys I recreate are symbols of the past decayed but with new growth applied; they are vessels for new thinking and ideas that will hopefully make one wonder about where they placed their old objects, cause the memory to resurface, and in doing so add new layers to them.*





*If every person had an object that represented them or a defining moment that was significant in their life, what would that narrative or sequence of growth look like? This question was explored through taking note of everyday conversations I overheard. The most intriguing stories were ones that made me think of specific objects as they were being told. As the artist, I am shaping and forming a narrative around my brief understanding of that person and instilling what their memory would look like in object form.*

*All of the forgotten toys play in a setting together with the dollhouse, shape fitter block, Etch A Sketch, and rocking horse, interacting with not only each other but the viewer. Together all of these pieces form a story of decay, new growth, the ability to form stories with those around you, and the possibility for new memories to form through viewing the work.*

*Memory is constantly making one reevaluate situations, storing them in new ways so as to pull upon them again at a later time, in a different circumstance. This is why as an artist it is always enlightening to look back on old work to see how, even in the beginning stages of my time at RISD, the mind was hinting at memories and past thoughts that I may not have fully realized the potential at the time.*















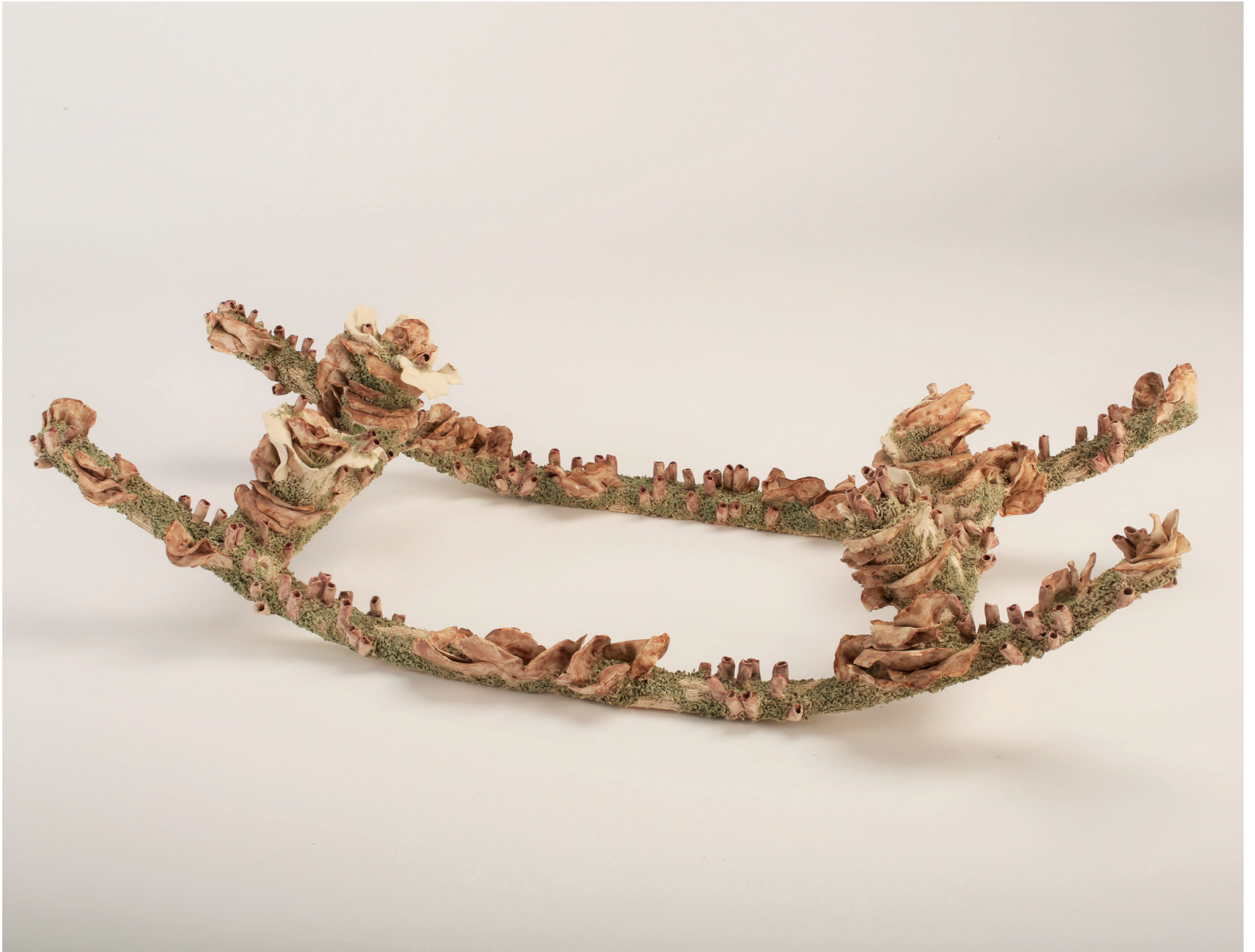
































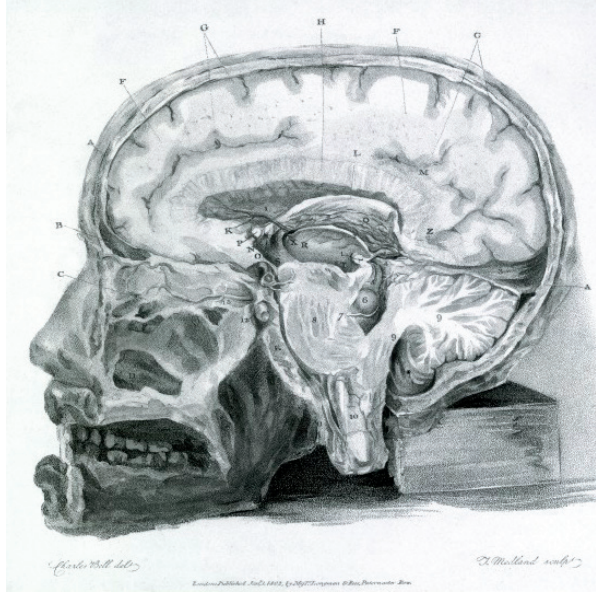




## II STORING: INSPIRATION, INTEREST AND THEORIES

**“The parables and the stories-  
all those great old stories-  
so much mystery and complexity.  
The story’s all there, but we know  
that the story, the real story  
is inarticulate.”**

**Rabbit Ableegumooch**

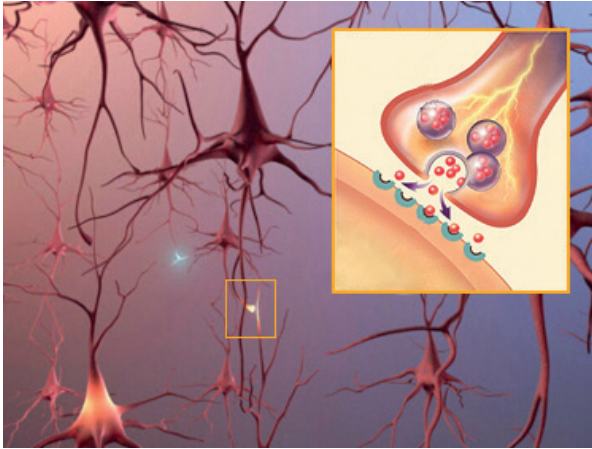
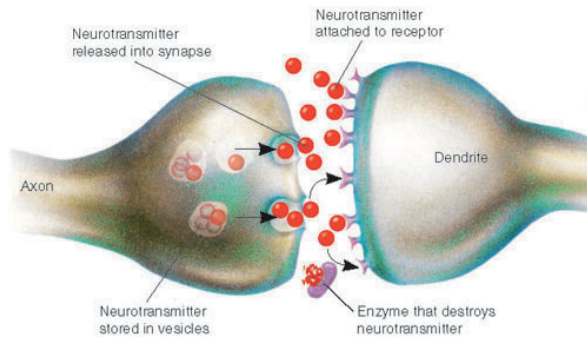




## **i. Memory**

*We would constantly be questioning ourselves if there was no memory to remind us of all our attributes, abilities, skills, emotions, or significant events that shape who we are today. As one ages, the brain collects more and more information discarding small unimportant fragments of what one had for lunch on Tuesday or that report filed on Friday.*

*This ability to sift through what we see on a daily basis is due to our brain's power house system. The brain is made up of thousands of nerves and cells all working together to record and create memories through synapses which form electrical pulses that carry messages across gaps in cells. This pulse triggers chemical messengers in the brain called neurotransmitters which attach to neighboring cells forming links. There are about 100 trillion synapses in the average brain and they are constantly pulsing, linking, and changing based on the events occurring around us. The brain is literally rewiring itself with each new event that occurs and processes it. It is in its own cycle of decay through which it uses old links to form newer, stronger ones that lead to new possibilities as a person through actions, recognition, and memory use.*



There is no specific region of the brain that is set aside for memories or recalling recent events, but instead the whole brain is involved in the process. This process has three major steps: encoding, storage, and recalling. While I am no neurologist or psychologist, each of these steps triggers brain receptors that create our past, record the present, and shapes who we become in the future by forming recognition with objects around us. The first step, encoding, is heavily reliant on our senses. When you remember something you can often picture part of that memory vividly. You sometimes can recall the smell, the background noise, the feel of something as you held it, or the taste. All of these instances help encode that memory and form triggers for when you next encounter them. This leads to the next step: storage. All of the senses store information constantly when events occur, processing them for later use when you come upon those sensory items again. Parts of the brain collect information as it happens and decide whether it was an important event in one's life, long term memory, or not as important, short term memory. The last step, retrieval, occurs when you recall events also known as a memory.

One specific type of memory encoding is called Episodic. This is the type of memory I find interesting because it is responsible for autobiographical events in one's life that allow us to recall specific times, places, people, emotions etc. It is a collection of very specific past events that allow one to essentially travel back in time through the act of remembering. As we age however, these memories can become altered or distorted based on the influences we have had between that initial memory formation and the point in time when one recalls it.

*Using this type of memory and looking at how art plays a role in remembering certain facts, images, and situations connects to the art of memory ideology, Ars Memorativa, a method or set of parameters that adds order to the natural activities of humans.*

*Even what we hear must be attached to a visual image. To help recall something we have heard rather than seen, we should attach to their words the appearance, facial expression, and gestures of the person speaking as well as the appearance of the room. The speaker should therefore create strong visual images, through expression and gesture, which will fix the impression of his words. All the rhetorical textbooks contain detailed advice on declamatory gesture and expression; this underscores the insistence of Aristotle, Avicenna, and other philosophers, on the primacy and security for memory of the visual over all other sensory modes, auditory, tactile, and the rest.”*

*Carruthers, 94-95*

*This is the thinking of Mary Carruthers, explaining one of the principles: visual sense and spatial orientation found in the art of memory ideology. As humans, we attach emotion, expressions, and images to our memory so as to remember the content clearly. The pieces I create do this by presenting familiar objects that will give visual sense and spatial orientation to the viewer. The only difference is the pieces aim to show decay and growth occurring to the viewer’s mind as they work through the memories they recall.*



A book titled, *Autobiographical Memory* by David C. Rubin discuss the effects of our everyday lives and the way we recall information. According to studies done, “it appears that most autobiographical memories are true but inaccurate. What is remembered in particular probably does not reflect the way some event really happened...the sense of familiarity created by an event is associated with a judgment that the event is true to what most likely occurred and consistent with what should have happened” (Rubin, 97). One study in particular used original files for a person in which they recorded events that occurred to them each day over 4 months and foils - false files- were then generated and given to them after a year to test their memory of what actually happened. Their ability to recall memory on the files after a year and identify the original one showed results on where memory is stored and how we as humans think we remember things. Rubin comments, “it seems that the non recognition of actual events occurs because of the merging of episodic memories into more generic “event” categories representing the semantic features of everyday activities. In short our autobiographical memories are not exact...change occurs in the reconstruction of exactly how, and in what ways, some events happened.” (Rubin, 95).

As an adult, drawing connections between memories and the fascination with the way things decay, alter, and transform into something new is curious and unsettling. Given the understanding there is of memory and brain function, through research and creating art, I am essentially growing and decaying on a daily basis, altering my original memories. The details I remember are factual in a sense but without the object in front me it is hard to say what is my supposed idea and what is fact in my memory. This happened with the dollhouse. It created instant memory retrieval since it was just like the dollhouse I played with, with my younger sister. This found dollhouse, however, was dirty, missing pieces, broken, and left as trash, making me question if the details I remembered were figments, or actually existed and just are not on this ‘other’ dollhouse.

By viewing the forgotten dollhouse, the original memory is forever altered so that I can no longer just have the childhood aspect of my dollhouse, instead I will have a child dollhouse and adult dollhouse to retrieve whenever my brain is triggered to remember. By creating a ceramic dollhouse I am creating a symbol to represent a part of the past allowing them to be a measure of physical growth from past to present. This recall and storage process will be different for everyone, but in viewing the ceramic pieces, a memory of some sort is stored, allowing one to grow regardless of their ownership or use of it.



*Ownership and familiarity of the object is important for the work to be understood. Children's toys hold a mysterious nature of being able to connect to a part of a person even if they didn't own the object in question. As David Leeming states in the book *The World of Myth*, "When the dreams of an individual are studied as a whole, a pattern- a personal mythology- emerges. When the dreams of many individuals are compared, universal dream language, a language of dream symbols, takes form" (Leeming, 4). Everyone holds a personal mythology which is then told through stories and remembering the past. When those memories are*

*able to be represented and understood through a single object they become universal. If one looks at history, the dreams, memories, and imaginations of various people have indeed formed a universal language that we study and identify through objects- artifacts- that hold meaning. No matter how old or fragmented an object is, it is interested to look at and form stories, memories, of what it used to be or mean.*





## ii. Natural Curiosities

*The idea of loss and decay of old found objects and the stories they recall is a way for nature to enter the ceramic work. As I thought about my art, I wanted to showcase the things that can be passed up or forgotten in memory but wasn't sure how to represent this incorporeal entity. This is where nature forced its way in. To quote Picasso again, "whether he likes it or not, man is the instrument of nature. It forces on him its character and appearance" (Ashton, 18). As a child, summer was a time for adventure and exploration, I remember looking out the window on road trips, seeing the landscape change, from flat cornfields to large mountains. Growing up in Chicago, I felt that traveling and seeing these new landscapes was beautiful and I wanted to be in it. I immersed myself through outings and museum visits, books, and films. I believe my interest in nature all these years has definitely affected the way I view art and my surroundings. There are things I find beautiful, that others do not, from rot smelling fungal growths that produce bright colors to decaying wood, animals, and structures covered in dirt and grime.*



*Fungi are interesting organisms. Their ability to grow in many situations along with their miniscule presence allow them to thrive. However, fungi are not plants. They need an external host to root themselves in and thrive upon, unlike many plants that use photosynthesis. Fungi are able to break down objects around them and use them to survive through the use of mycelium. This is how fungi absorb nutrients from the environment. Mycelium is often considered the roots or can be so small of a network that it is often unseen, only visible when the product of a mushroom top or other shape appears that is connected to the mycelium network. The fallen trees, old leaves, and even a stationary porous rock can be a host for fungi to sprout from. Depending on the location and the air quality these growths can be quite beautiful producing rich texture, colors, and patterns for those lucky enough to stumble upon them.*



*With this knowledge of fungi, the connection and symbolism it can play for decay and growth of memory is an avenue of interest and research that seeks to be connected. When I really started to think about it, memory was just like the fungi I researched. It was a constant thing, always existing but not always noticed. We are constantly storing and remembering things but until something triggers our memory we don't realize it. Just as fungi are constantly breaking down decaying logs or plants, until someone stumbles upon them, the object they are consuming isn't recognized.*

*This sense of lost-and-found that occurs with the symbolism of fungi can extend to the act of draping. This is seen as a form of closure on one hand while representing preservation on the other. This loss, this decay that inevitably occurs no matter how long it takes, creates memories, and alters them. We drape furniture in museums, houses, and even your grandmother's plastic covered couch. We aim to*

preserve everything in this day and age. We take the necessary precautions to save things we hold dear to us. As a ceramic artist, I have been shrouding clay since the first instance I was introduced to the medium. I cover all my in process pieces with plastic or cloth to preserve their moisture, I want to prolong their wetness for days, or months rather than the few hours they would stay malleable uncovered. People do this with other objects as well. Furniture covered in linen is a simple way to keep dust, sun, and grime off of precious objects.

But what happens when those objects are forgotten as well despite the intention of preservation? Do we remember them as they were in their prime or have they changed, being altered from sitting under a piece of fabric for so long? When you stumble across an old house with draped furniture does one dare lift the sheet off and disturb the contents, the preservations that has been done to it? Will we like what we see underneath that fabric? Draping objects awakens an inner child in this sense. The curiosity of wanting to know what's underneath yet not at the same time. The fear of what could be present and the ruined memory of what is imagined or dreamed up will be forever altered once the drape is pulled back. The child mentality of a simple sheet stirring memories of fort building, reading under blankets, covering toys, and the adult aspect of knowing that what I see underneath may forever change my idea of the sheet being something so innocent because of the memories I can't quite remember. The sheet can be a way to preserve or forget. Just as the fungi and memory, it is there covering the objects of the past but only is noticed when a curious eye stumbles upon it.









### **iii. Common Language**

*All of these interests over time have led me to explore how other artists can instill this sense of acknowledgement of the often unseen, growing, and decaying object in viewers, or preserve memory and narrative through art. I turned to narrative artists first, it didn't matter the subject, I wanted to be a storyteller. For this, Kate McDowell was a huge inspiration. Her union between nature and the impact society has on it through themes of pollution, destruction, and borrowed myths, history, and, in many cases, use of humans, show the relationship between us and our surroundings. Her delicate use of small intricate animals and plants add beauty while the ghostly white of the porcelain give a haunting feel to her pieces. She states, "In each case the union between man and nature is shown to be one of friction and discomfort with the disturbing implication that we too are vulnerable to being victimized by our destructive practices." This destructive practice can also be applied to the work of Courtney Mattison, an artist introduced to me by Rebecca Manson, for her use of large sculptural representations of sea coral. The small holes, and tiny coral buds are the same process that I find myself taking in my work when I hand sculpt fungi or lichen. I believe she understands my need for working on each piece entirely when she says, "I enjoy feeling like a coral, patiently and methodically constructing large, delicate, stony structures that can change an ecosystem. I build hollow forms by pinching together coils of clay and use simple tools like chopsticks to texture each piece by hand - often poking thousands of holes to mimic the repetitive growth of coral colonies." Her use of ceramics is also explained as the parallel to what happens to reefs when improperly cared for. The fragility of ceramics and the chemical makeup is what makes it the perfect medium for expanding on ideas of decay and memory.*







May von Krogh is a Norwegian sculptor who embraces the uncomfortable realities about childhood. With the use of childhood toys that are part of the past, decaying and growing symbolically with fungi, I took it upon myself to look for an artist that also dealt with childhood in a slow paced way. The use of children in art is often seen but to do it well is hard to come by. Krogh's ceramic subjects occupy a moment just before the presumed innocence of youth is ripped off like a bandage. Finding the balance of expression, gesture, and the calm before the storm of the situation is difficult in sculpture. Another figurative artist is Jess Riva Cooper, an alum of RISD. Her figurative busts being engulfed by flowers and vines show the destructive overgrowth of nature reclaiming their surrounding. Her work comments on the deteriorating economic and environmental settings of places. Looking at homes that are swallowed by plants, their locations reclaimed by nature slowly over the years, expressing the balance between life and death. Instead of figures I use objects that people can relate to.

Another artist I look to is Jennifer McCurdy for her form. She works in porcelain with the structural question of how thin and how much can one take away from a piece for it still hold its form. She also aims to explore how far one go to keep the movement of the wheel and the kiln's effect on a piece before it collapses. Her love of the symmetry in natural objects such as seashells, plants, and other items influence her work. All of this create an interesting vantage point for me as an artist. In my own body of work I let the kiln move and expand upon the shapes of my pieces while pulling from nature to show growth and decay. I don't aim to control every aspect of the piece and like Jennifer, I allow the medium to shape itself in the end and form its own memory, leaving room for imperfection and decay to occur. This imperfection is phrased beautifully by artist, Nuala O'Donovan. "Scarred and broken surfaces found in nature stand testament to the ability of living organisms to respond, recover and continue to evolve. Imperfections are evidence of life force in living organisms." Nuala's ceramic work and her statement on imperfections opened new doors for me.





*The undulating rhythms of repetitive shapes in her work captivated me for hours. I wanted to sit and look at the many folds, patterns, and the simplicity of color and was in awe of how this was inspired by nature. The imperfections she speaks of is what I love about my work. Imperfections show that something is real. A perfectly made object to me is too new, it hasn't seen enough hands or eyes, it doesn't have a large enough story to tell for me to be interested as I would in something with chips, cracks, or missing pieces.*



All of these artists offer views on process, the merge of human and nature tendencies, but I felt there was still an aspect I needed to incorporate. The missing piece of inspiration for my current work came in the form of Janine Antoni's sculpture "Saddle." As I began to understand how draping fit into my work, the haunting image of the figure crawling under what appeared to be translucent fabric (cowhide) pushed me to explore how draping had been used elsewhere as a way to express human presence. This idea of presence symbolized through an object led to Manfred Kielnhofer and his Guardians of Time. These are also shells or ghostly forms of fabric like material that are empty inside leaving one to imagine who had been there or still exists in space. It raises the question of who they represent and why these forms exist. For me I am not shrouding figures, but objects. I want the objects to instill the same question of why and who however, and leave a sense of curiosity.







### III. RETRIEVING: SUCCESS, LIMITS, EXPERIENCE, LEARNING OUTCOMES

**“Clay is humbling. Once you think you have it figured out, it all goes wrong.”  
Andy Brayman**



### **i. Tests**

*Ceramics has grounded me as an artist to realize that no matter how picky or precise I try to get at times I need to let go and let the clay do its thing. Over the past two years of graduate study at RISD, I have come to see the cycle of growth and decay occur over and over in my studio. From the work I created my first semester, to the final pieces of my thesis, they all have been stepping stones in my journey as an artist. Each is a memory that is altered, rewritten, and stored for future use. Each of my pieces seen in this book went through tests, glaze firings, and a learning outcome. As I look back, I am able to evaluate my layers as a ceramicist.*

*Testing building methods and glazes is crucial in ceramics. The many glaze methods, firing, clay, and even tool types can lend for success in a piece of work. When I started out, I was using basic knowledge of handbuilding and throwing skills that I had learned as an undergrad. These skills allowed me to produce work that was medium in size,*

*often measuring no more than 1.5 feet in height or width. As the inspiration of fungi settled in, I began to think in larger terms. I wanted to expand the clay and scale up my work to give it a presence in the room that table top pieces couldn't achieve. In order to accomplish this I had to learn more about handbuilding and throwing for large scale works. What typically would take me three days to build took me three weeks during my initial large pieces. I dealt with issues such as cracking, collapsing, rapid evaporation, and just the overwhelming nature of not being able to cradle the piece in my lap while working.*



## ii. Fire

*The kiln sizes available at RISD allowed me to think big and the studio space allowed me to build it. The issue of how big is too big then came into mind. As I increased in size and explored various heights, the pieces began to move more and more in the kiln. Branches and fungi would wilt and dance in all directions to the point where I wasn't sure if the next one would survive at all. This process and experimentation in size really solidified the fact that I had to contend with the kiln in all that it may or may not do, that imperfections left visible would be more noticeable as the scale increased, and overall how much the piece would alter from when I first imagined it in sketches.*





*This large variability of the kiln atmosphere affecting the objects was also explored in different environments. RISD's access to the Steel Yard's wood kiln on Sims Ave. allowed me to participate and place my pieces in numerous firings the last two years. Each firing turned out differently and since I had never gone through this process elsewhere I was able to test location, glaze vs. no glaze, and even the type of wood that was used. My pieces typically go through reduction or oxidation multiple times before being finished, but with a wood firing the often 50-60 hour firing and constant stoking made my pieces feel as though they were getting another layer of memory imposed on them. This memory of trees made me reflect on the plant and science knowledge I had while also making my memory react to put myself in the trees place.*

*"We sensed that these two piles of sawdust were something more than wood: that they were the integrated transect of a century; that our saw was biting its way, stroke by stroke, decade by decade, into the chronology of a lifetime, written in concentric annual rings of good oak. It took only a dozen pulls of the saw to transect the few years of our ownership, during which we had learned to love and cherish this farm" (Leopold, 9).*

*The pieces that I have wood fired retained the ash memory of trees that have been discarded and burned. Not only was the memory of the clay being distorted in the kiln but the memory of decayed trees was being melted onto the surface of the piece, drastically changing my memory in the end of what the piece looked like before the door was bricked up. Layers of ash was instilling a new memory to the vessels making them into tree urns that grew into new pieces once taken out. Coming to terms with this understanding of the trees burned having a history that led to their ultimate timber presented new avenues of thinking about fungi and their parasitic nature on those objects that I was instilling a new growth through calm surrender of deterioration of time.*







### iii. Test again

*Another learning outcome I was able to have was through the glazing process. Using my basic undergraduate knowledge of create, bisque, and glaze to completion, I didn't think much about alternate glazing methods. At that time, all I knew came from the limited materials that the school provided. After coming to RISD and taking the material science course, I was able to envision new ways of combining material, firing pieces multiple times with different glazes to achieve different effects and overall learn about the chemical processes occurring when I do all of this. Many of the initial pieces I made in graduate school were fired to cone ten and then glazed down at 10, 6, 04 and sometimes 018 if I applied a lustre. This meant that each piece was going through a firing cycle at least 4 times. This was vastly different than my bisque and glaze once routine. Being able to experiment with firing ranges and learn the chemistry behind glazes enabled me to formulate my own mixtures as well and learn about layering. All of this led to the color palette I currently use and am constantly looking to improve upon.*



*In addition to building skills and glazing knowledge, I was also able to gain information on clay bodies. When I began to incorporate clay shrouds into my work, I had to formulate a delicate slip and paper mixture that would be sturdy enough to look like a sheet over an object. This was another trial-and-error process that took time to figure out. At the end of my first year, I started to test different fabrics and paper slips. As time went on, I was able to find that using a layer of felt then pouring a six-to-one clay to paper ratio directly on top of the fabric to set in preparation for shrouding was a good technique. Since then, I have had to play with thickness and coloring of material for each piece that I attempt to drape. This learning curve is ongoing as I experiment with various shrinkage rates and sizes of the pieces. As the fabric burns out it can crack and shrink the clay in various ways which either conforms to the piece underneath or just shatters around it in the kiln.*

*Despite seeming to have figured out these obstacles of building, firing and glazing, I know as a ceramist the learning outcomes are never over. Clay is constantly changing with each piece you make, making the artist focus on each technique used to create the piece and work with the medium in constant states of learning. It is a give and take process in itself and one that, given all my interest, makes sense for me to be so attracted to as an artist.*





#### IV. ALTERING: CONCLUSION, NEXT STEPS

**“Perhaps such a shift of values can be achieved by reappraising things unnatural, tame, and confined in terms of things natural, wild, and free.”**

**Leopold**







*In conclusion, clay is a living thing for me. It holds shapes and memories in itself allowing me to think of bigger and better pieces to make with all the knowledge I have acquired from it and my interests. One part of memory function that is inevitable is the altering that occurs as we age and remember different aspects of our past. As an artist reflecting on brain processes, nature, and overall decay in various forms I plan to take the knowledge I have learned and use it to further my work on a more location/worldly based platform. I plan to think bigger in terms of how the past can be presented currently to bring awareness to decaying themes in specific locations, customs, stories, and the environment as a whole. "When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture" (Leopold, VIII). With all the issues in the world today, being able to reflect on the past and see how it has been altered in recent years is important for going forward in the correct direction. By using memory, and my interest in nature, I hope to be able to bring awareness to how fast people are moving, and make them imagine the in-between moments of specific places that are being left behind due to current day life overruling it. Travel, is important so as to study with ecologists and institutions that have a foundation in preservation of historical sites. Learning about areas that are being changed drastically due to urbanization. Personal memory was the foundation for my thesis work. Being able to tie the childhood memories many have to current day thinking was the root of my exploration, and now I want to take larger themes and explore how this same presentation of artwork can be applied to the bigger picture in a more activist role for bringing communities together.*

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**Anagama:** Translates “cellar kiln”—Traditional Japanese kiln evolving from the bank-kiln, and featuring a long, swelling inclined tubular ware chamber, with lower extreme serving as firebox. Characteristically produces heavy flame-flashing and residual-ash effects.

**Bisque-firing:** Initial kiln firing in which clay sinters without vitrifying, and though very porous, will no longer soften in water.

**Bone Dry:** Completely dry (and very brittle) state clay must reach before firing.

**Centering:** Critical step in throwing, occurring during and after wheel wedging, whereby the clay mass is formed into a symmetrical lump before penetrating and raising walls.

**Clay:** Widely occurring aluminum silicate mineral resulting from natural decomposition of feldspar and granite. Composed of microscopic disk-shaped platelets that give clay its slippery, plastic quality.

**Clay body:** Clay mixture formulated of clays and other ceramic raw materials to give desired working characteristics.

**Earthenware:** Low-fired ware, usually still porous after firing—must be sealed with vitreous glaze to be functional.

**Glaze:** Coating of powdered ceramic materials, usually prepared and applied in water suspension, which melts smooth and bonds to clay surface in glaze firing.

**Glaze-firing:** Kiln firing in which glazes are melted to form a smooth glassy surface.

**Green/Greenware:** Any dry, unfired clay form.

**Handbuilding:** Forming plastic clay by hand without the wheel, using pinching, coiling, and/or slab construction.

**High-fire:** High-temperature firing range usually including cone 8 to cone 12, for firing stoneware or porcelain.

**Kiln:** A specialized oven or furnace used for firing clay for pottery.

**Leather Hard:** Condition of clay in which it has stiffened but is still damp. Point at which pieces are joined and most surface modification and trimming are done. Soft leather-hard ideal for forming, joining, thick slip-decorating. Medium leather-hard good for thin slip-decorating, joining, incising, carving, piercing. Hard leather-hard good for thin slip-decorating, carving, scraping.

**Low-fire:** Low-temperature firing range, usually below cone 02 (2048° F), used for most bisque-firing and for glaze-firing terracotta and whiteware.

**Memory:** During drying and firing of clay, the phenomenon whereby a clay piece will “remember” the way it was formed and will often shrink specifically according to the forming method. If not accommodated, memory can aggravate a variety of drying and firing faults.

**Mid-range:** Glaze-firing range usually including cone 4 to cone 7, very popular with electric kilns.

**Oxidation firing:** Any kiln atmosphere with an abundance of oxygen to combust the fuel and oxidize the ceramic materials. Includes all electric firings and any gas firing with adequate air to insure complete combustion of the fuel close to the burner.

**Paper Clay:** Technique popularized by Rosette Gault, utilizing a claybody or slip containing paper pulp, which reduces shrinkage in drying stage, and encourages extremely strong joinery, allowing unconventional joinery such as wet to dry.

**Pinching:** Handbuilding method where clay objects are formed by pinching repeatedly between thumb and fingers or between fingers of one hand and palm of opposing hand.

**Plasticity:** Quality of moldable flexibility in damp clay—superior plasticity depends on smaller clay particle size, slight acidity, less non-plastic additives, aging of damp claybody, adequate water content, and/or addition of accessory plasticizers, such as Veegum or Macaloid.

**Porcelain:** High-fired vitreous claybody containing kaolin, silica, fluxes, and often ball clay to increase plasticity, with total clay component not more than 50%. Usually pure white or “eggshell” in color; some porcelains may fire translucent where thin.

**Press-mold:** A mold, usually plaster, into which moist clay is pressed to create multiples.

**Pyrometric Cones:** Small slender pyramidal-shaped indicators made of ceramic material formulated to bend at a specific temperature—standard method for determining maturing temperature of firing. Like clay and glazes, cones respond to temperature, duration, and atmosphere of firing far more accurately than mechanical measurement.

**Reduction firing:** In fuel-burning kilns, firing atmosphere with insufficient oxygen to completely combust fuel, introducing abundance of unoxidized carbon and hydrogen, which extract oxygen molecules from surface of wares, altering appearance of clay and glaze.

**Scoring:** Process of incising surface of wet or leatherhard clay in crosshatch pattern before applying slurry and joining pieces.

**Shrinkage:** Permanent contraction of the clay in both drying and firing stages. Overall may be as much as 18%.

**Slip:** Clay suspended in water, usually the consistency of thick cream. May be colored and used to decorate surfaces, or may be cast into plaster molds to create ceramic forms.

**Stoneware:** High-fired vitreous ware, literally as hard and durable as stone. Matures from 2200-2400° F. (cone 5-11). Also naturally occurring refractory clays with adequate fluxes to fire in stoneware temperature range.

**Underglaze:** Colored slips formulated to have low drying shrinkage, allowing application to bone-dry or bisque-fired surface before glazing. Commercial underglazes are available in a wide palette of colors primarily for low-fire, but many will survive high-fire.

**Vitrification:** Fired clay that has fused together completely, so that the pores between refractory particles are filled with glass and the body is impervious to water. Vitrification is sintering in the presence of a fully developed glassy-phase.

**Warping:** Distortion of clay forms caused by uneven stresses within clay due to forming method, uneven drying, uneven support in firing, or uneven or excessive heat in firing.

**Wedging:** Process of kneading the clay with the hands to remove air bubbles and ensure homogenous mass.

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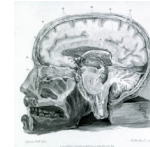
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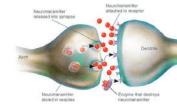
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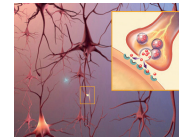
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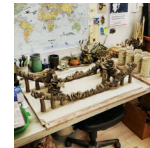
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