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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN COLORADO

Greeley, Colorado

The Graduate School

IGNITING THE CREATIVE PROCESS: A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH THROUGH PLAY, PERSONAL NARRATIVE, AND UNIVERSAL THEMES

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

Jennifer Montgomery McLees

College of Performing and Visual Arts
School of Art & Design
Art & Design

May, 2010

This Thesis by: Jennifer Montgomery McLees

Entitled: *Igniting the Creative Process: A Contemporary Approach Through Play, Personal Narrative, and Universal Themes*

has been approved as meeting the requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in College of Performing and Visual Arts in School of Art & Design, Art & Design

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examined over the course of five years the creative process and the underlying themes informing my personal body of work in clay. I designed a frame-work for implementing similar practices in the creative process and resulting ideas of my high school art students. Developmental practices focused on the use of play, exploration of personal narrative, and introduction of universal themes and post-modern concepts, which were grounded in contemporary studio art making and art education studies. Using methods of conceptual development grounded in these three approaches to developing the creative process facilitated the development of a personal voice that guided both myself and my students to fulfill thought-provoking ideas that were dynamic, reflective, and connected to contemporary studies.

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I would not be where I am today without the love and guidance of my family. Thank you to my parents and older brother, Michael, for supporting my creative nature while growing up and valuing a future in the arts as much as one would a future as a doctor or a lawyer. And, a special thank you to my husband, Ray, without whom, this thesis would not have been possible. His roles as supporter, motivator, and midnight

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

I. INTRODUCTION .. 1

II. RESEARCH . 6

Ben Shahn: *The Biography of a Painting* and Art Grounded in Personal Narrative
Marilyn Zurmuehlen's Studio Art: Praxis, Symbol, Presence
Defining Postmodern: Contemporary Studio Influences

III. BIOGRAPHY OF A BODY OF WORK: APPROACHING THE CREATIVE PROCESS THROUGH PLAY, PERSONAL NARRATIVE, AND UNIVERSAL THEMES . 38

Early Foundations
Recent Studies: A Return to Self Through Play, Praxis, and Subconscious Symbolization
Recent Studies: Developing a Personal Narrative
Recent Studies: Extending the Narrative Beyond Self, Exploring Universal Themes in Contemporary Art

IV. AN APPROACH TO THE CREATIVE PROCESS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL ART ROOM: PLAY, NARRATIVE, AND UNIVERSAL THEMES . 74

Context of Study
Play: Sparking the Creative Process
Personal Narrative and Voice
Universal Themes: Contemporary Studies

V. CONCLUSION . 103

REFERENCES . 109

Appendix

A STUDENT SURVEY 114

B GUIDING PRINCIPLES IN POSTMODERN ART 117

C AESTHETIC THEORIES AND PHILOSOPHIES 119

D HOW TO WRITE AN ARTIST STATEMENT ASSIGNMENT 122

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure

1. Ben Shahn, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti,* 1931-1932, tempera on canvas, 84 ½” x 48" 9

2. Ben Shahn, *The Prisoners Sacco and Vanzetti,* 1927, print 10

3. Ben Shahn, *Arkansas Cotton Pickers,* 1935 10

4. Ben Shahn, *Years of Dust,* 1937, photolithograph 11

5. Diego Rivera, *Man, Controller of the Universe,* 1937 Rockefeller Center mural 12

6. Ben Shahn, *Roosevelt Mural,* 1936-1937, 12' x 45' 12

7. Ben Shahn, *Allegory,* 1948, tempera on panel, 36 ½” x 48 ½” 13

8. Jennifer McLees, *Belly Pot,* Spring 2007, cone 5 oxidation, wheel thrown and altered, 12" x 10" x 9" 17

9. Jennifer McLees, *Belly Pots* on Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns, Summer 2008, raku, each 18" x 10" x 9" 19

10. Robert Irwin, Untitled, 1966-1967, acrylic lacquer on shaped aluminum, 48" diameter disc 21

11. Robert Irwin, *Light and Space,* 2008, 115 sprayed fluorescent lights, 6.9 m x 15.7 m 21

12. Jennifer McLees, *I’m Sorry,* Summer 2009 23

13. Jennifer McLees, High School Portraits, 1999 39

14. Jennifer McLees, *Singing Woman,* Summer 2003, raku slab construction, 10" x 20" 44

Figure

15. Jennifer McLees, *Torso,* Summer 2003, low fire salt, saggar, 22" x 15" x 5" 45

16. Jennifer McLees, *Egg,* Summer 2003, low fire salt, saggar, each 4" x 4" x 4" 45

17. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *The Grand Odalisque,* 1814 47

18. Edouard Manet, *Olympia,* 1863 48

19. Paul Gauguin, *The Spirit of the Dead Watching* 892 48

20. Jennifer McLees, *Vapor Egg,* Summer 2007, low fire oxidation with stanis chloride, 5" x 5" x 4 ½" 51

21. Jennifer McLees, *Broken Egg,* Summer 2007, raku, low fire oxidation with stanis chloride, 5" x 5" x 5" 51

22. Jennifer McLees, *Jackson's Urn,* raku, 12" x 7" x 7" 52

23. Jennifer McLees, *Self Portrait,* Summer 2007, raku 53

24. Jennifer McLees, *Bound,* raku, 15" x 4" x 4" 54

25. Jennifer McLees, *Marge*, Spring 2008, low fire oxidation, 14" x 5" x 6" 55

26. Sandy Orgel, *Linen Closet* 57

27. Miriam Schapiro, *Doll's House* 58

28. Faith Wilding, *Womb Room* 58

29. Judy Chicago, *Menstruation Bathroom* 59

30. Jennifer McLees, *Broken Eggs* (Woman House series), Spring 2007, medium fire oxidation, 13" x 5" x 4" 60

31. Marie e.v.b. Gibbons, *Remember the Dance* 61

32. Jennifer McLees, *Little Brother, Big Pain,* Spring 2007, cold finish with acrylics, 11" x 9" x 5" 62

Figure

33. Venn diagram: Overlapping relationship of narrative, play, and universal themes 63

34. Jennifer McLees, *Frio Pitcher Set,* Summer 2009 64

35. Jennifer McLees, *Angel,* Summer 2009 65

36. Jennifer McLees, *Industry Woman,* 2009 65

37. Jennifer McLees, *Babies for Sale,* Summer 2009 67

38. Jennifer McClees, *His and Hers, Fertility Dolls,* Summer 2009 68

39. Jennifer McLees, *Singing Elders* (singing prayer series) 69

40. Jennifer McLees, *Bound by Conformity*, Summer 2009 70

41. Jennifer McLees, *Belly Pots with Doors*, Summer 2009 71

42. Jennifer McLees, *Belly Pot on Corinthian Column,* Summer 2008 73

43. Beginning students engaging in group play activity with coil 79

44. Beginning ceramics investigation into development of symbol and self 81

45. Example of web exploring self 85

46. Describe, interpret, analyze, evaluate discussion slide for leading investigation into narrative with Intermediate Ceramics class 87

47. Describe, interpret, analyze, evaluate slide for leading investigation into narrative with Intermediate Ceramics class 88

48. Ben’s story 90

49. Janelle’s story 91

50. Angel’s layering assignment 94

51. Annie’s appropriation assignment 95

Figure

52. Roy Lichtenstein, *Hopeless,* 1964 97

53. Sketchbook idea for instrumental project 100

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It was the end of a long evening of hard work and celebration. I was elated as I had just shown my work publically for the first time. In my graduate art show, a one-evening event with 100 invited guests, I had displayed over 100 artworks, a feat for even the most experienced artist. Taking a moment to reflect on the work and study leading up to this event, I realized how I had grown in my studies as a student, an art educator, and an artist. I reread the artist statement that I had prepared for the show in which I shared my philosophy and process of art making with my viewers.

> My work is generated, inspired, and sustained by my personal stories and experiences. Inspiration may be as simple as my ongoing relationship with beauty or more complex as I try to make sense of life's challenges and triumphs. Through form and metaphor, I bring these narratives to the viewer to share, to experience, and to connect to. Through this dialogue between artist and viewer, my work is complete and I can move on.
>
> My ideas evolve over time. Most often, they originate when I slow down and take time to reflect and reconnect with myself and with nature. Once the seed of an idea is planted, it is present in all moments of my life. And those that stay with me come to life.
>
> Currently my ideas are embedded in several bodies of work in clay:
>
> - The functional body is grounded in both defining function and in finding release of expectations through play. It is less conceptual and the narrative focuses more on beauty, experimentation, risk-taking, and process.

- The figurative body is inspired by the emotions and expression of human nature. In these works, the formal elements of the figure, such as line and texture, are manipulated to reveal and amplify feelings such as sorrow, ecstasy, and pain.
- The narrative body is rooted in traditional storytelling. In these works, my stories and those of people I am close to are used to tell more specific tales of hope, celebration, and pain. With physical layering of space and media, as well as conceptual layering of symbol and metaphor, the viewers are connected through their own reading to my personal tale and also to the stories and experiences they, in turn, contribute.
- My recent body of work is a belly pot series. This body of work combines play, emotion, and narrative and brings forth, in my opinion, my most compelling and mature body of work to date. It is in this work that narrative most transcends the personal to the universal and the tangible to the abstract. It is in this body of work that more questions are presented than answers resolved. It is in this body of work that I feel validated as an artist. (Jennifer McLees, artist statement)

Five years prior to this show, I had begun my studies at the University of Northern Colorado. My entrance essay stated that my intentions were to develop my skills as both an art educator and artist. Coming into graduate school with only six years of teaching, I was still a novice art educator. Having made little artwork of my own since the beginning of my teaching (beyond classroom examples and wedding gifts), my art seemed, although not completely novice, certainly well below expert level.

Over the course of my graduate studies, my goals as an artist were met. With hard work and intention, my work had matured. It was now more controlled in its technique, engaging in its composition, and mature and focused in its conceptual unity. Each piece held a special place in my artistic journey, each intended for some special purpose. The intent behind each work had subconsciously developed and become the

focus of my journey. Through intent and reflection, I had developed a cohesive foundation for the conceptual processing and growth in my work.

This conceptual underpinning, in turn, informs my teaching. One of the first things seen on the wall of my classroom at Skyline High School in Longmont, Colorado, is a prominently painted quote asking: “Do you love it?” This quote has become, over the years, something of a mantra for me. It is the question I always return to with my students as they work through the idea generation process. It is the first thing my students are asked to contemplate when they feel their initial idea is worked out. This question is repeated as they manipulate their materials and move forward, making changes, and pushing the idea. And, again, it is repeated in the final assessment of their work. Embedded in this question is the need for students to be connected to their ideas and to make purposeful decisions that not only show the intent in their work, but also their underlying passion and individual voice.

The underlying passion in my work is the innate need to create narrative and communicate my story. The work that I love the most is the work in which I have seen the most conceptual growth in the generation and investigation of ideas. It shows not only evidence of growth in that particular piece but also in my body of work as a whole. Ironically, the work that I am the most proud of, my belly pot series, is the one in which conceptually I have invested the most and least conscious effort. The most, in the sense that it is the culmination of years of work; and the least, in the sense that I was finally able to release control of the idea and let it evolve on its own. The work poses more questions than it answers and lends itself to more universal and varied

interpretations. It asks: Why has the artist manipulated the human form in this way? How has the presentation, the tearing, the elevating, and the treatment of the surface of the bellies revealed its meaning? How is the presence of and manipulation of the human body connected to the artist's own personal narrative? And how is it a part of a greater narrative?

As I stood reading and rereading the artist statement, pondering my successes in creating a cohesive and thought-provoking body of work, I reflected on strategies in the creative process that I found to be both beneficial to my own conceptual growth and that of my students. I contemplated these questions: What were the strategies employed in developing my own voice and narrative ideas? How have I shared and implemented these same strategies in the classroom? How have I facilitated the development of my students' ideas and voice so that they could generate thought-provoking ideas filled with lessons and reflective thought that would support them beyond the art room and into their lives?

This research endeavors to analyze my process of conceptual growth as an artist, which in turn informed my teaching of art. I propose concrete strategies to inspire and support what other art educators and artists use for their own processes of teaching and making art.

In Chapter II, I discuss the research that was most influential in my studies. I introduce Ben Shahn's use of narrative; Marilyn Zurmuehlen's philosophies of praxis, symbol, and presence; and a brief introduction to postmodernism.

Chapter III explains my return to art making in graduate school. It explores the relationship of praxis and play and how that process enabled me to connect, again, to media and the subconscious development of symbols and developing themes. In addition, I investigate how personal narrative both motivated and grounded me as I began to develop a cohesive body of work. Lastly, it demonstrates how my studies in postmodern and contemporary art language enabled me to transform my work from personal to universal. Contemporary methods of questioning meaning and truths, embracing multiple interpretations, and stepping outside of self to explore more universal themes guided me in producing my most mature work.

Chapter IV outlines concrete strategies to use in art classrooms, centered in the grounding concept of, "Do you love it?" They allow students to tell their own stories, develop new relationships through play and risk-taking, and to find inspiration in the contemporary art world and the immediate world around them.

CHAPTER II

RESEARCH

Prior to starting my graduate studies, I often felt confused by the abundance and diversity of information concerning both contemporary studio art practices and contemporary arts education. Words and phrases such as modern, postmodern, dialogue, visual culture, praxis, semiotics, aesthetics, and critical lenses intrigued me. I lacked, however, the art historical framework from contemporary arts education to integrate this new terminology into the existing structures already in place in my studio practice and in my approach to art education. Contemporary research often seemed so daunting and the time to implement it so unattainable (as is the case with many art educators) that I continued to apply my former lessons in teaching and practices in the studio with little formal introduction of contemporary strategies. Committed to the pursuit of excellence in both my own studio work and in my teaching, I implemented some new strategies to achieve a minimal level of contemporary practices. But, as I immersed myself further in research, I realized that true excellence could only be achieved by further immersing myself in contemporary studio and arts education studies and developing my approach from there.

The most influential research encountered in my graduate studies was experienced in my own creative process as I returned to the studio. I had a natural

inclination to work from a three-tiered process as I creatively developed ideas for individual pieces and for a greater body of work. These tiers revolved around the ideas of play and praxis, personal narrative, and the establishment of a personal relationship with more universal and contemporary themes. In the following pages, I explain the components of research that were the most influential in defining how I approach the creative process.

Ben Shahn: *The Biography of a Painting* and Art Grounded in Personal Narrative

> It is not a spoken idea alone, nor a legend, nor a simple use or intention that forms what I have called the biography of a painting. It is rather the wholeness of thinking and feeling within an individual; it is partly his time and place; it is partly his childhood or even his adult fears and pleasures, and it is very greatly his thinking what he wants to think. (Shahn, 1957, p. 16)

The creative works and narrative focus of Lithuanian born, American artist, Ben Shahn, contributed significantly to this study of the creative process. Shahn's career as an artist, spanning the greater part of the 20th century, and his work most often grounded in narrative study has provided a well-developed and cohesive breadth of study for analyzing narrative in art. By studying his life, body of work, personal and social contexts, and academic contributions to the exploration of the creative process (in his lecture titled, *The Biography of a Painting*), an artist with strong ties to narrative finds a thorough investigation into this narrative focus of study.

Biography of an Artist/ *The Biography of a Painting*

Born in Lithuania in 1898 and immigrating to the United States when he was 8, Shahn began studying as a lithographer's assistant when he was 14. After several

years of study and travel, Shahn returned from a trip to Europe and submersed himself in the societal detriment brought on by the Great Depression. Rejecting the modern foundations of his recent European studies in France, Shahn chose instead to submerge himself in the narrative art of social realism, hence beginning a career where telling story and visual imagery would become the focus of his work.

Brought up in a strong Judaic faith in a working class home, Shahn shared a great empathy with the plight of the working class during the Depression, and his work reflected this shared kinship. During the Depression, Shahn worked aside other artists such as government funded Works Progress Administration (WPA) photographers Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange to depict,

> the social troubles of the suffering urban lower class: urban decay, labor strikes, and poverty. His early work during this period was concerned with political issues of the time, while his later work portrayed the loneliness of the city dweller. (University of Virginia, American Studies, n.d., para. 2)

Between 1931 and 1933, Shahn produced perhaps the most famed of his works, 23 narrative paintings depicting his telling of the Sacco-Vanzetti trial and their eventual execution in 1927 (see Figures 1 and 2). A highly publicized trial with much opposition from those who felt the defendants were framed for murder based on the strong anti-immigrant feeling of the time, this trial resonated with Shahn and many Americans during this time. The series of paintings brought an immediate fame to Shahn that would never be rekindled but would absolutely lead him into a lifetime as an established and influential artist.

Figure 1. Ben Shahn, *The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti*, 1931-1932, tempera on canvas, 84 ½" x 48." From *The Sacco-Vanzetti Case*, by Assumption College, n.d., www.assumption.edu

From 1933 to1938, Shahn continued his work in the social realism style by taking on work as a photographer and documentary artist for various government projects, including work for the New Deal Resettlement Administration and for the Farm Security Administration (see Figures 3 and 4) (University of Virginia, American Studies, n.d.). Throughout this decade, Shahn traveled the American countryside of Pennsylvania and Delaware, as well as through 10 southern states, gaining new insights and taking pictures of the American Depression era, creating a portfolio of images that he would refer to in his later paintings (University of Virginia, American Studies).

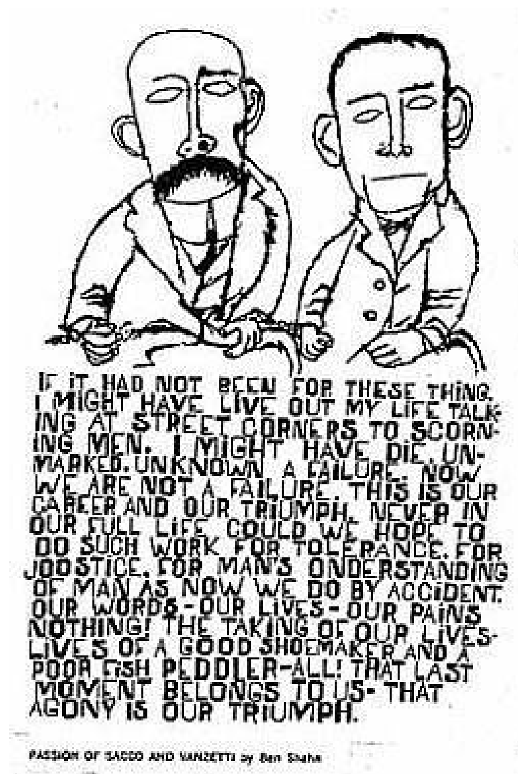

Figure 2. Ben Shahn, *The Prisoners Sacco and Vanzetti*, 1927, print. From *The Sacco-Vanzetti Case*, by Assumption College, n.d., www.assumption.edu

Figure 3. Ben Shahn, *Arkansas Cotton Pickers,* 1935. From *Tales of the USA: Past, Present, into the Future,* by Tales of the USA, n.d., www.talesoftheusa.com

Figure 4. Ben Shahn, *Years of Dust,* 1937, photolithograph. From *A New Deal for the Arts: Work Pays America,* by National Archives and Records Administration, n.d., www.archives.gov

In addition to, and on occasion as part of these government assignments, Shahn also took part in a variety of mural projects, the first of which was serving as an assistant to Diego Rivera as he helped to execute the infamous Rockefeller Center mural (see Figures 5 and 6).

As the presence of World War II loomed, Shahn's work made a major shift away from social realism and toward a more introspective and subjective style (The Jewish Museum, 2009). Moved by his personal faith and connection to Judaism, his work became less about realism and more influenced by his own narrative and personal reflection on the horrific events of the world around him. Unlike his

contemporaries, most of who turned toward abstraction as their subjective outlet, Shahn stayed true to both the human form and to the narrative in his work and continued to do so throughout his career. Through his continuing investigation of internal and external forces around him, Shahn "universalized both personal experiences and the trauma of World War II, the Holocaust, the nuclear age and the Cold War" (The Jewish Museum, 2009, p. 1).

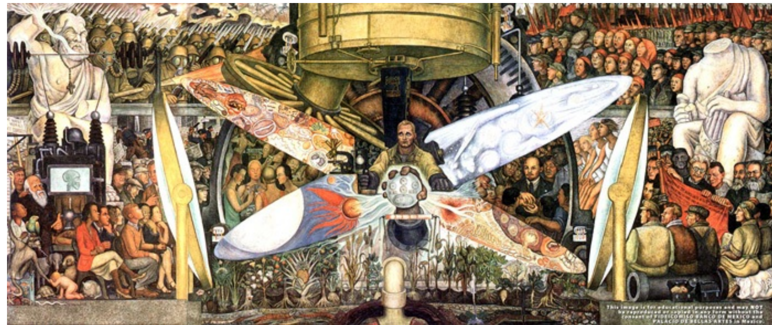

Figure 5. Diego Rivera, *Man, Controller of the Universe,* 1937, Rockefeller Center mural. From "Diego Rivera, Man at the Crossroads, Man Controller of the Universe," by J. Kindle, 2008, *Dossier Journal, 11,* p. 1, www.dossierjournal.com

Figure 6. Ben Shahn, *Roosevelt Mural*, 1936-1937, 12' x 45'. From *Roosevelt Mural,* by Columbia University, School of Music, 1998, http://music.columbia.edu/roosevelt /mural.htm

Biography of a Painting

In 1948, Shahn exhibited a painting that he "cryptic(ally) titled 'Allegory'" (see Figure 7) (Shahn, 1957, p. 25). Shortly thereafter, a friend and critic for a prominent New York newspaper, critiqued the piece and while at first his words praised the work, shortly thereafter, as Shahn describes, he,

> launched into a strange and angry analysis of the work, attributing to it political motives, suggesting some symbolism of Red Moscow, drawing parallels which I cannot recall accurately, but only their tone of violence, completing his essay by recommending that I, along with the Red Dean of Canterbury be deported. (Shahn, 1957, p. 26)

Shahn was so taken aback by his friend's critique that it prompted him to go into an in-depth analysis of his own, an analysis which he later shared in a lecture he titled*, The Biography of a Painting*.

Figure 7. Ben Shahn, *Allegory,* 1948, tempera on panel, 36 ½" x 48 ½". From *A Jewish Primer (Part 5): After the Catastrophe,* by The Jewish Press, 2006, jewishpress.com

From a lecture series he titled, The Shape of Content, Shahn presented *The Biography of a Painting.* The six lectures were published by Harvard Press in 1957 and the result is a hand-written account of Shahn's own reflection on not only the analysis of *Allegory,* but also on the act of painting itself and the inherent symbolization of both conscious and subconscious content.

In his study, Shahn explored several sources of influence on the creative process and the origins and development of ideas. His reflections on the shaping of content through symbolism, constant attention to the artist's inner critic, and developing personalized narrative within universal investigations were influential in my studies.

After the 1940s, Shahn redirected his content from social realism to personal realism (Shahn, 1957). In making this shift, his visual iconography also shifted toward the use of more symbolism and allegory in his work (Proyect, 2009). "It is not your purpose to tell about a fire," said Shahn. "Not at all; what you want to formulate is the terror, the heart-shaking fear. Now, find that image" (Shahn, 1957, p. 34)!

In developing my own body of work, I have found that my narrative focus has also come to rely heavily on both subconscious and conscious use of symbol. As my work has matured, I have been able to release my work from use of direct iconography and embrace more subconsciously driven use of symbol and metaphor. Though still highly personal, this type of iconography has allowed my work to reach a more universal audience, where individuals can interpret and personalize meanings beyond my personal experiences.

Embracing the use of both conscious and subconscious symbol opens visual imagery to less denotative and more connotative interpretation. When complexity of interpretation is presented in this way, Shahn reminds artists to have constant and substantive study with their inner critic, in order that their intentions are not misinterpreted (Shahn, 1957). When speaking of the relationship he had with his inner critic, Shahn (1957) stated:

> I began to question the degree of my belief in the views which I held. It became uncomfortably apparent to me that whatever one thinks as well as whatever one paints must be constantly reexamined, torn apart, if that seems to be indicated, and reassembled in the light of new attitudes and new discovery. (p. 38)

In this light, the artist chooses to gain or release control, to stay personalized to his or her own interpretation or release from consciously directed inner critic, and to let the work take on a life and direction of its own (Shahn, 1957).

By allowing his work to move forward in the use of new iconography and constant reflection, Shahn was able to develop beyond personal and embrace universal themes as well. In his words, "the universal experience . . . illuminates the private and personal world in which each of us lives the major parts of his life" (Shahn, 1957, p. 47). It connects beyond the artist and invites personal interpretation from any viewer.

Marilyn Zurmuehlen's Studio Art: Praxis, Symbol, Presence

> Most of the time when I work, I work in the dark, but sometimes I have just a vague idea of something and I want to bring it into being. (Peter Voulkos, cited in Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 3)

In Marilyn Zurmuehlin's (1990) book titled, *Studio Art,* the former head of Art Education at the University of Iowa analyzes the studio process as three interrelated

aspects: art as praxis, art as symbol, and art as presence. Zurmuehlen describes the studio process as initiating art making with a primal instinct, first by intending, then acting on this intention, and finally, after realizing the product of this intention, reflecting as a new intention arises, "I can do it again" (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 6).

Art as Praxis

Art as praxis is defined as the point in art making in which actions influenced by unreflective thought, such as those in play, become affected by reflective thought, and intentions become more clearly defined and often are able to be verbalized. It is at this point when more reflective action takes course, and the process moves into authentic art making.

Zurmuehlen uses the art of her young niece, Megan, as a simplified example of praxis in action. Megan begins her drawing with zig-zags on a paper (like many children). When her mother recognizes the marks as a Christmas tree, Megan consciously reflects and chooses to take this new symbol and "do it again" (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 8).

In my ceramic sculpture, I often see a similar dialectic occurring at the beginning stages of playing with material and technique. In my belly pot series, I have a clear recollection of sitting at the wheel, having just raised a well thrown 14-inch cylinder, taller than I had thrown before (see Figure 8). I hesitantly set aside my attachment to the technical victory of the piece and released my intentions to the play and destruction of this perfect surface. Taking a deep breath, I picked up a mold I had previously made of my abdomen and wrapped it around the vessel. I then pushed the

clay into the mold from the inside of the vessel so that the clay tore along the bottom edge as it conformed to the curved index of my belly. Stretching the lip so that it tore as I pulled the mold away, I saw for the first time how my belly and the perfect cylinder had come together in play to create something so visceral and personal that it would eventually become one of my most valued works. Like a child making marks on a paper and discovering imagery where previously there was none, I found myself reading into my art meaning and symbols, something I had not consciously intended. I was connected, drawn in, and decisive with my engagement. The world of play had opened a new direction in my work, a direction connected deeply and intimately to my inner self so much, that at first, I was taken aback. For me, "the concrete physicality of a medium," as Zurmuehlen (1990) describes it in her book, had become the "basis for reciprocity between" maker and material, "a grounding for reflective attention" (p. 4).

Figure 8. Jennifer McLees, *Belly Pot,* Spring 2007, cone 5 oxidation, wheel thrown and altered, 12" x 10" x 9". Photograph by Jennifer McLees.

Art as Symbol

In the aspect of studio art making that Zurmuehlen labels as "art as symbol," this reflective attention (praxis) results in the purposeful interpretation and reenactment ("I can do it again") of symbols. In her book, Zurmuehlen (1990) summarizes American philosopher Suzanne Langer's work (in the study of symbol), restating her "explanation that our brains naturally translate experiences into symbols" and that "by interposing symbols between our perceptions and our responses, we construct order from the chaos of direct experience, and by means of symbols we can add the experiences of other people to our own" (p. 11). For the girl drawing the trees, she made sense of the zig-zag lines in an effort to connect with those around her. In my belly pot series, the vessels symbolized for me personally, my struggles with infertility and the lack of control I had over my body to become pregnant. On a more general and universalized level, the belly pots explored the variation in individual relationships humans have with their bodies and how these cognitive relationships are interpreted physically (see Figure 9). In discussion of this series with others, I found the interpretations were highly personal and extremely varied. Some shared my interpretation focusing on the lack of and desire for control of our physical being. Others interpreted the pots as sexual objects of desire. And others latched further to the idea of the belly providing a balanced, spiritual center in the body.

Zurmuehlen (1990) describes Langer's distinction between sign and symbol. A sign works as an indicator of subject; "it tells us that something exists, or did, or will in the future" (p. 11). When a sign is used as a reminder of an idea, it becomes a

symbol (Zurmuehlen, 1990)). It forces the viewer to conceive beyond the physical concreteness of the subject and read meaning into it that is a part of a larger idea. My bellies had become more than a physical recalculation of the body. Personally, they carried with them connotations referencing my infertility and the lack of complete control over physical dreams, wishes, and desires.

Figure 9. Jennifer McLees, *Belly Pots* on Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns, Summer 2008, raku, each 18" x 10" x 9". Photograph by Jennifer McLees.

Langer further elaborates on the difference between discursive and non-discursive articulation and the importance of non-discursive symbols in art.

Discursive presentations are “marked by analytical reasoning” and “proceeding coherently from topic to topic” (Discursive, 2010). Langer equates this to language and its “conventional reference” (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 12). Non-discursive presentations, on the other hand, focus on a more intuitive interpretation and approach. Zurmuehlen (1990) points out that visual forms “are non-discursive symbols because they present their constituents simultaneously and their structure is grasped in one act” (p. 12). The idea is articulated and they become an “abstraction of life rhythms for our intellectual intuition” (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 13). The symbolism in a work of art essentially speaks to us on a level that at times cannot be worked out linguistically in simple terms. Interpretation requires one to embody “the artist’s own imagination of organized feeling, the rhythms of life and the forms of emotion” (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 13). The non-discursive presentation in the belly pots reveals the visceral quality of these vessels and the deep connection with my own story before I put words to articulate it.

Art as Presence

Art as presence is another of Zurmuehlen’s conditions for studio art making. Whereas Zurmuehlen uses philosopher Suzanne Langer’s work in her interpretation of art as symbol, she chooses contemporary artist Robert Irwin’s work and his defining of how process of perception detracts from presence as a structure for her interpretation of art as presence.

Irwin’s contemporary sculptures are about presence and the “primacy of precognitive perception” (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 14) (see Figures 10 and 11). In his

site-determined installations, Irwin uses "'scrims' of muslin that filter and reflect the light," creating a space dominated by the "primacy of perceptual experience" (Bishop, 2005, p. 57). He views this primacy of perception over intellect in response to his sculptures and in doing so creates a space where presence dominates the space and foundation of his artwork. His intentions are to break through typifications of reality and deal only with what one sees, to break the cognitive barrier and be present in that moment, leaving behind preconceptions and abstractions that you have brought to the art experience and will bring in through cognitive intellect.

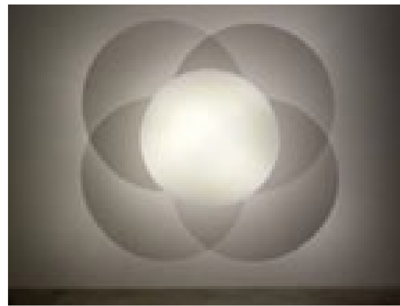

Figure 10. Robert Irwin, Untitled, 1966-1967, acrylic lacquer on shaped aluminum, 48" diameter disc. From *Invisible Might* by Foundation 2021, 2010, www.2021.org

Figure 11. Robert Irwin, *Light and Space,* 2008, 115 sprayed fluorescent lights, 6.9 m x 15.7 m. From *San Diego Apartment Living,* by hubbuzz, n.d., www.hubbuzz.com

Zurmuehlen (1990) explains Irwin's approach to perception by briefly summarizing his ideas on the progression of experience: from perception through conception, form, formful and formal to formalized. Perception/sense, is "defined as originary, undifferentiated sensation, not yet distinguished as sounds or colors" (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 14). In simplest terms, Zurmuehlen uses Irwin's own words to describe this phenomenon: "We know the sky's blueness even before we know it as 'blue', let alone as 'sky'" (Irwin, cited in Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 14). In conception/mind, categorization begins and individuals start to isolate areas of focus, naming things "this" and "that." Irwin equates this to intuitive thinking. It is in the next stage, which Irwin calls form/ physical compound that meaning begins to infiltrate into the process. This is the stage where we start to equate physical meaning with the phenomena we observe, titling things as "symbol, act or thing" (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 14). In the formal-objective compound stage, one further equates meaning through comparison and contrast and establishing physical relational patterns such as light/dark, large/small, and soft/coarse. This is where information is processed and analysis is made on an organized level. In the next stage, which Irwin titles, formal/boundaries and axioms, patterns are retrified and information from life is integrated into the interpretation. Finally, Irwin describes in the formalized stage, the final stage, how abstraction has taken over presence and cognitive perceptions, and magnified outside influences have taken over and dictated our experience. The viewer's interpretation of experience is no longer true to the immediate experience of the phenomena but instead

has been organized and calculated into a framework that has taken them further from truth and presence.

For Irwin, each step through this process of perception and conception signifies a loss in authentic experience and presence in his installations. In Irwin's terms, we have lost presence to abstraction (Zurmuehlen, 1990). In my own work, it is finally in the belly pot series that I allowed myself to be present with the process and with the innate symbolization and therapeutic nature of the work (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Jennifer McLees, *I'm Sorry,* Summer 2009 (detail shown on right). Photograph by Jennifer McLees.

Essential Conditions for Making Art

Zurmuehlen synthesized the concepts of praxis, symbol, and presence with three essential conditions for making art originally developed by Kenneth Beittel. These conditions are named artistic causality, idiosyncratic meaning, and intentional symbolization.

Artistic causality attests that “artists have no choice but to express their lives” (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 18). Artists have a choice of process. However, this process does not change the essential content of their work in art, which “can only be life” (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 18). For example, personally, conceiving a child had been such an overriding desire that it had to be expressed in my art, thus the creation of many works, including the belly pot series.

Zurmuehlen integrates her notion of art as presence with Beittel’s condition of idiosyncratic meaning. Idiosyncratic meaning occurs with the inclusion of “affective and image-bound meaning, . . . uniquely bound to a particular person and situation.” This is the stage where “life experience is the source of art” (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 25). Zurmuehlen (1990) illuminates this aspect by referencing the story of an art educator who used a clay lesson to let her students play with the material, “pushing their fingers in and out, pounding it, rolling it” (p. 26). The teacher’s intention allowed the students to explore and enjoy the clay. However, the teacher stated to the children,

> if you find that, as you feel the shape you are making beneath your hands, an idea comes to you of what it might be, then perhaps you would like to bring out that idea a little more, to shape it into the form of the thing that is in your mind. (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 27)

Zurmuehlen (1990) also connected this art as presence to art teaching practices she observed in Japan. In Japan,

> play periods were times of exploration and experimentation with art media and materials. Every grade level began the school year with two to three weeks of such activity and art teachers returned to play periods at any time during the year if they observed their students' work becoming banal or academic. The art educators viewed these play periods as explanation for the high quality of their students' art. (p. 27)

Zurmuehlen (1990) concluded the section on idiosyncratic meaning by summing up with a particularly apt quote. She states:

> Life is more than a thing, an object, a substance that exists. It is also a process that is enacted. We have a choice in our approach to it. We can choose to describe it or we can choose to re-enact it. Description in its various ramifications is the traditional approach of the scientist. Re-enactment has been the tradition and approach of the artist. (p. 28)

Zurmuehlen finalizes her reflection on the three essential conditions for making art by outlining Beittel's third essential condition entitled, intentional symbolization. Within this condition, learning and creativity move beyond description and toward personalized interpretation. Zurmuehlen (1990) describes this as,

> the holding to oneself of experiences, feelings about those experiences, memories mingled with reflections, all merging through increasing layers of new experiences into an individual's unique structure of meaning. (p. 30)

This third condition is clearly exemplified in my belly pot series. The pots became a form that transformed my experience of infertility into a ceramic vessel, the belly pot.

Defining Postmodern: Contemporary Studio Influences

The research most influential to this investigation of the creative process was that encountered in exploring prominent concepts from contemporary art practices, most notably literature and discussion surrounding postmodernism and its influences

in the studio and art classroom. Prior to my graduate studies, the term, pos-tmodernism, seemed foreign. Despite the entirety of my education having occurred after the commencement of the shift from modern to postmodern (in the late 1960s and early 1970s), I still lacked a formal framework to define the term and understand its underlying influences. After becoming interested in contemporary postmodern artists, concepts, and literature; I found it especially helpful, in defining my own approach to this philosophy, to study its history and underlying principles. From this education, I was able to develop a mature, contemporary platform from which to elevate the ideas in my own studio work and the ideas of my art students.

Brief History of Modernism in Art

Postmodernism is a complex philosophy that seems, in some ways, easiest to comprehend by its contrast to the era that preceded it, modernism. Like all art movements, modernism's history and philosophical grounding are embedded in the webs of history and philosophy that precede it. Most historians agree that many of the founding principles of modernism first emerged during the European Renaissance. It is during this time, as Dennis E. Fehr (1997) explains in his journal article titled, "Clutching the Lectern, or Shouting From the Back of the Hall: A Comparison of Modern and Postmodern Arts Education," that the key determinants in modernism are first introduced: the new "emergence of Democracy; the notions of respect for the individual over the group; and the belief in the supremacy of Western culture and in reason as a superior way of knowing" (p. 2).

While most art historians agree that the seeds of modernist philosophy were introduced in the Renaissance and commenced in art with the late 19th century impressionist movement, most also agree that the climax of modernism is much closer to our lifetimes. Simply put, the word, modern, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary*, means, “of, pertaining to, or characteristic of recent time or present”. (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996, p. 5). It is with the impressionism movement that we first see the idea “that art must change because the experience of life itself changes,” a concept originating directly from poet and critic, Charles Baudelaire~~.~~ (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2010. Baudelaire passed along his belief that art should reflect modern life to his good friend and founding Impressionist artist, Eduard Manet. Finding inspiration in Baudelaire’s words, Manet integrated the new philosophy into his artwork, thus beginning the conception of a visual arts movement “preoccupied with the visual and material facts of the medium for their own sake”, present in the immediate moment, and freed from the past (Chilvers & Glaves-Smith, 2010).

The term, modernism, became an umbrella philosophy at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century as it pertained not only to the arts but also to many political and cultural studies as well. Modernism’s beliefs are grounded in Sigmund Freud’s “science of the unconscious, Charles Darwin’s theories of evolution and Viktor Lowenfeld’s art education studies which argued against “imposing adult art knowledge on children” (Bois, Buchloh, Foster, & Krass, 2004, p. 5). In all of its genres, whether they are grounded in education, culture, or science, modernist thought

seeks to move on from the past and look to the future for inspiration and direction, a future infused with optimism and change.

Modernism's fixation on abandoning the past in lieu of a brightened future led to a plethora of styles throughout the 20th century. Clark (1996) describes modernism as,

> a parade of visual styles, each passing by the reviewing stand for a brief moment of critical acclaim. Every new style follows the same route- setting out briskly at the periphery of obscurity, reaching full-stride at the centre of recognition, and fading inexorably at the edge of imitation. (p. 3)

Consequently, we see styles such as impressionism abandoned, as they become part of the past and not part of the optimistic future. Impressionism is abandoned for post-impressionism, post-impressionism for cubism, cubism for expressionism, expressionism for surrealism, and so on.

Of key importance to the history and development of these styles are the critics who assisted in their growth and demise. As the modernist movement grew, the voice of the academies that once guided the direction of art waned and stepped aside for a new group of individual art critics. Early formalism, a key concept of modernism, was advanced early on by Clive Bell and Roger Fry (Efland et al., 1996). Early expressionism, another key concept of modernism, was advanced by Benedetto Croce and Roger George Collingwood (Efland et al., 1996). During the post World War II era, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg were the prominent critics leading the direction of art in their support for abstract expressionism (Efland et al., 1996). Like the leading critics before them, their support for the most recent genre in art supported the two leading modernist principles of formalism and expressionism. Greenberg's focus lay

in his support of formalism. In *Postmodern Art Education: An Approach to Curriculum,* Efland et al. (1996) discuss Greenberg's support in the lack of subject matter, quoting Greenberg's description of art as being "beleagued by mass culture in need of reform around those values only to be found in art," subject matter becoming "something to be avoided like the plague" (p. 3). Rosenberg, a supporter of expressionism, supported abstract expressionism instead in its connection with the recent "existentialism that pervaded postwar intellectual thought" (Efland et al., 1996, p. 3).

The official end of modernism is debated. Certainly, there are artists who still work in a modernist style. Some also believe that postmodernism is merely an extension of modernism. Others believe that pop art, in its reference to a greater world culture and its emphasis on pop culture, both qualities which modernism rejected, commenced the fall of modernism. Most, however, confirm that modernism ends during the 1960s with the rise of postmodernism, introduced first in serious discussion of the visual arts by Nikolaus Pevsner in connection with new developments in architecture style.

An abbreviated list of modernist styles. Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Art Nouveau, Fauvism, Cubism, Futurism, Expressionism, Dadaism, Surrealism, Abstract Figuration, Abstract Formalism, and Minimalism (De La Croix, Tansey, & Kirkpatrick, 1991).

Key modernist beliefs. Most prominently, as mentioned before, modernism is associated with a rejection of past and an optimistic outlook toward the future, a future made more optimistic in its acceptance of reason and truth. Modernists hold the belief

that "in order to create a new world, one is forced to destroy much that has gone before" (Efland et al., 1996, p. 2). We see this not only in the discarding of numerous modernist styles as style after style repeatedly becomes passé and is discarded, but also within the styles, as Cubism seeks to break apart the pictorial plane and postwar sculptors begin to use scrap of the past as part of their chosen media (Efland et al., 1996).

As previously mentioned, modernism in the arts tends to sway either toward the purely formal state or toward the expressive. Grounds for formalism lay in the modern artist's attempt to reject the figure and realism from the past. For modernists, the further from realism, the more distance from the past, the purer the art form becomes. The elements and principles became a new language that modernists believe to be a universal language, allowing formalism to cross international boundaries.

The expressive nature of modern art arises not only as an extension of the formal view but also in its own right. Roger Clark (1996) explains in *Art Education: Issues in Postmodernist Pedagogy*, "since modernism emphasized the emergence of form over content, artists looked inward for self-inspiration. Self-expression became an end unto itself, devoid of any other social function" (p. 5). As artists became more insistent on rejecting the past and became more focused on inward discovery, the artwork became about the individual artist rather than about an outward expression of societal reflection. This view, in addition to the then recent discoveries and newly planted seeds of psychology, placed expressionism at the forefront of modernism in equal stature to the also prominent formalist approach.

Brief History of Postmodernism in Art

There are varying beliefs on when the postmodern movement actually began, and for those who believe that postmodernism is simply an extension, another stage in modernism, it has not commenced at all. For the purposes of clarity, however, I begin my history with the most clear-cut and popular belief that postmodernism begins in the 1960s with an initial shift in the structure and development of architecture.

Although Nikolaus Pevsner is credited with the initial introduction of the term, postmodern, in the 1960s, it is author Charles Jencks who popularized the term, initially in his book, titled *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, and thereafter in numerous other publications he wrote on the subject concerning the new architectural style. Jencks credited the new movement "as a reaction against the austere, rational, clean-cut International Modern Style in favour of brash eclecticism" (Cilvers, 2007, p. 1). He further asserts that the new style of architecture upholds "regional and traditional sources, introducing colour and ornament, often in a 'jokey' manner" (Chilvers, 2007, p. 1). American architect Robert Venturi, who is most credited with the new style, "wrote that he liked 'elements which are hybrid rather than pure' and preferred 'messy vitality' to 'obvious unity'" (Chilvers, 2007, p. 1).

Since its introduction in architecture, postmodernism has continued to grow as the dominant style of art in contemporary society. Because it is new and still growing and changing, definitions of the movement tend to vary from critic to critic and author to author, usually leaving their audiences with more questions than answers in their responses to readings. It is likely that in retrospect, once the movement has passed on,

there will be clear distinctions and definitions of the contemporary movement. For now, inquiries into the subject of the postmodern must navigate through the literature and formulate their own definitions by deciphering bits and pieces of this intensely complex, philosophical, and culturally linked movement.

Determinants of the movement are closely linked to the complex webbing of determinants that have shaped contemporary society. The *Handbook of Research and Policy in Art Education*,

> notes that the term "postmodernism" . . . may refer variously to eclecticism in artistic creation and performance, the cultural logic of late capitalism, the condition of knowledge in an information age, a shift in emphasis in the kinds of philosophical problems studied, and the literature of an inflated economy. (Eisner & Day, 2004, p. 179)

Fehr (1997) defines postmodernism as pointing,

> to the beginning of the computer era, the spread of multinational corporations, political activism in the arts, culturally inclusive public education, the bristling militacy of marginalized groups and the demise of the second world and the free market industrialization of the third world harbingers of a new era. (p. 4)

Contemporary society, as it grows to include greater technology, a redefining of borders and boundaries, a public involved in its cultural and political diversities, and a higher demand on our lifestyles because of the growing complexities in civilization, demands a complex underlying cultural philosophy. The answer to this demand is postmodernism.

Some prefer to define postmodernism in response to its deferral from modernism. Efland et al. (1996) describe postmodernism as a "repudiation of the modern or modernism, in the same way that there was a repudiation of traditional art styles." This distinction, however, becomes problematic, as Efland et al. (1996) go on to say:

"If modernism is the style that repudiates past styles, then the postmodernist style that repudiates modernism can be seen as maintaining in the modernist tradition" (p. 11). Hence, postmodernism becomes simply another "ism" in the long list of "isms" that form the modern art movement.

Most, however, in defining postmodernism by comparison to the passé modern movement, direct their conclusions to a path leading them further from, rather than closer to, modernism. Postmodernism tends to be linked more to the past and present, as opposed to modernism's utopian view toward focusing on an idealistic future. Postmodern art styles tend to be more eclectic and diverse than that of modernism. They include cultures other than the west. They demand it. Postmodern media have expanded beyond the traditional categories of sculpture and paint, to include such things as installation, technology, and performance art. Postmodern styles and movements do not exist exclusively. They are not thrown out as passé. It is almost as if a new set of "isms" have jumped into the pool, but this time all at once. Formalism and self-expressionism still hold their place in the postmodern world as an extension of modernism, but a new set of aesthetic criteria have entered the playing field in addition, criteria which focus less on the introspective self and more on a greater societal view.

An abbreviated list of postmodernist styles and movements. Pop Art?, Conceptual Art, Happenings, Land Art, Light and Space, Body Art, Neo-Dada, Arte Povera, Installation, Neo-Expressionism, Neo-Classicism, Neo-Realism, Latin

American Art, Far East Art, Art of Racial Minorities, African and Afro Caribbean, and Feminist and Gay.

Elaboration of several key postmodern beliefs. Unlike modernism's focus on the future and a reasoning for inevitable progress, postmodernism is grounded in the past and present (Clark, 1996). Postmodernists believe it necessary to investigate the past in order to fully understand its contributions to the present. Progress and the linked truths to progress, assumed in modernism, are questioned. As Efland et al. (1996) cite, the past is investigated "to discover genealogies of current predicaments," such as the "progressive" modernist additions of runaway technologies which contribute today to the polluting of the environment (p. 28). This more pessimistic outlook, as Roger Clark (1996) states, often lends itself to the harshest critiques of postmodernism: "Attacked for its skepticism, cynicism and nihilistic attitudes," the focus becomes about this attitude more than its "central propositions" (p. 2).

The subject matter of postmodern art focuses on the use of art as a means for critiquing and questioning key concepts in culture such as the "modernist conceptions of progress, hierarchies of knowledge and objectivity in a fragmented and pluralistic world" (Efland et al., 1996, p. 28). There is a renewed focus on time as process. As Efland et al. (1996) explain: "a sense of fragmentation pervades on time, of place and of subject . . . bits of the past are placed together in a collage-like fashion . . . suggesting the ways a fragmented past continues to exit in the present" (p. 28). Notions of power and knowledge are questioned and explored, as postmodernism makes attempts to "unearth hidden, oppressive elements of a democratic society" (Efland et al., 1996,

p. 28). Western dominance is questioned as postmodernism explores and validates the beliefs and methodologies of cultures both within and outside of the western domain. Cultural boundaries such as those created by race and gender are explored and questioned, hence the rise of Feminism as one of postmodernism's first concrete artistic investigations. As Neperud (n.d.) comments, "the relationship of context to content" emerges, questioning "an era of change and contradictions" (p. 4). And the subject/object relationship that has historically existed between artist and model and artist and viewer is questioned, as are the effects of mass media and progressive technology being used, "as tools for social control and to enable empowerment" (Efland et al., 1996, as cited in Clark, 1996, p. 2).

Artists begin to use new tools in postmodernism, sometimes in addition to and sometimes in purposeful exclusion of the modernist elements and principles of design. They become interested in surface, juxtaposition and illusion, the appropriation of images, and the use of text and image. They prefer narration over abstraction and multiple perspectives over the singular. They include in their media new non-traditional materials such as video, installation, and performance. In addition, they include previously excluded materials relegated to the low arts of craft, materials such as those used in basketry, quilting, and pottery.

The voice of the critic in postmodernism again shifts, this time from voices of the modernist avant-garde individuals such as Greenberg and Rosenberg to, as Clark (1996) puts it, "the voices of pluralism" (p. 2). Critique becomes more invested in the

corporate and technology driven mass culture than in the formalist qualities pushing abstraction or in the self-involved expression of modernism.

Modernism and Postmodernism in Contemporary Art Education

Modernist art education naturally reflects the principles and philosophies of modernism. Strategies focus on those supporting either a formalist or expressionist approach. Students are encouraged to create formally through their use of the modern elements and principles of design and expressively through introspection and abstraction.[1] These both remain key concepts and structures in today's art education, and for many the approach to contemporary arts education remains soley focused on this type of curriculum.

Postmodernist art education seeks to explore beyond formalism and expressionism. It involves students in their world; for example, as Fehr (1997) explains, it "suggests that the ubiquitous expressions of commerce and entertainment—billboards, TV, radio, movies, computers, advertising—reflect the value of culture and written language, however attractive or not" (p. 5). It pushes students to learn about other cultures, not as inferior in their art making, but as equal partners working in a different context. It explores the idea of context. It provokes students to question progress and truths. Most important in postmodern education is this investigation. These investigations seem to be what is most underdeveloped in today's art education.

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[1]The modern elements of design most often include line, form, space, value, texture, and color. The modern principles of design often include unity, variety, repetition, pattern, movement, contrast, and emphasis.

A modern/postmodern comparison is as complex as the societies that created them. When you add to this the difficulties in determining a concrete definition of postmodernism because of its current growth and evolution, it seems a daunting task to create any art curriculum that could reflect the needs of art education today. An art curriculum supported by postmodern beliefs is complex and like its grounding philosophies, must leave room to evolve. Just as artists must stay present and informed in contemporary art influences in order to stay connected to the evolution of their field, so must the educational foundations in the classroom.

CHAPTER III

BIOGRAPHY OF A BODY OF WORK: APPROACHING THE CREATIVE PROCESS THROUGH PLAY, PERSONAL NARRATIVE, AND UNIVERSAL THEMES

> Such are a few of the traceable sources of imagery, and of the feeling of a single painting—mine, only because I can know what these sources are, because I am able to follow them backward at least to that point at which they disappear into the limbo of the subconscious, or the unconscious, or the instinctive, or the merely biological. (Shahn, 1957, p. 48)

Like Ben Shahn, I believe that a painting, a sculpture, a drawing evolves. It does not live in a vacuum inspired only by itself and affecting nothing else. Instead, it stands as a culminating event supported by the ideas and actions preceding it. The work adds to a foundation from which other works will be inspired. It is a part of a greater narrative.

I have recently come to a culminating study in art that silences years of my inner critic denouncing my art as amateurish. And although I feel this art to be the most mature and legitimate in my evolution as an artist, I know it does not stand alone but rather as a marker to what has come before it, just as it will surely support future concepts and creations.

In the following pages, inspired by the writings of Shahn, I have written my own biography of a body of work. In reflecting on my work, I have discovered that

through my creative process which focuses on play and experimentation, personal narrative, and the extension of that narrative to include a broader web of universal themes, I can trace the life of my current work, its history, and how it came to be.

Early Foundations

The story of my work begins with my first memories of art. Those that I remember the most are always the ones in which I felt a personal connection, both to the creative process and to the culminating idea. In preschool, I remember filling outlines of my body with personal symbols and in elementary school, creating personalized silhouettes of my own shadows. I remember sculpting personal tea sets to the theme of clothing and apparel in middle school and painting painfully expressive portraits in high school (see Figure 13).

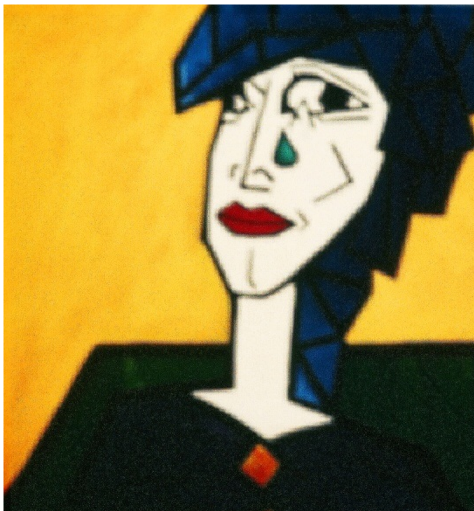


Figure 13. Jennifer McLees, High School Portraits, 1999. Photos by Carolyn Beers.

As my studies as an artist continued into college, I studied sculpture, photography, painting, and drawing with a focus in ceramics. The lasting impressions that still resonate with me are, again, those inspired by my personal narrative. These memories, which motivated me to move forward with determined intent as a young artist, are the foundations of what still resonate in my art today.

After college, I continued making art as an art educator, and my art making took on a completely different role. Most of what I created was directed toward studio examples focusing primarily on technique and composition. My personal voice, although still present in my choices with media and the way in which I laid them out, had lost its passion and conceptual drive.

Recent Studies: A Return to Self Through Play, Praxis, and Subconscious Symbolization

After four years of placing all of my creative energies into supporting the ideas of my students, I felt an urgent need to reconnect as an artist and rediscover the passion that had initially drawn me into being an art educator. Fearing the constraints and judgment of formal schooling, I decided to return to the world of art making at my own pace, by taking local summer pottery classes through the local Parks and Recreation program. For three summers, I engaged in play with raku and other nontraditional firings such as low fire and high fire salt saggar. I reignited my passion for ceramics through the temperamental methods of these experimental firings and was able to lessen my fear of failure and to reopen my personal narrative with the emergence and development of subconsciously developed symbols in my work.

Raku proved to be the perfect platform for a non-threatening environment focusing on process, experimentation, and freedom. Originating in Japan in the early 1500s, it has from its inception been associated with a sense of enjoyment and unrefined play. The Zen masters often preferred using raku-fired objects in their ritualistic tea ceremonies because of the innate connection of the process to the Buddhist teachings: "humility, unpretentiousness, simple naturalness, and its deliberate avoidance of luxury" (Camilleri, 2009, p. 105). Grounded in the four guiding principles of "Harmony (wa), Respect (kei), Purity (sei), and Tranquility (jaku)," the Japanese raku process reinforced these essential teachings of the ceremonies (Camilleri, 2009, p. 105).

American-style raku was developed in the mid-1900s and although it shares similarities with Japanese-style raku, in many ways it is different. Most relevant to my studies and focus on experimentation and freedom using the American style are the differences with the American style's approach to firing, cooling, and final surface treatment. Japanese-style raku is fired and then allowed to cool slowly with no smoking and further manipulation of the glaze surface. American-style raku is fired quickly in a special raku kiln and pulled immediately from the kiln with tongs when the glazes reach full maturity (at about 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit). The pieces are then placed into a nest of combustible materials while still hot, and once full flame is achieved, covered so that a reduced oxygen atmosphere is realized. As the flame is starved for oxygen, it begins to pull oxygen from the glaze and the surface of the glaze reacts to this deprivation. The piece is smoked briefly and then pulled into open air

and quenched with water. By cooling the surface, the water stops reoxidation and the glaze stabilizes into its final surface color, most often reflective of a copper or crackle surface.

Although there is some degree of control with experience in using the American-style raku process, there is always an element of uncontrolled experimentation and freedom that the process intrinsically allows the artist. A sense of play exists in the relationship one develops with the fire and the unpredictability of the relationship the fire will have with the atmosphere and the glaze. Freedom exists in the sense that often pieces are lost to the process of heat, expansion, and contraction. It is in this unpredictable and volatile relationship that one finds freedom to release from expectations and indulge in process, play, experimentation, and letting go of intentions.

Salt firing is far less exhilarating than raku in the action of the process. (There is no fire, no dramatic transformation.) But it is just as exciting in the unexpected, experimental, and playful finish. The pieces are fired in a standard gas reduction kiln where salt is added into the firing. The salt or materials with high salt content, such as pistachio shells or seaweed, are laid with the ceramic pieces in enclosed containers, called saggars, or laid next to or on top of the pieces in the general kiln space. Salt can also be dispensed generally in the kiln at different stages of firing. As the salt heats, it vaporizes, leaving colorants, markings, and a semi-glossy sheen on the pieces.

At first, my raku and salt-fired ideas focused primarily on engaging with the material and with processes and techniques that were both old and new to me. I played

with slab, coil, pinch pot, and wheel-thrown forms. I explored textures and surface and allowed myself to engage in the process without any expectations or rules.

As I continued in my discovery mode, I began to recognize patterns and themes in my work, despite my lack of intent in any direction. The most dominant themes were the human figure and a series of wheel-thrown eggs. In reflecting on those themes, I realized that through no conscious intent, I had returned to symbols that had been and would further endure as important elements in my personal narrative.

The figure had been and continued to be a constant in my work. It is in this work that I connect most with the bare essence and raw emotion of human nature. A series of women emerged, their simplified and elongated bodies twisting and turning in an upright curve, the top of which revealed small, daintily detailed heads that were singing, praying, and on rarer occasions, shouting or screaming (see Figure 14). The degree of severity in the manipulation of the bodies signified the harshness of emotion. The women with less pronounced curve revealed more refined emotion, while the ones with more severe twists, were more distraught. Eyes, both open and shut, worked to both engage and disengage the viewer as the women's gazes both ignored and challenged them.

A subtler vehicle of emotion emerged as I played with truncating the torso and manipulating the surfaces to reveal sensual and graceful lines of the figure (see Figure 15). The truncated torsos, molded from my body, were both sensual and graceful and at the same time, broken and incomplete. These natural contradictions in the form interacted beautifully with the unpredictability and sensual qualities of the raku and

salt fire process and finish. Furthermore, the exhilarating process of raku pushed me to recognize and embrace my fear of fire.

Figure 14. Jennifer McLees, *Singing Woman,* Summer 2003, raku slab construction, 10" x 20". Photo by Jennifer McLees.

The other theme, the eggs, I initially developed by playfully exploring aesthetic form. The challenge of throwing a closed, albeit small, form on the potter's wheel, drew me into the process (see Figure 16). The fundamental symbol of the egg seemed to be a naturally accessible subject. Now, as I reflect on the eggs, I realize, that without any conscious effort, I was visualizing subconscious themes of self and fertility, themes that would carry me into the next phase of further developing my process and identity as an artist. This became my narrative.

Figure 15. Jennifer McLees, *Torso,* Summer 2003, low fire salt, saggar, 22" x 15" x 5". Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Figure 16. Jennifer McLees, *Egg,* Summer 2003, low fire salt, saggar, each 4" x 4" x 4" (left wrapped in cooper, right wrapped in nori).

Recent Studies: Developing a Personal Narrative

In the fall of 2004, I was formally admitted to the University of Northern Colorado to pursue an master's degree in visual arts. One of the primary goals in my art making at this time was to intentionally focus on developing and reconnecting with my personal narrative. As well, I sought to gain the education needed to further develop this narrative toward broader, more universal themes beyond self.
After taking several lecture courses such as Women Artists and Literature in Art Education, I took a seminar in Contemporary Art with University of Northern Colorado professor Connie Stewart, where my ideas were reinvigorated. Although my classes beforehand were absolutely essential in coming to this point, it was through engagement and study of contemporary art where my creative processing moved forward with intent—questioning, thinking, pushing, and relating.

The Contemporary Art course commenced with studying artists from the early modern era in the late 1800s, artists such as Manet, Picasso, Rodin, and Gaughin. Professor Stewart utilized these familiar artists to build a platform for philosophical studio art conversations that would ensue throughout the semester. The list of artists grew to include less familiar contemporary names. These artists included performance artist Joseph Beuys, feminist artist Barbara Kruger, and other postmodern artists focusing on conceptual gains, such as Kara Walker, Louise Bourgeois, and Damien Hirst.

Discussions centered on contemporary discourses such as recognizing and deconstructing the different lenses that we bring into interpreting art; understanding

semiotics; the place of signs, signifiers, and symbols in studying art; and using a new postmodern language to explore contemporary art. The format of discussion focused on establishing a dialogue with art through methods of questioning. For example, one such discussion centered on comparing and contrasting different images of the Odalesque theme painted by Ingres, Manet, Gauguin, and other prominent artists (see Figures 17, 18, and 19). The conversation focused on deconstructing meaning by asking questions. For example: What were the historical contexts surrounding each of these paintings? Who is the prominent woman, and what is her relationship to the viewer? Who or what is the other figure in the background? Who holds the power, the viewer or the woman being viewed? Were these private or public paintings? Asking these types of questions and sharing responses allowed a more informed and open platform for engaging with and reflecting on the extremely diverse and layered meanings and media in these older images as well as contemporary art images; contemporary media such as performance, light, and found object; and contemporary themes such as identity, narrative, place, power, and time (Miller & Otero, 2010).

Figure 17. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *The Grand Odalisque,* 1814. From *Life of Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingress*, by Lib-Art, n.d., www.lib-art.com

Figure 18. Edouard Manet, *Olympia,* 1863. From *Manet Reproduction of Olympia* by Impressionist Art Gallery, n.d., www.impressionist-art-gallery.com

Figure 19. Paul Gauguin, *The Spirit of the Dead Watching* 892. From *Paul Gauguin, The Spirit of the Dead Watching, 1892*, by L. Shafe, 2009, www.shafe.co.uk

These new methods of engaging with art presented a new framework from which to analyze and interpret intentions in my artwork. Participation and reflection on contemporary methods and philosophy ignited my creative process to push conceptually beyond my personal story to themes that are more universal to the human condition. At the conclusion of this course, I felt connected to the contemporary art

world. After years of coexisting with contemporary concepts of art, I finally had established a beneficial relationship with them.

Soon after the Contemporary Art course, I began my graduate studies in the studio with University of Northern Colorado ceramics professor, Mike Lemke. My intentions in this course were to reconnect with my art making through exploration of technique, composition, and concept. In my hopes to elevate my art to a more professional level, I sought to explore concept through developing a thorough investigation into my personal narrative. In doing so, I found that context became a key determinant in its unfolding.

One of the most interesting points of discussion in the Contemporary Art course was the renewed focus on context. In constructing my own biography, I find it highly important to mention my personal context while in this class, as it is highly influential in the artwork that would unfold. In fact, it still affects the artwork I produce today. The previous year had been the most trying personally since the common trauma of being a teenager. In one weekend, a tree fell on my car (the commencement of years of financial struggle), my grandmother suddenly died (the end of countless shared discussions on differences in spiritual beliefs), and my young 7-year-old dog-child, Jackson, was diagnosed with terminal cancer. All of these emotionally fraught circumstances were further magnified by the fact that I was entering into my fourth year of unsuccessfully trying to have a first child. And shortly after this traumatic weekend in October, after having already negotiated years of natural child planning, two sessions of acupuncture centered on fertility, alterations in

diet and lifestyle, and three failed artificial insemination procedures, I would suffer the first of two unsuccessful In Vitro attempts. It was a dark time, a perfect time to explore my own narrative in the healing process. It seemed only natural that my art would reflect my world so personally, not as another thing to distract or to add on, but as an extension, a way of coping, of showing love, of dreaming, of analyzing, and of sharing.

Most of the themes developed in this stage revisited and reflected on subconscious themes I had discovered earlier in my initial stages of play. The eggs, the wheel, and the figure all returned. However, a different contextual lens dominated. A sense of lacking control in my life consumed me and a general darkness veiled my public and private persona, as well as that of my art. As I returned to previously playful themes such as the figure, their tone took on an entirely different mood.

The eggs returned as a newly developed and consciously formed symbol (see Figures 20 and 21). Having held subconscious seeds of symbolism before, the series of wheel-thrown sculptures came to embody more directly my own feelings of desire and loss, my life and art bound tightly by my all consuming struggle with infertility.

The wheel returned and became a tool for not only experimentation and play, but for the first time as the perfect platform for my conceptual development. Improved skills and a greater control on the wheel allowed me the freedom to use this method in creating highly charged emotional pieces such as my series of eggs and a dog urn I created for my beloved Jackson's ashes (see Figure 22).

Figure 20. Jennifer McLees, *Vapor Egg,* Summer 2007, low fire oxidation with stanis chloride, 5" x 5" x 4 ½". Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Figure 21. Jennifer McLees, *Broken Egg,* Summer 2007, raku, low fire oxidation with stanis chloride, 5" x 5" x 5". Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Figure 22. Jennifer McLees, *Jackson's Urn,* raku, 12" x 7" x 7" (detail of inlaid pawprint on right). Photo (one week before Jackson's passing) by Jennifer McLees.

The full female figure resurfaced in an angry raku self portrait, her piercing, silent scream substituted for the usual tranquil and contented expressions of my earlier women (see Figure 23). The immaturity of the raku glazing (being pulled too soon) created a red mask of bubbling glaze framing her face, forming the perfect fit with her raw and unrefined display of angst).

Another subtheme of the figure emerged at this time with the introduction of the male persona. Like my most recent work with the female figure, my male figures display a feeling of entrapment and loss of control. Their bodies are bound, tied, and stripped of appendages. Their eyes confront the viewer with expressions of anger or angled upward as their faces scream in anguish. Frustrated and angered in their situation, they symbolize subconsciously my struggles at the time with infertility, financial resolve, and mortality.

Figure 23. Jennifer McLees, *Self Portrait,* Summer 2007, raku (detail shown on right). Photo by Jennifer McLees.

While the emotions elicited by my male figures were directly tied to issues in my personal narrative, they also represented my first purposeful attempts at connecting to a more universal audience, thus eliciting similar connections to the viewers' own personal narratives created by their own memories and histories. In trying to make this connection, my use of symbolization was more consciously directed and open to individual interpretation.

In one example, three tubular bodied men are bound together back to back by a wrapping of rope around their midriffs (see Figure 24). The back of their heads seem to barely touch as their heads, screaming and covered in a crackled white mask, tilt back in anguish. Their finishes are similar so it is not definitive as to whether this is one man or many. If one, the rope might symbolize a positive force just barely holding

this person together. And if many, a feeling is created, instead, of entrapment. Interpretation presents more questions than answers. And for myself, interpretation seems less personally bound to my immediate situation, and instead tied to a larger societal context where more universal themes are presented and more varied interpretations from a broader audience can be made.

Figure 24. Jennifer McLees, *Bound,* raku, 15" x 4" x 4" (detail shown on right). Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Recent Studies: Extending the Narrative Beyond Self,
Exploring Universal Themes in Contemporary Art

Over the course of the next school year, I continued to immerse myself in my art making through an independent course of study with Mike Lemke. My intentions in this course of study were to return to play, both technically and also conceptually.

This time, however, the intent was more direct. My play, technically, was directed at studying the form and textures created using a more experimental firing technique (see Figures 8 and 25). And my play, conceptually, was directed at exploring some of the contemporary concepts and themes I had begun studying just a year before.

Figure 25. Jennifer McLees, *Marge*, Spring 2008, low fire oxidation, 14" x 5" x 6". Photo by Jennifer McLees.

As I explored new techniques and contemporary themes, I found that my personal narrative was already extended toward a universal audience beyond self. My narrative provided a base for form and metaphor that could be interpreted in many ways. In discussing the conceptual direction of my art with others, I discovered that while some related directly to my stories, such as those surrounding infertility, others associated different meaning into my work by making connections to their own

context and story. As well, my efforts to consciously release from purposeful manipulation of the idea at times created a platform that encouraged my work to further evolve and embrace multiple perspectives and interpretations. A more mature body of work began to evolve. And I looked to prevalent themes in contemporary art to further investigate this evolution.

Woman House

The first piece that I pursued was inspired by a story I had read in Contemporary Art regarding a very influential group of young women artists in the early 1970s. In 1971, early in the Feminist movement, this group of female California-based artists grouped together as students in a program called Woman House. The faculty, consisting of teachers Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, had several items on their agenda,

> first, to let students confront their problems as women while grappling with the demands of a project rather than undergoing initial extended consciousness-raising; second, to give students the chance to learn many skills and work collaboratively; and last but most important, to force the students to begin pushing their role limitations as women and test themselves as artists. (Wilding, 1977, p. 1)

Together, these 25 students and their instructors spent two full months renovating the rooms of an old Hollywood mansion (Wilding, 1977). They sought to create an environment reflective of women's issues, taking the "age-old female activity of homemaking . . . to fantasy proportions. Woman House became the repository of the daydreams women have as they wash, bake, cook, sew, clean and iron their lives away" (Wilding, 1977, p. 1) (see Figures 26, 27, 28, and 29). In addition to the renovation of the physical space, the artists worked together to create performances centered on themes of "housework, women's role conditioning, nurturing and body

experiences" (Wilding, 1977, p. 1). The temporary exhibit was then opened for public display from January 30 to February 28, 1972. It received rave reviews and became an inspiration to female artists and an example to all of the strength behind working together toward something so much larger than the individual. For myself, it was an inspiration to put forth my most personally painful piece and feel validated as an artist, grounded in women's issues.

Figure 26. Sandy Orgel, *Linen Closet*. From *Timeline: Judy Chicago,* by J. Chicago and D. Woodland, 2010, judychicago.com

Figure 27. Miriam Schapiro, *Doll's House*. From *Collections* by Smithsonian American Art Museum, n.d., americanart.si.edu

Figure 28. Faith Wilding, *Womb Room*. From *Features* by artnet Magazine, n.d., artnet.com

Figure 29. Judy Chicago, *Menstruation Bathroom*. From *Timeline: Judy Chicago,* by J. Chicago and D. Woodland, 2010, judychicago.com

My piece, titled, *Broken Eggs*, consists of a clay shelving infrastructure (as if you were looking inside of a pantry) filled with actual broken egg shells (see Figure 30). Atop the shelving is a faceless doll head that rests to one side. Extending off the sides, below the top of the shelf, are doll-like arms that awkwardly reach and grasp each other in front of the shelving. Extending from the bottom of the shelves are doll-like legs, positioned in somewhat of an awkward yet protective stature. My intentions in this piece were to create both a personal and universal investigation. The personal interpretation is about infertility. The universal interpretation invites multiple interpretations and perspectives. Through the absence of a face and the wealth of specific symbolic imagery referring directly to infertility, a broader and more universal

interpretation centers on an investigation focusing on women, how they carry their bodies, and how they function as vessels and as objects of display.

Figure 30. Jennifer McLees, *Broken Eggs* (Woman House series), Spring 2007, medium fire oxidation, 13" x 5" x 4". Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Little Brother, Big Pain

As an art educator in Colorado, every year I make it a point of going to the annual Colorado Art Educator's conference. It was here that several years ago I was fortunate enough to attend the conference and have a seat in a special session with ceramic artist Marie e.v.b. Gibbons. Ms. Gibbons resides and works in Denver and holds a conceptual vision that is similar to my own intentions. Much of her work

focuses on narrative and sharing both her stories and those of others (see Figure 31). Working figuratively, her thematic style resonated significantly with me.

Figure 31. Marie e.v.b. Gibbons, *Remember the Dance.* From *The Work,* by M. Gibbons, n.d., mariegibbons.com

My piece, titled, *Little Brother, Big Pain,* shares a conceptual space with Gibbons, in that I have chosen to direct my narrative away from self and instead toward someone in my life who I love (see Figure 32). In my efforts to take conceptual risks, this was a small but significant step as it further stretches my narrative development. This piece, I have made in honor of my little brother, who at the young age of 23, has been through military school, four different drug rehabilitation centers, living on the side of the highway, spending time in jail, and then back again to the family. The setting of the piece is in a room where I have purposely skewed the walls and floor at odd angles to create a disturbing and uncomfortable space. In the fore-

ground, a little boy, who represents my brother, screams out to the viewer in anguish, as his body stretches out below him in a bound prison-like garment. In the rear corner, sits an abstracted and disassembled stuffed animal figure, which represents his bear that he still carries with him to this day. “Bear” is torn, dismembered, and so abstracted he almost looks like a pile of fecal matter. The mood is grey and dark and the textures of the surface worn to depict the street-like quality of my little brother’s experience.

Figure 32. Jennifer McLees, *Little Brother, Big Pain,* Spring 2007, cold finish with acrylics, 11" x 9" x 5". Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Culminating Studies: An Intertwining Investigation of Play, Personal Story, and Universal Themes

In the culmination of my studies, I have discovered that my work is a continuous interplay of three creative processes. Play, personal story/narrative, and exploration of universal themes have become creative processing structures that I continuously work with. At times, I focus on them separately and more often than not, my conceptual intentions overlap in more than one or in all three of these areas (see Figure 33).

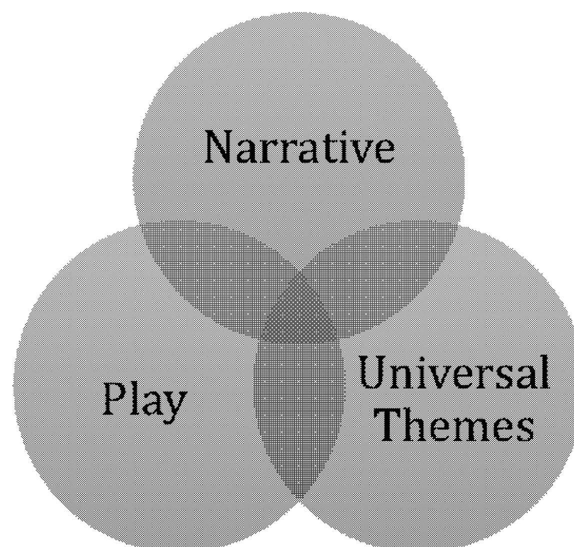


Figure 33. Venn diagram: Overlapping relationship of narrative, play, and universal themes.

Culminating Investigation:
Play in the Figure

While exploring technique and media through my functional work is still present (see Figure 34), the figure has become a canvas for play where I feel most connected to the media and most inspired to experiment and take technical risks. In my latest series of women, I am particularly interested in developing personalities through the incorporation of media other than clay. For example, in *Angel*, the wings are made out of tree branches, thus referencing my own beliefs in spirituality stemming from the natural world (see Figure 35). Another example of this incorporation of media other than clay is seen in *Industry Woman* (see Figure 36). In this piece, the hair is made of spikes of aluminum wire and the head and neck finished in a shiny metallic glaze. By juxtaposing metal and clay against each other, I have attempted to associate my figure with the greater contemporary influences of mechanization and industry on our modern human personas and experiences.

Figure 34. Jennifer McLees, *Frio Pitcher Set,* Summer 2009. Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Figure 35. Jennifer McLees, *Angel,* Summer 2009. Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Figure 36. Jennifer McLees, *Industry Woman,* 2009. Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Culminating Investigation:
Personal Narrative

The most resonating of creative explorations for me are still those originating with and consciously exploring my personal stories and narrative. My most recent work has reflected my processing in letting go of infertility and moving on toward the adoption process. Where infertility once consumed me, I have now moved on to thinking more positively about the experience, and while not giving up hope of a possible biological child, have found a new grounding instead in efforts to have a child through adoption.

My piece titled, *Babies for Sale*, is a work in progress and reflects both my struggles with and my hopes for adoption (see Figure 37). In this piece, four molded babies are situated next to each other on a rectangular background with their backs to the viewer. Glazed in bright neon colors reminiscent of pop art, their coloring invites multiple interpretations from the viewer and a possible association with consumption, thus placing the baby as a commodity for sale. Originally, my intention was to apply bar codes to the baby bottoms and further elevate the idea of babies as a commodity for sale. While working on the piece, however, I became drawn more to the symbolism associated with the technical process of molding the babies from an existing commodity, and the more candid symbolism of the pop art colors and their suggestive qualities. As well, the viewer might interpret the piece in a more positive light, focusing on the positivity and brilliance of the color, and associating this choice in color with diversity, openness, and hope instead.

Figure 37. Jennifer McLees, *Babies for Sale,* Summer 2009. Photo by Jennifer Dailey.

A more direct, positive tone can be inferred from my narrative piece titled, *His and Hers, Fertility Dolls* (see Figure 38). In this piece, for purposes of continuing the dialogue associated with the historic hope for fertility, I have appropriated the famous Venus of Willendorf figure. Created originally as a positive measure to focus on more playful and hopeful themes, these two figures originally reflected, for me personally, a culminating hope for my own biological child. As time and my own living narrative have shifted, however, the piece has instead come to represent a hope for a healthy baby in our future, as well as in the futures of those close to us who are starting families as well.

Figure 38. Jennifer McClees, *His and Hers, Fertility Dolls,* Summer 2009. Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Culminating Investigation:
Universal Themes

In reflecting on my own work and its evolving biography, I have found that my own narrative is more closely tied to more universal themes than I once recognized. With a more pronounced effort at thinking outside of my immediate story as well as striving to make purposeful engagements with prevalent themes in contemporary art, it has been an easy transition to direct my creative processing toward more conceptually universal themes than I once imagined. The influence of my contemporary studies has naturally encouraged a sense of inquiry into my artistic investigations. I have come to appreciate and strive for multiple interpretations of my work.

My *Singing Prayer* series is a piece I created in response to personal reflection on my spiritual grounding (see Figure 39). Although I am not a religious person, I consider myself a spiritual person with beliefs much larger than the physical world. In this series of small figures, I have created 30 rock women. In each, a small singing

head protrudes out of a stack of veined rocks, molded originally from clay by laying slabs over real river rocks. The beauty of and persistence of nature keeps me stable. Song and community keep me energized. The seven Elders are the core of the group, representing knowledge and wisdom. Although I keep these in my home, I have given the others to friends and family across the country, imagining an invisible stream of consciousness and song connecting and protecting us across physical space.

Figure 39. Jennifer McLees, *Singing Elders* (singing prayer series). Photo by Jennifer McLees.

My piece titled, *Bound by Conformity,* centers on the darker theme of lacking control from conformity in society (see Figure 40). In this piece, three female doll figures, hang bound around their arms by three types of wire. Each figure is slightly different in dress and proportion. However, their blank faces and tense bodies all hold

the same posture. Bound by common threads and hung by hangers protruding out of the back of their necks, these figures appear worn and completely lacking control. Like many of my other pieces, their completion suggests more questions than answers in my own interpretation. And whereas before, this lack of concrete meaning may have bothered me, now it motivates me and pushes me forward in my visual investigations.

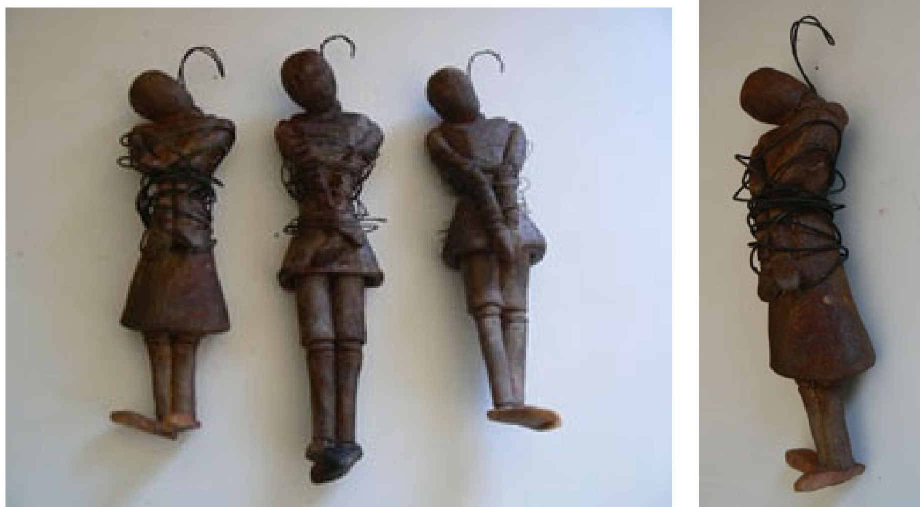


Figure 40. Jennifer McLees, *Bound by Conformity*, Summer 2009 (detail shown on right). Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Culminating Study: Belly Pot Series—Synthesis of Play Narrative, and Universality

As mentioned earlier, the work that I am most proud of is the most recent body created in my belly pots series. To me, this body of work represents the culminating

study of inquiry and investigation in developing my creative process. The interpretations that unfold are intimately connected to all preceeding work. It is in this series, that my artwork is defined; and it is through the integration of play, personal narrative, and universality that I bring to the viewer a mature body of work that can be interpreted from a variety of personal contexts and lenses.

At first, the belly pot came about as a reflection on play with technique. They were thrown, manipulated with the mold, cleaned with little further manipulation, and then fired and finished with a copper matte raku exterior and a smoked interior. As I began to infer meaning from the form, I began to question the symbol and what it could mean. I thought of how I could manipulate the thrown bellies formally and how this would change the meaning. How would the meaning change with repetition, with elevation, with changing scale, or omitting sections of the bellies? How would the meaning change if the belly were a frame for an inside space or as a window (see Figure 41)?

Figure 41. Jennifer McLees, *Belly Pots with Doors*, Summer 2009 (detail shown on right). Photo by Jennifer McLees.

As I moved through this inquisitive approach to brainstorming, I realized that with each push in the process and successive yielding to ideas, my work was naturally growing as both an extension of my own narrative and closer to the universal connection for which I had been striving. The universal interpretation I had sought to discover was naturally embedded in my personal narrative. With the realization of this paradox came a clear recognition that my investigation had come a full circle, grounded first and ending in personal narrative.

In *I'm Sorry*, the narrative is both intimately personal and universal (see Figure 12). A worn and broken belly sits atop a broken piece of sandstone. Inches from the belly button, the belly is torn and from the tear, a handful of small rocks have broken through, their surfaces rendered to appear aged and worn and carrying a repeated inscription, "I'm sorry." As an exercise for this piece, I tallied the number of times I said I was sorry in a day. The final tally, 106, was heartbreaking. For me, every "I'm sorry" holds with it a true sense of regret and angst. And from personal experience, I know this type of held-up emotion eventually leads to physical and emotional ailments. This type of ailment, bred by emotional distress, I know, to be shared by many in our contemporary world. It is through this shared experience that my piece becomes extended to a universal audience and narrative. As others invite their own contexts and stories, the piece takes on a life of its own beyond self and beyond concrete answers and investigation.

In the belly pots on columns series, the conceptual intention, still relevant to my narrative, is less obvious than in *I'm Sorry*. Here, I have placed three wheel-

thrown belly pots on three distinct Greek columns (see Figure 9), one Doric, one Ionic, and the final and most embellished, Corinthian (see Figure 42). Some of the bellies broken and the columns themselves raw and bubbling with immature raku glaze, interpretation requires inquiry from the viewer in order for them to discern for themselves what they infer into the meaning. My intention was not clear from the beginning; I truly left myself open to conceptual play and freedom. And in doing so, I have created a piece that truly reflects my growing maturity as an artist. Returning to the tracing of my torso, as I did in preschool, I have discovered innately through an intermingling of play, personal narrative and exploring universal themes, a true presence in my artwork that was lacking before, and now has surfaced in a narrative-based inquiry and investigation.

Figure 42. Jennifer McLees, *Belly Pot on Corinthian Column,* Summer 2008 (belly pots on columns series). Photo by Jennifer McLees.

CHAPTER IV

AN APPROACH TO THE CREATIVE PROCESS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL ART ROOM: PLAY, NARRATIVE, AND UNIVERSAL THEMES

We are without question living in an unprecedented time of rapid change and growth in the American education system. As new jobs "put an enormous premium on creative and innovative skills (and) seeing patterns where other people see only chaos," there is a demand in education to develop a new set of competitive "21st-Century Skills" (Wallis, 2006, p. 1). Abilities such as "creativity, innovation, critical thinking, problem-solving, communication and collaboration" are now recognized as crucial to leadership development (Mathews, 2009, p. 1). The creative process, tied intimately with the development of these abilities, is suddenly at the forefront of reform. It has claimed its place alongside traditional subjects, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, as a basic skill needed to move forward and make sense of the chaos and influx of information in contemporary society.

At the same time that this general shift in United States education is moving steadily forward, the subject of visual arts education is moving in tandem with a similar push for reform. Like the broader reform efforts in the United States education system, the reform in visual arts holds an intimate relationship with the development of the creative process. This reform suggests that arts curriculum not only be driven

by technique and composition (the dominant focus in modern art), but also by the processing of concept and connecting this process to contemporary influences in society and art. Contemporary and postmodern concepts associated with visual culture, multiculturalism, context, narrative, and dialogue drive this reform.

Since my personal art is conceptually grounded, it follows that my philosophy of teaching would reflect the same focus. Thus, the idea and its development through the creative process is a foundational element in my instruction. While technique and composition are also essential, it is my belief that the best art is grounded in personal experiences and reflection and that in order for my students to connect art making to their own lives, they must elaborate and refine their ideas to reveal their individual voices and reflect their world.

In reflecting on the evolution of my creative process, I have identified three overlapping spheres of influence: play, personal narrative, and the investigation of universal themes (see Figure 34). By applying these same three influential concepts within the art classroom, I have created a framework for developing and strengthening the conceptual base of my students' artwork. In the following pages, I present some of the strategies employed in my teaching.

Context of Study

Skyline High School is a medium-sized school of about 1,300 students. The student body is divided roughly in half with equal numbers of Latino and Caucasian students. There are strong specialty programs such as English as a Second Language, Special Education, and the Honors program. More than 25% of the student population

qualify for free and reduced lunch. In the Visual Arts program, this number far exceeds 25%.

The Visual Arts program is strong. There are three full-time art teachers who offer instruction in design, drawing, painting, ceramics, sculpture, jewelry, photography, and digital arts. The structure of the program offers a strong foundation in Explorations of Visual Art, as well as a substantial challenge in each of the three Advanced Placement Studio Art portfolios: Drawing, 2-D Design, and 3-D Design.

While I have taught well over half of the art classes at Skyline High School, my primary focuses have been Ceramics, Sculpture, and Advanced Placement Studio Art. Beginning classes are usually quite large, housing anywhere from 30 to 40 students. Intermediate and advanced classes are usually much smaller, ranging in number from a high of near 30 to a low of as few as 10.

In my classes, the focus in the areas of technique, media, composition, and concept vary with each level of instruction. At the introductory level, there is more focus on technique, media, and composition. The exploration of concept, while important, is more limited in scope, usually as guided student assignments. These assignments focus on familiar, concrete themes such as identity and exploring one's immediate world and culture, as well as traditional themes associated with particular media (for example, the teapot and figure studied in Ceramics). At the intermediate level, the emphasis on concept is equal to the exploration of media and assignments are aimed at exploring bigger ideas prevalent in the contemporary art world—themes such as power, desire, consumption, structures, and game (Miller & Otero, 2010).

Technique, exploration of media, and composition are still areas of focus but with more freedom of choice by the student. At the advanced level, concept receives the most emphasis as students move from structured and guided assignments to develop more individualized programs of study.

Play: Sparking the Creative Process

> The element of playfulness that characterizes all creative investigations helps me generate new ideas and sustain the freedom necessary to plan and execute a work of art. The same can be said of children. Play brings out their individuality and allows their imaginations to thrive. (Szekely, 1991, p. 1)

Although the theme of play in studio art and in art education is not new, it has recently become a more prevalent topic when discussing current art education trends. Researchers will find some reference to play in the more thorough contemporary art education studies. George Szekely, who has written books and developed videos on the study of play in his classroom, believes that "playing teaches students how to take charge of an art search, to look toward themselves as inventors, and feel the stirrings of great voices and powers within" (Szekely, 1991, p. 1). Olivia Gude, a leading author on contemporary art education studies and director of Chicago's Spiral Arts workshops, presents play as an important consideration for contemporary education, stating in a recent publication how she believes "learning begins with creative, deeply personal primary process play" (Gude, 2007, p. 8). The idea of play, though not mentioned specifically, is also present in the works of Zurmuehlen. There, the process of play is tied closely to praxis, symbol, and development of self.

The strategy of play employed by art educators is not a frivolous or whimsical act, nor are the primary functions only fun and recreation. Research in art education

encompasses a broader definition of the word that focuses also on self-discovery, rehearsal of technique without high stakes, and accessing the subconscious for symbols and themes. While the fun and amusement of play can provide a spark to motivate momentum, the focus of play in art education can be further developed to provide a platform and framework for boosting conceptual development in the creative process.

Exploring Material and Creating Community in the Classroom

Play has proven to be both an excellent platform for exploring media and also for building community and relationships in my classroom. Lessons that have focused the technical expectations on exploration and risk-taking, rather than on perfecting technique, have emphasized learning about and relating to different media and techniques in a non-threatening way. As well, play lessons prompted students to connect easily to material, process, and peer support while working together in small groups to attain a playful goal. These relationships later provided a broader network of support when students were engaged in critiques seeking suggestions for works-in-progress and further encouragement for ideas.

Utilizing play in the art classroom was a foundation for exploring media and creating community dialogue in Beginning Ceramics. One day after a short demonstration on technique, students were organized into small groups randomly and then prompted to explore and devise the tallest or curviest coil vessel they could produce in a one-hour period. Before beginning the activity, they were told that there would be a prize for both the tallest and the curviest form. They were also instructed that during

the next class period, the class would execute a final release from expectations by shattering the vessels against the outside brick wall.

I have initiated this type of approach in several of my classes, and each time it has led to an experience characterized by motivation, full engagement, risk-taking, and fun (see Figure 43). The exercise produced an emergence of leaders and followers, of discussion and planning, and of collaborative creative thinking. As students who started strangers came to know each other quickly in this competitive and playful activity, cliques shifted and cultural shields lifted. In critiques that immediately followed, more students seemed engaged than usual. And in subsequent critiques, this trend continued as students became more comfortable with each other after this initial introduction through play.

Figure 43. Beginning students engaging in group play activity with coil. Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Exploring Material and
Developing Symbols of Self

One of the more compelling observations in my research of play has been its innate tendency to lead toward symbol and connection to self. In most beginning classes, the semester commenced with a playful investigation into self through exploration of consciously and subconsciously developed symbols. At the intermediate and advanced level, this type of investigation was usually present later in the term, and in conjunction with studying symbols and metaphor in larger, more involved projects.

On the first day of Beginning Ceramics, for example, students were given a piece of clay and instructed that the initial exercise of the semester was to become acquainted with the material and then to create a symbol of self. In establishing their initial physical relationship with the material, students were encouraged to spend a substantial amount of time exploring the physical properties: pushing, wadding, stretching, pinching, rolling, and playing around with the addition of water. Concrete imagery was not encouraged. If, however, students discovered images or identifiable forms emerging, they were given permission to recognize those and bring them to fruition.

After this initial exploration of the physical properties of clay, students continued their creative process by forming an image for which they had some kind of personal connection. Often, imagery found in the initial play reemerged in final symbolic representations. Some struggled with imagery, and the instructor then needed to prompt them through questioning. A few did not move beyond the first

stages of exploring the physical properties of clay. And, others, most who seemed to have derived an idea from the original instructions, moved forward with decisive intent (see Figure 44).

Figure 44. Beginning ceramics investigation into development of symbol and self. Photo by Jennifer McLees.

When the exercise was finished and all pieces ready for presentation, the class held the first critique of the semester. Although technical skill varied, individuality and diversity predominanted as a strength. These initial works provided a solid

foundation for the semester and provided a focus for producing artwork that was both personal and individual.

Personal Narrative and Voice

Artistic causality attests that "artists have no choice but to express their lives. They have only, and that not always, a choice of process. This process does not change the essential content of their work in art, which 'can only be life'" (Zurmuehlen, 1990, p. 18).

For artists, exploration with both the creative and narrative processes often go hand-in-hand. It is through subconscious and conscious intent as well as reflection during the creative process that artists bring their stories, opinions, choices, and individual lenses of interpretation to the pieces they create. Whether defining narrative literally as an engagement with story or rhetorically as a method of discussion grounded in inquiry, this mode of investigation is often at the center of exploration in art.

In my research, I have focused on exploring narrative in the classroom as a reflection of self, of story, and as a process of discovery and communication in one's work. It is my belief that students' artwork evolves not as a result of "tite?" technique, or "cool" composition, but instead from the connection to a developing narrative, grounded in personal experience and choice. By focusing curriculum on narrative and pushing students to recognize its significance, I continued to establish a solid foundation for which technique and composition were important to support concept and intent; but, the pursuit of concept that connects to self was at the forefront of

investigation. Once the conceptual component of self was established, students were further instructed in transference of these notions to a domain where they expanded their narrative to explore other contexts.

Development of Personal Narrative in the Classroom: Warming up to Self

In my studies, I discovered that the strongest and most easily accessible element of narration began with self. Students were naturally inclined and driven toward this egocentric exploration. And this type of exercise provided an excellent "opportunity for them to further their emotional and intellectual development, to help formulate a sense of who they are, and who they might become" (Gude, 2004, p. 4).

The process of establishing personal narrative in Beginning Ceramics began on the first day with the exploration of self through an introductory survey. Students were prodded into thinking with open- and closed-ended questions about reasons for exploring art, types of art they liked, motivations for their art making, and motivations for their lives. The survey revealed a first glimpse into who the young artists were and what could be identified as possible motivational themes to help them discover and develop their personal narratives (see Appendix A).

The students' investigation into personal narrative continued the same day as they were instructed to develop visual symbols in clay that were somehow tied to their sense of self (see Figure 44). As mentioned in the prior section on play, this process allowed students a non-invasive environment in which to make their first introductions. As egocentric as many teenagers are, this activity provided an easily attainable theme to focus on during the first day.

The class then presented their pieces in a critique format that emphasized both the possibilities and limitations of technique and composition in ceramics, as well as the conceptual possibilities of symbol to develop visual representation of self. Students were asked to share their interpretations of works completed by other class members. They were also encouraged to consider the possibilities of combining symbols with each other and to imagine how this change would affect the intention of the pieces to represent themselves as individuals and the group as a whole.

The critique provided a solid starting point for the first major assignment in clay, that is, an exploration of student identities through the manipulation of media and the combined formation of signs and symbols. Before students finalized concrete ideas for the assignment, however, they continued to develop ideas of descriptive symbols of self in structured warm-up exercises. In one example, students were required to create a web of personal influence (see Figure 45). Through this structure, students began to explore beliefs and themes that were important to them, such as family, friends, culture, place and art.

Development of Narrative in the Classroom: Learning to Establish a Dialogue with Art through Investigation of Story

Most literal definitions of narrative on the Web include a reference to story (Narrative, n.d.). In the visual arts, this definition of narrative has held a prominent place over time. The most novice of art historians probably has some familiarity with the paintings in the Caves of Lascaux, Greek ceramic vessels, Michelangelo’s painted ceiling in the Sistine Chapel, or Edvard Munch’s painting titled, *The Scream*. And if

those examples are not familiar narratives, then at least almost everyone has read the Sunday comics or a comic book.

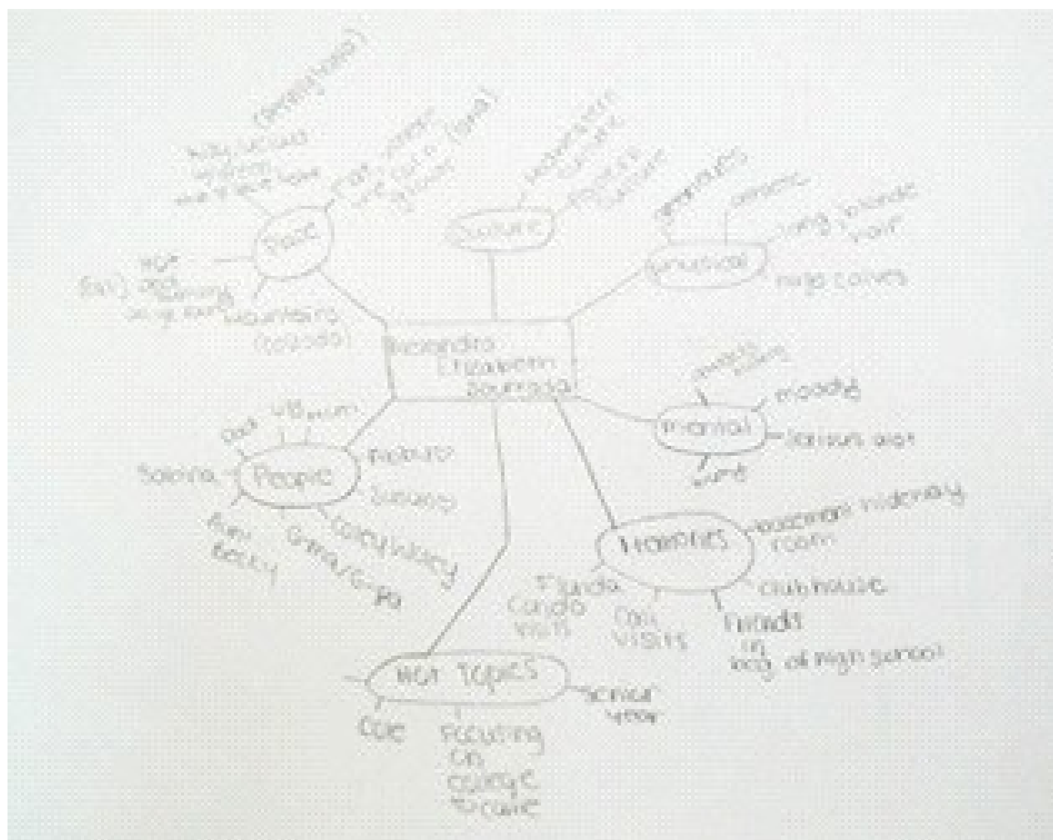


Figure 45. Example of web exploring self.

Narrative can be further defined as a style of investigation through inquiry. It involves a process of defining “our response to question and doubt; . . . the ways in which we organize and make meaning” (Hendry, 2009, p. 73). Through this definition, the relationship of narrative is intimately tied to telling and creating a dialogue in

art. The artist tells the story and the viewer, through an investigation of inquiry, attempts to decipher the intent.

I chose to explore narrative as both a story and as a style of inquiry with my Intermediate Ceramics classes. Whereas in Beginning Ceramics, I chose to focus on major themes that were easily accessible and more concrete, for example, identity, the teapot, and the human figure in clay, in Intermediate Ceramics I incorporated larger ideas. These ideas explored not only contemporary themes in ceramics but also more challenging themes prevalent in leading contemporary artwork: themes such as culture, game, desire, and loss (Miller & Otero, 2010). The investigation into story provided an access for connecting to prior explorations of self, as well as for developing deeper methods of inquiry that could be used in relating to and understanding these contem-porary themes.

Before introducing narrative as an investigation through inquiry, I reintroduced students to a process of talking about art common in contemporary art texts and referred to as Feldman's model (Feldman, 1994). In this model, students used a process of describing, analyzing, and interpreting to read and evaluate works of art. The Intermediate Ceramics students practiced this style of inquiry through exposure to and interpretation of current ceramic artists who work with story as a theme in their art. At first, these readings were presented in a discussion format with the instructor facilitating the process (see Figure 46). Once students became more informed and better understood the process of engaging in a thorough dialogue with the art, they

were grouped into pairs. Together, they moved through the process of interpretation and eventually were able to establish a dialogue on their own (see Figure 47).

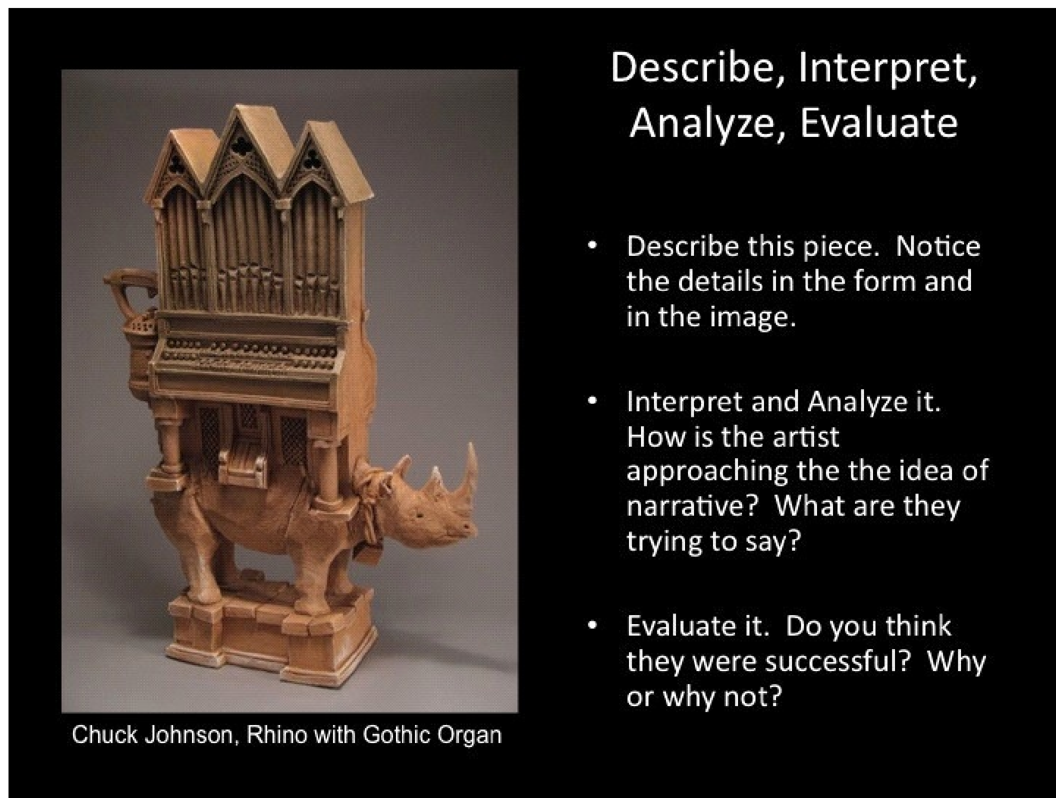


Figure 46. Describe, interpret, analyze, evaluate discussion slide for leading investigation into narrative with Intermediate Ceramics class. Slide created by Jennifer McLees.

Figure 47. Describe, interpret, analyze, evaluate slide for leading investigation into narrative with Intermediate Ceramics class. Slide created by Jennifer McLees.

Once students had established a relationship of reading the art of others, they further developed this relationship through questioning exercises directed at their own work. Students were paired and presented with a series of questions about narrative. The pairs recorded their responses in writing and then shared responses in a class discussion. Prompted questions included:

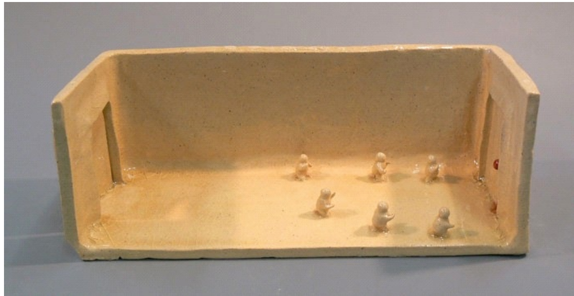
- Where do we use story in our lives?
- How does the perspective of the narrator bias the story?
- What is a story that you would like to share?

- How is tone established in a story and how can that be relayed visually?
- How do we learn about others through story?
- How is history related to story?
- What are the parts that make up a story?
- What engages us in a story?
- How can story be used to carry messages and morals?
- Why do people tell stories?
- From where can we find inspiration for story?
- Can a story be shown in one frame or does it need many?

From these questions, students developed three ideas for a narrative piece centered on the concept of story and the layers of meaning that their imagery would reveal. They then presented their ideas to the instructor (as is common practice before beginning most projects). On occasion, further questioning was prompted by the instructor to facilitate more connected and reflective ideas. Once the ideas were fully developed and approved by the instructor, students moved on to building the actual piece. Once finished, students participated in a critique where the artists were asked to listen and take notes while their peers used the Describe, Interpret, Analyze, and Evaluate (DIAE) process to deconstruct the meaning of the pieces. Afterward, the artists were asked to share their conceptual processing and intent.

For purposes of this study, I have used pseudonyms for each student. For his story, Ben focused on a fictional narrative where a group of six tiny blob-like figures run toward a door, which to the viewer, is clearly barred from the other side (see

Figure 48). Ben shared that his focus was on juxtaposing a play-like tone with the small, innocent figures against the more distressing tone of the situation.



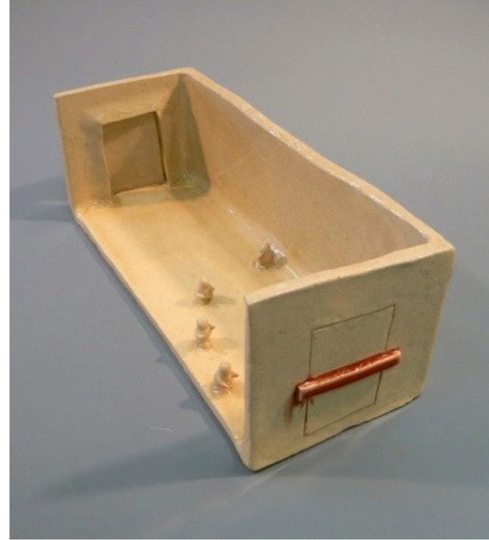


Figure 48. Ben's story (detail on right). Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Janelle chose to take on a difficult autobiographical story in her depiction of three small penguins posing in the "see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil" pose (see Figure 49). When she was a girl, her grandmother called Janelle "her little penguin." Sadly, this relationship dissipated after a dispute. When Janelle was molested by a man for whom she was babysitting, she felt she had no one with whom she could trust to share this information. The action of the penguins, although often viewed as cliché, seems to gain gravity as the viewer relates to this young girl's grappling with her painful experience. For Janelle, this was a narrative of discovery and healing.

Figure 49. Janelle's story. Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Universal Themes: Contemporary Studies

Upon my return to the studio, I discovered that a renewed investigation into contemporary art ignited my creative passions and helped to elevate my work to a more professional level. By establishing an informed dialogue with the contemporary practices of my colleagues, I was motivated to explore new combinations of media, expand my conceptual base, and develop a body of work that was more informed and mature. Not surprisingly, as I have applied the lessons learned from contemporary art

to the classroom, my students have also been ignited with the same type of passion and motivation that I experienced.

In my teaching, I have used several of the key points of postmodern reform explored in Chapter II as a platform for investigation into curriculum reform in my art classroom. These included the need to establish dialogue, push beyond formalism and expressionism, connect to students' lives through the study of visual culture, and explore both multiple cultural influences and the context of visual imagery. By examining my own processing with contemporary study and using these tenants as well, I created several curricular strategies from which to connect my art education curriculum to current contemporary art practices. These strategies included developing dialogue through inquiry, the introduction of postmodern approaches to composition, and a renewed investigation of aesthetic intent.

Establishing a Contemporary Dialogue: Postmodern Principles

Studio practices in contemporary art making have developed to encompass a much broader defining of compositional practices than those developed in the Modern era. Modern art, which predominated from the early 1900s and well into the middle part of the 20th century, created a universal language to discern and evaluate art, popularly referred to as the elements of art (line, shape, form, space, value, texture, and color) and the principles of design (unity, variety, rhythm, movement, emphasis, contrast, and balance). Composition in contemporary design has evolved to include a new set of design practices(see Appendix B). These include design components such as:

- Hybridity of media.
- Juxtaposition of disparate materials.
- Appropriation of borrowed imagery.
- Recontextualization of imagery.
- Layering of imagery to evoke the subconscious mind and complexity of times.
- Placing text and image together to invoke ironic associations.
- Challenging the gaze of the viewer.
- "Representin'" imagery which is tied to the proclamation of one's identity, history and culture of origin (Gude, 2004).

In order for art students to fully understand and engage with contemporary art and its conceptual impetus, they need to understand this underlying language that is new to contemporary art composition. Art curriculum that does not incorporate this new discourse remains stagnant and unconnected to current practices. And resulting artwork lacks current context and substantive investigation.

I chose to introduce and develop these new postmodern strategies with the Advanced Placement classes. While I presented more limited introductions at the beginning and intermediate level, the advanced level provided more informed and mature subjects for investigation. At this stage, students were prepared and motivated to research more thoroughly on their own as they devised a personal investigation that was individual and choice-based.

The introduction of these postmodern practices at the Advanced Placement level began with a review of modern language in composition and then introduced the postmodern practices as an extension of these compositional strategies. To begin, I presented the group of practices as a whole in a PowerPoint presentation. Then, students were presented with a series of images that exemplified each of the practices and were asked to interpret the work and strategies employed to convey the underlying concept. From here, additional and more thorough instruction was presented on layering and appropriation of image (see Figures 50 and 51). Students then moved on to generate ideas and create pieces inspired by these two contemporary practices.

Figure 50. Angel's layering assignment. Photo by Jennifer McLees.

Figure 51. Annie's appropriation assignment.

The layering project was introduced as an assignment in which students were required to incorporate layering of both physical and conceptual properties. Students first were encouraged to play, explore, and take risks with individual media such as chalk, pencil, crayon, paints, paper, and collage in a series of sketchbook assignments. Then combinations and translucent layers of these different media were explored. Finally, to learn strategies for resolving complex compositions, traditional components of modern design were applied in collage exercises.

As students examined the physical properties of different media, they also researched sign and symbol and the layered meanings associated with both. To start

this process, the class discussed the definition of sign and symbol and brainstormed a list of symbols with which they were already familiar. Formal symbolism was explored with reference to color and texture. Iconic symbolism was delved into by exploring prevalent iconography in culture and contemporary events.

In Angel's piece focusing on the development of both physical and conceptual layering, she chose the translucent qualities of color pencil, graphite and chalk pastel to evoke subconscious associations (see Figure 50). This played into her concept about patriotism and the indirect associations citizens have with their countries on a global scale. Two soldiers are presented in the foreground. One is rendered in a translucent manner so that the viewer can see the full image of the American flag behind him/her. The other soldier is rendered as a black, opaque silhouette and stands with a rifle in hand in front of the Iraqi flag. The opaqueness and silhouetted nature of this second figure was purposefully designed to present a quality of omission rather than presence of the soldier.

The appropriation project was introduced with less structured guidance in developing the initial concept. The principle was introduced, examples of contemporary artists working with appropriation were shared, and students were instructed that they needed to appropriate a popular image or style in order to make a contemporary connection.

In Annie's project, she chose to appropriate the style and imagery of Roy Lichtenstein's painting, titled, *Hopeless* (see Figure 52). Her rendition includes a colorful cartoon-like Scarlett Johansson laid on her back with a thought bubble stating

"A day of retouching, sharpening, correcting, repairing and cropping…Finally, I'm ready" (see Figure 52). The pop art quality of the image, borrowed from Lichtenstein, evokes a connection to current contemporary society. The ironic association of the hopeless image, rendered through Photoshop of this mega-star, presents a dark facet of humor to the viewer.

Figure 52. Roy Lichtenstein, *Hopeless,* 1964. From *News,* by B. Smart, 2008, http://www.baccarasmart.com/news/labels/Hopeless.php

Unlike using modern principles of design and composition, students seemed excited to explore these new design components of postmodernism. Instruction, however, was less forward and concrete than instruction in modern compositional components; perhaps for this reason, the quality of resulting products varied. In the layering assignment, compositions often became cluttered and confusing. By focusing on layering, students often neglected traditional organizational strategies such as creating an area of emphasis and creating unity in the composition. In focusing on appropriation, some students created projects that bordered on plagiarism. And yet, more successful pieces were filled with personal reflection and were some of the most compelling works in students' portfolios.

Developing Universal Dialogue:
Aesthetic Intent

At the advanced level, students were also introduced and pushed to explore contemporary philosophies of aesthetic intent (see Appendix C). These included mimetic, formal, expressive, instrumental, multicultural, and deconstructivist theories. Understanding these theories provided another rationale for analyzing and interpreting artwork. By extending their intent beyond the traditional aesthetic philosophies in art education, which most often include a focus on mimetic (realistic), formal, and expressive qualities, students were given a new set of qualities for conceptual inspiration and aesthetic evaluation.

Students began investigation into these theories with an activity that encouraged research of each theory. In groups of two or three, the students first randomly selected a description of an aesthetic theory from a hat. Then they searched through a

pile of imagery provided by the instructor for two or three visual examples of their selected theory. When all groups had compiled evidence supporting their theory, the students took turns presenting their theory with visual support to the class.

Following this introduction of selected aesthetic theories to the class, a more in-depth introduction was given on instrumental theory. In this theory, the intent in an artwork is to persuade and manipulate the viewers' opinions through visual text toward the opinion of the artist. Artists engaging in this theory usually make art that is about culturally-based viewpoints. Formal components are important only as a vehicle for enhancing the message. Examples include religious art, magazine and newspaper advertisements, television commercials, propaganda (posters/flyers/pamphlets), and Feminist art.

After the reintroduction of instrumental theory, the class brainstormed a list of possible instrumental topics that included persuasive ideas, such as consumerism, the influence of pop culture, fashion advertisement, and war propaganda, as follows:

- Consumerism
- Beauty
- Pop culture
- Religion
- Fashion advertisement
- Eating disorders
- Historical perspective on holidays
- Technology take over

- War propaganda
- Drugs
- Routine patterns in society: birth, school, work, death
- Sexual orientation
- Heaven
- Political standing

Ideas often centered naturally around teen issues and larger global issues. Once the classroom discussion was finished, students chose to either use one of the class-generated ideas or devise their own teacher-approved ideas to create sketches for a fully developed project in their sketchbooks (see Figure 53).

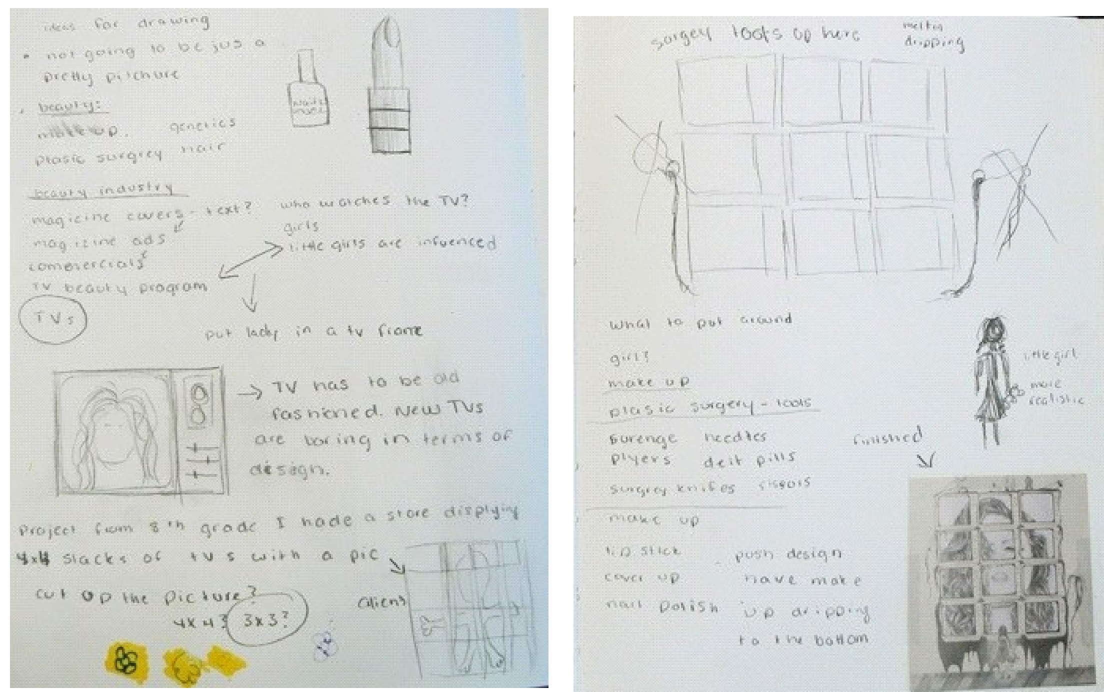


Figure 53. Sketchbook idea for instrumental project.

The projects resulting from the study of instrumental aesthetic intent were varied and reflected a tremendous diversity in individualized voice and style. Focusing on instrumental themes invigorated students to make passionate choices about important issues in their lives. This type of reflection proved later to be an integral tool in approaching less familiar issues that would prompt further research and investigation.

The modifications incorporating contemporary studies into the curriculum at the advanced level completed a well-rounded program of study into the creative process and its development through play, narrative, and exploration of universal themes. Just as I developed a mature body of work by focusing on the three dominant spheres of influence, my students' work reflected a comparable pattern of growth through a similar outline of study. Play studies provided a platform for motivation, experimentation, and risk-taking. Narrative studies provided a foundation for one's art, grounded in self, but also allowing the extension of intent through inquiry and dialogue. The final investigation into contemporary philosophies in art provided an essential understanding of current studies in studio art practices and the emphasis they place on raising questions about social responsibility.

Supported by these spheres of influence, students were introduced to methods of creative instruction that can be further applied to many venues in 21st century learning. There is now a renewed focus on the creative process and its capacity to promote aptitudes such as problem solving, critical reflection, and innovation in the 21st century learner. My studies into the creative process with its subsequent fostering

of play, narrative, and contemporary engagement in the classroom provide one program for developing these new skill trends.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

> I try to express my views about the world through my art, such as conforming to society's standards and juxtaposing ideas.
>
> I hope people will look at my art and see my voice. In my art I have a stance on how society dictates how we should look, and try to convey my thoughts and ideas about society through an aesthetic appeal as well as a deep and metaphorical meaning. The influence the beauty industry has on women, especially little girls, is overwhelming. I attempt to point out in a blatant way what is happening with the elements of art. I want people to walk up to my art and think what a beautiful piece, but upon further inspection and thought, realize I'm not sending a pretty message. Viewers should really think about the issues I bring up, and see how it affects them personally.
>
> Art plays as another person in my life. Sometimes we get along and we can think of grand ideas together. Other times art and I don't get along and the last thing I want to do is draw. During these times, like in a real relationship, I can't focus on other things. Once I am back in my creative zone though, the possibilities to express and create seem to flow freely in my head. While working on an art project I am full of energy and have a sense of completion and reason overlaying my life. (Annie, artist statement, Advanced Placement Studio Art, Skyline High School)

Just as I once examined my personal artist statement and reflected on the processes leading up to it, at the conclusion of this thesis, I reflect on the statement of an advanced student, Annie, and the creative processes introduced to her and their influence on her development as a mature, conceptual thinker (see Appendix D for artist statement assignment). As I conclude my study, Annie's statement, clear in its conceptual intent and advanced in its development, prods me to reconsider the

questions that commenced this study: What were the strategies employed in my art to develop my own voice and narrative ideas? How have I shared and implemented these same strategies in the classroom? How have I facilitated the development of my students' ideas and voice so that they could generate thought-provoking ideas filled with lessons and reflective thought that would support them beyond the art room and into their lives?

Over the course of five years of research into the creative process, I have discovered three spheres of influence that support the development of strong ideas grounded in personal choice and reflection: play, personal narrative, and the investigation of universal themes that are exemplified in contemporary art practices. Though my biography and those of my students are still developing, the focus on these three spheres has created a successful framework from which to explore and motivate conceptual growth in our work. The three notions guided us as we pushed for conceptual growth in technical experimentation, narrative development, and purposeful reflection on contemporary studies in studio art. In Annie's work, for example, I was able to watch this development throughout her high school art experience. I assisted in motivating play with material, both at the introductory and advanced level, and guided her toward the development of a cohesive culminating study grounded in personal voice and choice. Most influential in the developing maturity and depth of her work was her introduction to contemporary philosophy and practices. Through this final piece of investigation, Annie's studies excelled and, as discussed in her culminating

artist statement, pushed her to explore aesthetics, metaphor, and issues prominent in contemporary society.

Though initially investigated as three distinctive tiers of influence, I discovered that processes derived from the exploration of play, narrative, and universal inquiry coexisted, and while at times provided an independent focus more often then not, commingled as a simultaneous and often cyclical query of influence. The development of symbol and narrative naturally emerged from the process of play. By releasing control of personal narrative to play, universal themes and a solid connection to contemporary dialogue unfolded. My personal investigations often began with play of material, technique, and composition. At this stage, I tended to take risks most within these fields and released myself from conceptual expectations. Subconscious themes and symbols emerged, and some naturally progressed into conceptual components of my larger body of work. I returned to play later in my work and discovered in my culminating investigation, the Belly Pot series, that physical risk-taking and release from conceptual expectations allowed my work to mature through abstraction and serendipity. With this discovery came a final recognition that play is an important component to include throughout the art making experience, both within individual works and in a greater biography of work.

Each of the three tiers of influence had its own set of specific challenges in igniting and supporting the creative process. These challenges became magnified most prominently in the educational setting. Play, for example, if unnourished and undirected, became a frivolous activity in connection with the development of idea.

Personal narrative demanded an inquisitive investigation beyond immediate spheres of influence, especially at the high school level. In order to move forward from the immediate and often clichéd circle of imagery associated with students' personal likes and dislikes, instruction required them to look for connections beyond self to such external forces as those found in culture, belief systems, and themes introduced in the contemporary Art 21 series. Investigations into themes beyond self held a new set of challenges. To begin, there was the challenge of introducing postmodernism itself. With foundations and theories which are still not fully developed and constantly shifting, postmodernism proved to be a daunting subject to present to high school students. Understanding postmodern philosophy and terminology requires a level of maturity and experience in the world that many high school students have not yet achieved. Thus, it is challenging to present a concrete framework of instruction. For example, when I introduced the concept of appropriation to high school students, many wrestled with developing ideas reflecting their personal processing and instead incorporated images and concepts that bordered on plagiarism.

With all three directives (play, narrative, and universal inquiry), there was an added challenge of balancing the importance of concept with the equally important components of technique and composition. In the initial stages of this investigation, I often observed that instruction in concept often superseded and placed to the side technical and compositional competence. This resulted in projects with ambitious conceptual ideals but supported by inadequate technical or compositional attention. Although students seemed connected to their ideas, the finished products seemed

underdeveloped and the intent completely masked by poor craftsmanship and design. I found that focusing on mimetic and expressive approaches in introductory courses provided a solid foundation to emphasize technique in rendering naturalistic representation and also layout and modern compositional choices for expressive representation.

As I continue exploring the creative process in the classroom, it will be important to devote a significant amount of time devising systems within my classroom studies, so that this type of inquiry comes as naturally to my instruction as it has to my personal explorations. Specifically, there is a need to incorporate a more consistent practice of contemporary reflection and inquiry in developing dialogue in my classroom procedures.

Despite the challenges, the three spheres of influence proved to be a solid foundation for approaching the development of narrative within a body of work. I found that the three universal directives can be used to investigate and motivate artists' query into the creative process; this approach, though grounded in postmodern study, can be continued beyond the postmodern context.

As we leave a century where modernism led way to postmodernism and postmodernism is still uncertain in its identity and current definition, we find ourselves in a time where even without a definitive label of postmodernism, there is a certainty that life is complex, competitive, and filled with creative challenges. Studio art currently embodies a plurality of approaches in media, style, content, and intent. This plurality of approach demands a broader and more introspective approach to investigation of the creative process, whether the artist is an amateur or professional. Without

an investigation of and an opening to contemporary studies, studio practices in visual arts will remain stagnant and unconnected with the real art world and the society.

The task to stay current with contemporary research and strategies in studio art is challenging and at times consuming and uncertain. When connected and fully participating in the contemporary art world and its unfolding dialogue, the learning and drive within one's art is dynamic, reflective, exciting, and inspirational. I observed these moments both in my own work and in that of my students. These "aha" moments, although infrequent, especially in the earlier stages of development, are worthwhile and sustaining. They inspire and motivate artmakers and bridge the contemporary art world with society to make their larger mark on time.

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APPENDIX A

STUDENT SURVEY

STUDENT SURVEY

1. I'm taking this class because:
   ____ I enjoy making art.
   ____I want to learn something new.
   ____I need to fill my Fine Arts requirement.
   ____It was the only class available.
   ____Somebody recommended that I take it. If so, who?
   ____I don't really know why.

2. I enjoy working with:

____clay	____regular pencil	____tempera	____wire
____charcoal	____water color	____plaster	____color pencil
____acrylic	____crayons	____conte	____oil paint
____found objects		____papier mache	

   List any other materials you enjoy working with.

   ____

3. I would like to learn to work with:

____clay	____regular pencil	____tempera	____wire
____charcoal	____water color	____plaster	____color pencil
____acrylic	____crayon	____conte	____oil paint
____found objects		____papier mache	

   List any other materials you would like to learn more about.

   ____

4. Art I like is:

____realistic	____abstract	____beautiful	____colorful	____graffiti
____impressionist	____minimal	____funny	____fantasy	
____2 dimensional	____3 dimensional		____controversial	
____made with unusual materials			____about culture	

   Other descriptors?

   ____

5. Themes I would like to explore are:

____identity	____story	____abstraction
____spirituality	____consumption	____loss and desire
____time	____humor	____power
____structures	____play	____romance
____traditional	____contemporary	

Other?
____

6. I consider myself:
____an excellent artist.
____an ok artist.
____a horrible artist.

7. One of my favorite subjects in school is: _________________________________

8. Outside of school I like to: ____

9. I really hate: ____

10. Use the back of this page to tell me a story that tells me something about who you are.

APPENDIX B

GUIDING PRINCIPLES IN POSTMODERN ART

GUIDING PRINCIPLES IN POSTMODERN ART
(modified from document prepared by
UNC professors Connie Bethards and Olivia Gude's
Postmodern Principles, *Art Education*, January 2004)

Hybridity
- Incorporation of various media into works—large-scale projections of video, sound pieces, digital photography, and computer animation.

Juxtaposition
- Bringing together radically disparate elements; Juxtaposition of non-art materials; Reflects familiar shocks of contemporary life.

Appropriation
- Use of appropriated materials; Connecting materials used to those common in one's life; Surrounded with cheap, disposable images, recycle found images to compose art.

Recontextualization
- Positioning a familiar image in relationship to pictures, symbols or texts with which it is not usually associated.

Layering
- Layering of imagery, evoking complexity of subconscious mind; Evokes the layered complexity of contemporary life.

Interaction of Text and Image
- Interplay of the two gives rich, ironic associations; NOt a literal match of verbal and visual signifiers.

Gazing
- Who creates and controls imagery? Who is being looked at and who is doing the looking?

Representin'
- Street slang for proclaiming one's identity and affiliations; One's own personal history and culture of origin.

APPENDIX C

AESTHETIC THEORIES AND PHILOSOPHIES

AESTHETIC THEORIES AND PHILOSOPHIES
(paraphrased from 2000 CAEA document)
Will manipulate and paraphrase further

Defining Aesthetics

- a branch of philosophy traditionally associated with beauty and taste; emphasizing the evaluative criteria applied to art in assessment of desired intent.

Mimetic Theory

- Intent in artwork is to "mimic" reality as closely as possible—the more successful the imitation, the better the art; one of the most popularly held viewpoints in art. Dating from as far back as the ancient Greeks, the belief is that in order to be successful, art must imitate the real world in physical or idealized form.

Formalism

- Intent in artwork is to create engaging, "cool" arrangement focusing on the Elements of Art and the Principles of Design within a composition as it main concern. This theory negates such relationships as artist or audience to the work of art, encompassing only what is intrinsic in the work itself.

Expressive

- Intent in artwork is to either evoke emotion from the viewer or display intense emotional content. Within this theory are variations including the necessity of an emotional exchange between the artist viewer and the singular importance of communication of an expressed emotion.

Instrumental

- Intent in artwork is to use art for influence of opinion about artist message; to persuade and manipulate the viewer's viewpoint. Those that are interested in this theory are interested in making art that is about culturally based viewpoints. Formal components are important only as a vehicle for enhancing the message. Examples of Instrumental art include religious art, magazine and newspaper advertisements, TV commercials, propaganda (posters/flyers/pamphlets) and Feminist art (art about the elevation of women in society—not just art about women).

Multicultural

- Intent in artwork is to explore culture, including one's own. This philosophy offers a platform for interpreting and evaluating both explorations of culture in contemporary society and cultural objects, both past and present, from around the world. This theory can also be used to evaluate the incorporation of visual culture such as sports logos, advertisements and popular fast food logos. Investigation into multicultural art enhances understanding and acceptance of oneself and others and acknowledges the interconnectedness of human life.

Deconstruction

- Predicated on the idea that forms or images can be understood as signs indicating meaning. However, its intent is to separate the form/image from its accepted meaning and to challenge or undermine the inherent meaning in the image. It creates conflictuality which generates multiple meanings or no meaning. Ironically, as a result of taking apart meaning, new meaning is actually constructed which is often a reflection of current societal conditions.

APPENDIX D

HOW TO WRITE AN ARTIST STATEMENT ASSIGNMENT

HOW TO WRITE AN ARTIST STATEMENT ASSIGNMENT

What is an artist statement?

An artist statement is a short essay written by the artist that explains, justifies and contextualizes a body of work. Statements provide the unfamiliar audience an introduction to the artist's work. As important, the writing of can serve as a tool for the artist, helping them to unfold where his or her work comes from and where it might lead. Don't be surprised if you learn something about yourself through this process.

Your Assignment:

Type a half to one-page, single-spaced artist statement that describes your work and your intentions for making it. Drafts for you statement will be due on the designated critique dates where you will share them with your critique group. It might be a good idea to try it out on a couple of other folks first!

February 1st Draft I due
March 1 Draft 2 due
April 5 Final Draft due

Brainstorming:

Take five minutes and brainstorm as many descriptive words and phrases of your work as you can.

Central Questions:

People will read your statement to get answers to questions they might have. Take a moment in your sketchbook and answer possible questions:

1. What patterns emerge in your work? Conceptual? Formal? Technical/Media?

2. Is there symbolism that might be pointed out to the viewer in order to clarify intent?

3. From where do you find your inspiration?

4. Are there contemporary or historical images that influence your work?

5. What are your primary processes and medium and why do you choose these?

6. How does your choice of medium and process effect the content of your work?

7. What interests you formally? Line? Space? Form? Movement? Juxtaposition? Layering? Perspective? Scale? Repetition?

8. What do you want to elicit from the viewer? Emotionally? Intellectually?

9. What associations do you hope viewers make when viewing your work?

10. How would you contextualize your work in comparison to other historical time periods and situations?

No need to tell them everything. Keep some mystery open to interpretation.

A Statement Format:

Here is *one* format for an artist's statement. You are not obligated to use this style. There are many online examples that also provide strong formats. Just be sure to keep it short and clear. Avoid obscure references and art terms that the general public may not know. Write in first person only and most importantly, share your philosophy and passion in your art and what it means to you! (Pointers paraphrased from Savannah College of Art and Design)

Paragraph #1
In this introductory paragraph, give a general physical description of your work and its conceptual intent. What are the big ideas of your work?

Paragraph #2
In this first body paragraph, address where your inspiration comes from and your creative processing in coming up with the perfect idea. This is a good place to talk about historical and contemporary influences

Paragraph #3
This second body paragraph should further develop on what you touched on in your first paragraph. It is your opportunity to further develop different themes and bodies of work within your greater narrative as well as expanding on formal and technical attributes of the work You may chose to break this section into additional paragraphs if needed.

Paragraph #4
Your final paragraph is an optional summary or conclusion. In this paragraph, you might choose to revisit your main points in paragraph one and/or discuss any lingering points that were not addressed in the body.