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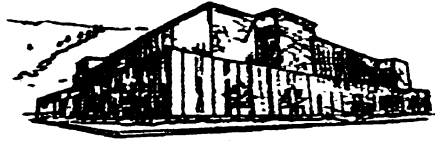
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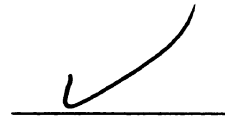
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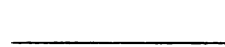
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**TIMELINE:**

**A SEQUENCE OF REMNANTS, FRAGMENTS AND MEMORIES**

By

Orville W. Chigbrow

B.A. University of Montana, 1974

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

May 2006

Approved by:

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Chairperson

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Timeline: A sequence of remnants, fragments and memories

Chairperson: Elizabeth Lo 

Serendipity can be a powerful component in a life. Along with conscious choices it can dramatically shape, or reshape, the experiences we cherish most in our life. Sometime during an introductory Anthropology class at the University of Montana in the early 1970's I woke up to the possibilities of culture and place and how they can define who we are collectively and personally. I didn't know how I was going to experience those possibilities but I knew that I desperately wanted the opportunity. Timeline represents those possibilities. It is a collection of sequential experiences gathered over the last twenty-five years while living as a foreigner in other cultures around the world.

I am fascinated by the connection between human actions and processes, the sometimes blurry line between past and present, serendipity and design, manmade structures that evolve from natural formations, permanence and transience, and the occasional dichotomy of memory and experience.

Timeline assimilates my memories of ancient ruins and architectural marvels; divergent cultures; the elegance of natural formations; forgotten relics; a near obsession with the ancient, the neglected and the forgotten; terrorism; bigotry; natural disasters; human cruelty and heroism; communication without a common language; and the effort of each culture I have lived with to preserve and remember the best of a time past.

When I revisit a memory or experience I see it as a complex interplay of color, surface, and emotion rather than a literal "picture" in my mind. This experiential image seems to fit the wall rather than a pedestal. My experiences, the "memories" represented in this exhibit, were not objects sitting placidly in place, but events that unfolded around me.

This thesis is grounded in physical places, both natural and man-made, and the cultural events that shaped them. I am not hiding the present in the past but I am using the past to introduce the possibility of a shared feeling, a shared experience.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Title Page</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>Table of contents</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>List of Images</b>	<b>v</b>
<b>Timeline: A sequence of remnants, fragments and memories</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Works Cited</b>	<b>22</b>

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost I would like to thank my mentor, Professor Beth Lo, for her wisdom, patience, guidance, gentle nudging, aesthetics, and for sharing her technical knowledge. I would also like to thank Professor Tom Rippon who first recognized my passion for clay and encouraged me to apply to graduate school, despite my lack of an art degree. If I grew as an artist on any given day it was because Alex, Hak Kyun, Ryan, Sarah, and Paul gave me their honesty, sincerity, kindness, support, and most of all their patience. And finally, without Mary Lou's faith and encouragement, I would not have started this journey. I could not have done this without her.

## **List of Images:**

1.	<b>Almost Saffron, 2006</b>	9
2.	<b>Ineffable, 2006</b>	10
3.	<b>Character, 2006</b>	12
4.	<b>Bazaar Bauble detail, 2006</b>	13
5.	<b>Bazaar Bauble detail, 2006</b>	13
6.	<b>Bazaar Bauble, 2006</b>	14
7.	<b>Pagan Landscape, 2005 - 2006</b>	15
8.	<b>Through Rose Colored Glasses, 2005</b>	16
9.	<b>Influences, 2006</b>	17
10.	<b>Timeline Detail, 2005 - 2006</b>	18
11.	<b>Timeline Detail, 2005 - 2006</b>	19
12.	<b>Blank Canvas, 2005 - 2006</b>	20

**“Thus art is not an object but experience.”<sup>1</sup>**

**Josef Albers**

**In its broadest sense a timeline represents events that appear to happen in a logical and linear sequence. They do not. Events outside of our immediate concern, and often beyond our control, frequently affect our very existence. History is portrayed as a spatial sequence of events and experiences. It describes who we are as a culture and as individuals. This thesis details some of the remnants, fragments and memories that make up my timeline. With hindsight, comes perspective.**

**To depict life you must first taste it. Before one can induce an emotion, one must first experience its nuances and flavors. Art, like life, thrives and evolves when stimulated by a strong emotional response. Making art with clay helps me to define my own history by association. It is the tool that I use to evoke a reality beyond clay’s obvious physicality. It is a means to elicit an emotional response from, and to engage, my viewer. My art begins with the memory and revisualization of an event or place that was imprinted on my mind. It has never been a literal transition from thought to object but rather one of playing with the clay, turning it over and over in my hands, smoothing some areas while imprinting others. It seems fitting that an emotion imprinted by something external so long ago is renewed by me imprinting on another malleable substance.**

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<sup>1</sup> Eva Richter and Alba Lorman, Bauhaus and Bauhaus People. (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1970) 186.



Clay is an inorganic substance that elicits very organic responses. It is a material with a long history of human use. Clay's geologic origins historically link the natural world with our cultural constructs. It is this connection between human action and natural processes, past and present, serendipity and design that intrigues me. I use texture and exposed surfaces to invite physical touch as well as to elicit a multiplicity of associated memories and emotions. Artifacts, symbols, marks, forgotten relics, organic forms and architecture are referenced in my work. Over time, they have coalesced into the quiet mental remnants that inhabit my memory and my art.

Art object or artifact; whichever it is, it can pique my imagination as well as delight my senses. Travel, natural formations and architecture, especially abandoned or neglected structures, are the inspiration and influence that shapes the physical form of my work. Art should evoke a simplicity of emotion that connects your past with your present. For me, this simplicity of emotion is a mix of memories that are remnants of my personal history. My memories, and my wall objects in this exhibition, are either about a specific event, experience or incident or they reference the ephemeral quality of the passage of time. These two concepts of time seem to come from two different parts of my brain. I see time in two distinctly different ways: experiential specific and conceptually encompassing. Perhaps they come from my natural impulse to abstract, to find the essential element of what I am seeing, to reduce a complex scene to its basic and most critical element. They all evolve from my study of anthropology, being a foreigner and living in sometimes-hostile countries around the world and from the vestiges that my mind chooses to assimilate.

Memories are simply remnants of our past, of my past. They are a kind of visual text that I can interpret within the context of my own perspective,<sup>2</sup> my own present. My memories are not limited to the images in my mind but include the cultural artifacts left behind as our civilization evolves. A memory is both a physical and mental entity. Wassily Kandinsky depicted objects in his drawings and paintings as if they were no more than ‘memories’ that provoked associations.<sup>3</sup> As I age my memory reshapes who I am, the persona I project. Things get lost and treasured memories become fragments. Linda Weintraub explored the incredible variety in which artists define themselves. She pointed out that the self is not static for either the viewer or the artist. Issues of realism and factuality are continually being reshaped and reassembled as lives evolve. In the quest for “self”, “... past experiences are being forgotten, altered, and embellished.”<sup>4</sup> My referents are part archeological, part mark making, and part architecture. The surfaces, like the self, are a construct; i.e., the sum of decisions and experiences and the resultant complex personality; a work in progress; a work with multiple layers.

Clive Bell believed the ideal art should not express the emotions of life but rather evoke a strong emotional response. The viewer subjectively responds to the artist’s manipulation of form, color, texture, and surface. The artist’s message need not be the same message perceived by the viewer. It is a delicate dance between maker and viewer. It’s a dance I try to lead, albeit subtly.

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<sup>2</sup> Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, Themes of Contemporary Art Visual Art after 1980 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 65.

<sup>3</sup> Magdalena Droste, bauhaus 1919 – 1933 (Germany: Bauhaus-Archiv Museum fur Bestaltung. klingelhoferstr, 1990) 67.

<sup>4</sup> Linda Weintraub, In the Making (New York: D.A.P./Distributed Art Publishers, Inc. , 2003) 195.

## **Influences**

My images, like my memory of their referents, have some Minimalist hard edges and stark lines. They also convey a Modernist's attraction to multiples and to an occasional nuance of line and form. They are not literal representations of the cultures with which I have lived. They are the result of the subtle influences that the cultures of Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Burma, Tunisia, the People's Republic of China, Germany and others have had on my soul and my aesthetics. Civil war, insurrection, terrorism, bigotry, monotheist dogma, natural disasters, human cruelty, individual heroism, kindnesses, art, customs, national treasures and national autocracy have all had a strong affect upon me. Most profound has been the almost universal effort to remember and preserve the best of a time past. By preserving the past we control—or think we control—our future.

Subtleties of texture, surface treatment and mark making are the “enticers” that bring the viewer in to touch, see, and feel. Texture, saturated color, and a layered surface can invite physical touch. I want others to touch these surfaces and discover that tiny jewel of a lost emotion that color and texture can elicit. Mark Rothko used paint to suggest a multiplicity of experiences—experiences of space, light and shadow for quiet contemplation that could not be paraphrased in words.<sup>5</sup> A layered surface treatment can demand a degree of visual intimacy, a closeness that can precipitate an emotional response. This response, however subtle, is the first and most important reaction I wish to elicit from a viewer.

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<sup>5</sup> Bernice Clearwater, Mark Rothko Works on Paper (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1984) 13.

Whenever I look for aesthetic rejuvenation I invariably turn to artists whose work stops me, both physically and mentally, and sets my mind wandering off to new connections. These truly unique artists imbue their respective works with a gentle voice and presence that are far grander than the mere the physicality of their works. A single work by any of these artists, regardless of its size, seems to own the space of its environment, regardless of its size. I am in their debt. I am drawn to ceramist Jun Kaneko's smaller pieces because they seem to occupy the same thought space as his Dangoes. A small object owning a very large space is no small feat. The tactile surfaces and spirituality of David Shaner's ceramic "cirques" seem calming when I need it most. His rich surfaces mirror sensuous curves that invite contemplation and touch. Steve Heinemann uses molds to transform thin sheets of clay into exquisite vessel forms that he enhances with subtle marks and rich surface treatments. The works of Wendell Castle and Hans Coper, woodworker and potter, are formally exquisite objects. Painters Ken Noland and Agnes Martin showed me the conceptually simple line, its infinite possibilities and variations and the power of multiples. My notion of 'a mark' changed dramatically and irrevocably after viewing works by these two artists.

The ancient and modern ceramics that I encountered in my travels also left a tremendous impression on me. Clay is the link between my fascination with ancient ruins, the lure of diverse cultures, the elegance of natural formations, and my fascination with modern expressionism. "We all tell stories which are versions of history – memorized, encapsulated, respectable, and safe. Real memory, ..., is an invocation of the color, smell, sound, and physical presence, the density and flow of life. Memory

allows an endless flow of connections<sup>6</sup> that revitalizes me and shapes, quite literally, my clay.

The images of ruins and the artifacts of the places I have visited are intrinsically intermixed with my own personal history. I was, and am, profoundly moved by the architecture I have seen: e.g., the magnificent buildings and facades carved into solid stone at Petra, fading murals of Pompeii, the perfectly preserved murals in the underground dwellings in Tunisia, the 2,200 Pagodas in Pagan, the terracotta soldiers at Xian, the tapestries of Nepal, the Nabataean Tombs meticulously chiseled out of a single large boulder, the abandoned fortresses in the deserts of Oman, the almost-biblical hilltop villages of Yemen, as well as the natural formations in Monument Valley, Utah, Sri Lanka, Saudi Arabia, and Burma. The images of these places, and others, are an integral part of my personal iconography and memory. It is this dichotomy between permanence and transience, nature and man-made that captivates me and fuels my imagery.

## **Process**

I am fascinated with the discarded, neglected, forgotten, worn, and fragmentary parts of our collective history, both physical and cultural. Ancient ruins erode and decay, much like the natural rock formations that comprised their building materials, evoking a feeling of nostalgia, neglect and mystery. In both, the layers of geologic strata present a record of continual change. My methodology of surface treatment forms a similar record, a narrative of neglect and creation. Character, Almost Saffron, and some of the Bazaar

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Weintraub, In the Making 205.

Baubles are built up with successive layers of terra sigillata. Before the layers, some mixed with mason stains, are completely dry I super heat them with a torch until the water in the sigillata boils—blowing part of the sigillata off the green ware like a miniature volcano. This eruption of the surface is uncontrollable and the results are often unpredictable. The end result is similar to what happens when time and weather erode and peel paint from old buildings or signs. The irony is that by forcing neglect upon my surfaces I create a record of change that is easily discernable.

Process, an inherent element in ceramics, is essential to the outcome of my imagery. Process implies a series of steps. A series of steps and fortuitous events led me to this point. Any event, the culmination of countless variables, is the sum of decisions and consequences that preceded that moment. The physicality of my art making is both a reductive and additive process, much the same way that nature forms her best work and my travels formed the way I view the world. Paper clay is an essential part of this process. I was introduced to paper clay about two years ago and have used nothing else since. The concept is absurdly simple: introduce paper fiber, e.g., cheap toilet paper, into your favorite clay body. Paper fiber makes the clay body less susceptible to blowing up in the bisque fire because the capillary action of the paper fibers allows steam to escape rather than erupt. I can attach wet paper clay to bone dry clay and it will fire as a solid piece. I use paper clay to repair, and add parts to, bisque ware; this is something I cannot do with any other clay body. Because terra sigillata conceals without obscuring the body underneath it is an important element of my work. My sigillata is usually three parts ball clay, two parts china clay, and a pinch or two of colemanite, ball milled

overnight to the consistency of yogurt and thinned as needed. The larger particles of the china clay and the minute amount of colemanite help bind it to green ware and bisque ware.

### **Passage of Time, Specific Memories**

I do revisit some of the traumatic events of my life but choose to depict the associated, and less threatening, events instead. In Sri Lanka a young soldier with an automatic weapon stopped my car and held me at gunpoint. He seemed to be 13 but was probably closer to 16. He was as scared and nervous as was I, maybe more. All I could see was a full magazine, a trembling finger, a scared young boy and a very large muzzle. There was a lot of sectarian violence going on at the time between Tamils and Singhalese and I was in an area in which the Sri Lankan government didn't want me. It was a little tense, very scary, and could have ended badly.

I was thinking about that event and the terrible ethnic violence surrounding it. I was also thinking about the sanctuary we gave to some of our Singhalese friends, and the Monkery that was next door to our house. The memory of those elegantly simple saffron robes, the tranquility of the Buddhist Monks and their black lacquered begging bowls always brings a certain calm to my thoughts. It is that tranquility that I tried to portray in Almost Saffron (see fig. 1). I remember sharing the bananas and mangoes from the trees in my yard as well as some cooked rice with the Monks next door. In return they gave me a glimpse of their lives. I can't ignore the violence still going on there but I try to

concentrate on the magnificent country that Sri Lanka is and the relationship we had with those Monks next door. We looked out for each other. They were terrific neighbors and, despite a language barrier, good friends. We communicated with hand gestures, food, and smiles. I try to downplay events like the confrontation with the soldier, to erode it, change it to something less benign. It was the first, but not the last, time I was held at gunpoint. Those Monks may have helped shape my journey in search of a simpler aesthetic, a journey I didn't know I was on until very recently. Almost Saffron is my memory of, and thanks to, the Monks in saffron robes and their begging bowls.



Fig 1. Almost Saffron

Ineffable (see fig. 2) emerged from memories of many trips to the Great Wall of China at Badaling. The sky was usually a little hazy but the half dozen mountain ranges stretching across the horizon and receding into the mists were visible more often than not. These ranges formed a series of jagged horizontal lines, each one more faint than the last.



It was a very quiet and mystical place, in spite of the noisy throngs of tourists and Chinese visiting the wall each time I was there. The wall and the distant hills shrouded in mist are in this piece. I have reduced the memory of numerous visits to the single image you see here, the solid impenetrable wall holding back the threats on the horizon. The Great Wall is obviously not flat but my memory combined the many trips to the wall and merged the Great Wall and the mountains together into a single plane, a single representation of a symbol, and a single moment in time.



Fig. 2. Ineffable

To my eye, the Chinese character is an elegant mark that represents an incredibly complex language and worldview. Character (see fig. 3) represents that simple complexity. The surface of each piece was layered with terra sigillata, partially scraped away, and then burnished. This process was repeated several times to achieve a depth of character and depth of surface. After the final layer of sigillata was applied and

burnished it was fired to temperature one final time. After bisque, a carnauba wax was applied. Character was then heated to 625 degrees Fahrenheit. This last process was repeated three times until the wax began to burn and get darker with the repeated exposure to heat. A final coat of wax was applied to protect the surface and provide a slight sheen.

Character began as an abstraction of a Chinese character. Somewhere between sketching and making it morphed, acquiring meanings and connotations I hadn't originally intended. It became anthropomorphic. Ceramists describe the component parts of a pot in human terms. Think about the "I'm a Little Teapot" song. A pot has a lip, neck, belly and foot. Terra sigillata, an extremely thin coating of fine-grained clay used to cover the pot, can be thought of as the skin of a pot. Terra sigillata doesn't obscure the details in the clay's surface; rather it simultaneously reveals and conceals. Character would like to think he has a tough skin but, as you can see, it is pretty thin. The body under that thin façade is a little rough in spots but enduring.



Fig 3. Character

Each Bazaar Bauble (see figs. 4, 5, and 6) represents the variations on a glaze or surface treatment that I have explored over the past 3 years. Each is meticulously covered with a veneer of color designed to catch your eye, invite inspection and touch, and make you smile. The effect isn't much different than that used with any kitschy item I have seen at a flea market, antique market, bazaar, middle eastern suq or carnival: underneath that shiny smooth exterior is common, durable material (i.e. clay), with surface treatments that are painstakingly designed, rendered and applied. When taken out of context they can be viewed as vignettes of color, surface, shape and form.





Fig 4. Bazaar Bauble detail



Fig 5. Bazaar Bauble detail



Fig. 6. Bazaar Bauble

Pagan, Burma is an incredible sight of over 2,200 Pagodas stretched across a lush jungle plain. It is a very peaceful and meditative site. Monks continuously try to restore the murals inside some of the pagodas. They do it quietly, with purpose, and with a profound sense of tradition. Restoration is spotty, dependent on the talent pool of the Monks that inhabit Pagan during any season. They do not accept money from tourists who happen to see them at work but gladly and humbly talk about the process, use of traditional materials and dyes and their duty to preserve their heritage. It is a place, and spirit, not easily forgotten. Pagan, in the more traditional meaning of the word, refers to a heathen or non-religious person. It is this contradiction that I find so fascinating and so far from the reality I saw and felt in the physical place of Pagan.

Pagan Landscape (see fig. 7) appears to recede into space as it stretches up the wall, an appearance that closely matches my memory of looking out over the plains surrounding Pagan and seeing the tops of the pagodas stretching up through the jungle canopy. Its



components are a patchwork of restoration mirroring the micro and macro views in Pagan.



Fig. 7. Pagan Landscape

Through Rose Colored Glasses (see fig. 8) is an accumulation of various washes, stains, and tints on a slab form that has been impressed and altered. It is painterly and somewhat architectural. It began as one of those moments when two distinctly different thoughts tried to occupy my brain at the same time: the natural formations in Arches National park and the abandoned forts I explored in the deserts of Saudi Arabia. It

became two fragmented memories that remade itself into a whole picture. This view suggests ephemeral images and thoughts rather than any recognizable image.



Fig. 8. Through Rose Colored Glasses

### **Passage of Time, an Ephemeral View**

Influences, Timeline and Blank Canvas reference the ephemeral quality of the passage of time rather than specific memory events.

The horizontal markings of Influences (see fig. 9) are the distinct events from my life, those essential elements taken from my personal Timeline. The plethora of experiences is reduced to their most basic and most critical elements. It is a vertical, compact and direct image equally as contemplative as the horizontal depiction of my lifeline (see figs 10 and 11).

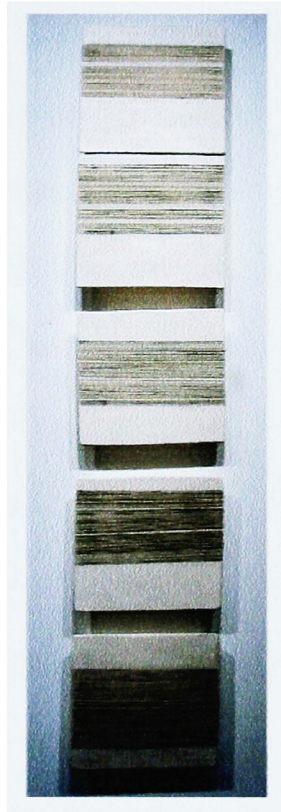


Fig. 9. Influences

The physical act of building Timeline mimicked the natural processes of buildup and erosion at sites I have visited in Jordan, Utah, Tunisia, Arizona, Sri Lanka and other places. Each piece of this image was initially formed over a block with horizontal cuts and gouges scored throughout its surface, much like layers of rock grinding over each other when tectonic plates shift. Each successive piece, each chunk of time, had additional memory marks scribed into its face. Bands of clay were compressed together, then scraped and eroded to form the sides. These forms, and the experiences from which they evolved, are revealed through process rather than by imitation.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Whitford, BAUHAUS (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1984) 91 - 92.



Timeline (see figs. 10 and 11) is inherently a contradiction. It is an attempt to put spatial order into a collection of disparate events and fragmented memories. There is a formal relationship between the similarities of surface, tone, and size of each component and the overall composition. Mark Rothko, by limiting his shapes and colors, intended to increase, not reduce, emotion in his paintings.<sup>8</sup> By imposing limitations on form and glaze, I paradoxically expanded my vocabulary. The contradiction of uniformity representing the (seemingly) random events that affected my life, the reformation of its component parts into a recognizable sequence, and the marks under their “skins” is ironically contemplative. Events, once past, can be rearranged and relived through associative links. Associative links are those sights, sounds, and smells that propel a forgotten moment into the now. By delineating the component parts of Timeline it is as if disparate events are truly connected and not just a set of lineal experiences.

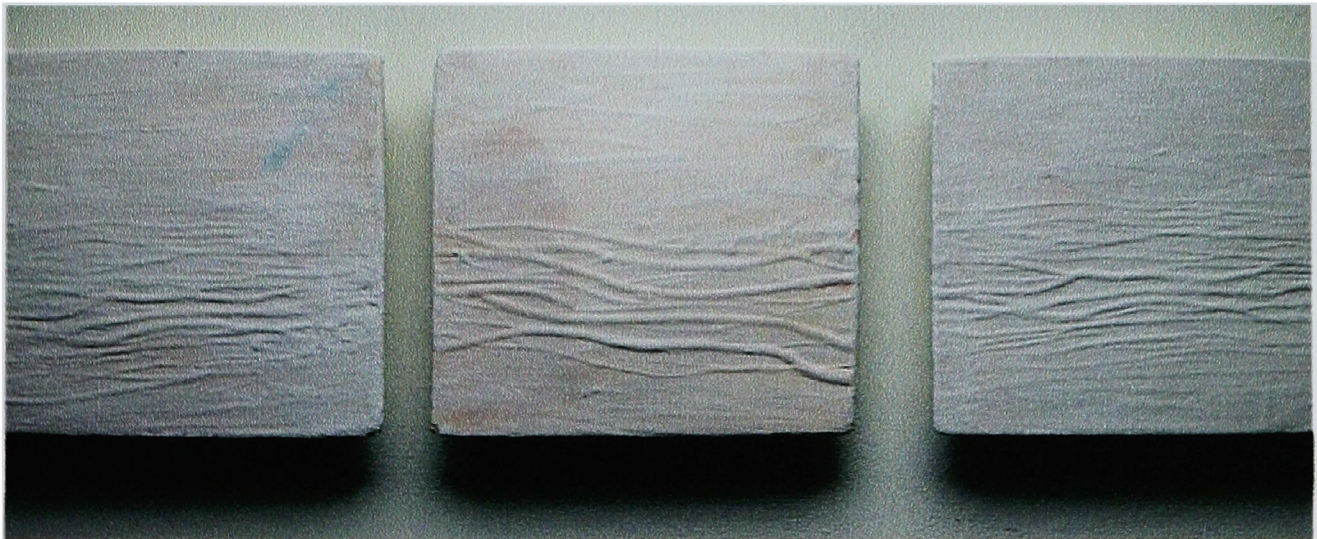


Fig. 10. Timeline detail

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<sup>8</sup> Klaus Ottmann, The Essential Rothko (New York: London: Harry N. Abrams, Inc. 2003) 66.

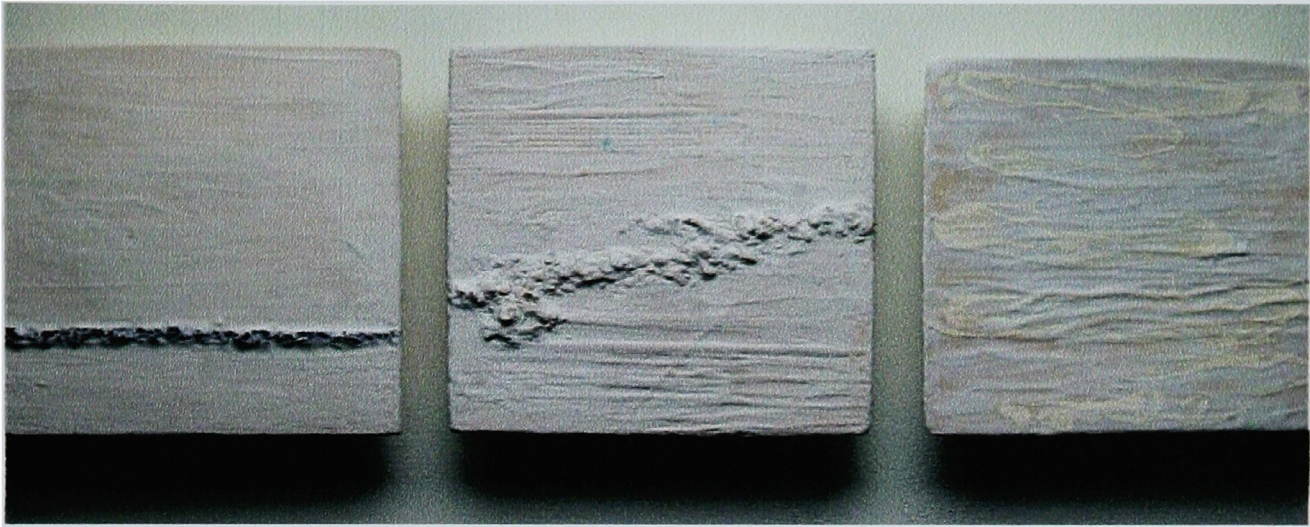


Fig 11. Timeline detail

Time, as we measure it is linear. We measure it in discrete moments but think of it as expandable or compressed. Time doesn't go by quickly when we are having fun or achingly slowly when we are not. Time is a constant; it is the experience of the moment that seems to happen slowly or quickly. We break up time into easily understood fragments. Each day is filled with opportunities to change the effect time has on our lives. We add minutes to our calling cards, time to our cell phone plan; our PDA arranges our days into neat fifteen minute segments, parking meters give us six minute chunks of anxiety, and for fifteen minutes in your life you might be famous. Timeline is intended to be broken up, rearranged, resequenced and reordered. Timeline is, simultaneously, individual parts and a totality. It is the dragon eating its own tail. It is sequential yet infinitely variable. It is a contradiction in terms.

Blank Canvas (see fig.12) provides an appropriate end to this dissertation. The initial concept was a portrait of myself when I returned to school. The major portion of this two-part piece is a little rough and experienced whereas the smaller portion is fairly



smooth and new; an allusion to my past military career and my new life as a student artist. This piece sat on my shelf, unfinished, for over a year. I thought that the new part of me would eventually dominate the past and its attendant experiences; that the new principal portion of my self-portrait would be as an artist. When I finally finished it I was a little surprised at the final outcome—there would be no artist without the past experiences; neither could erase nor dominate the other. It is a symbiosis with which I am at peace and that I have finally embraced.

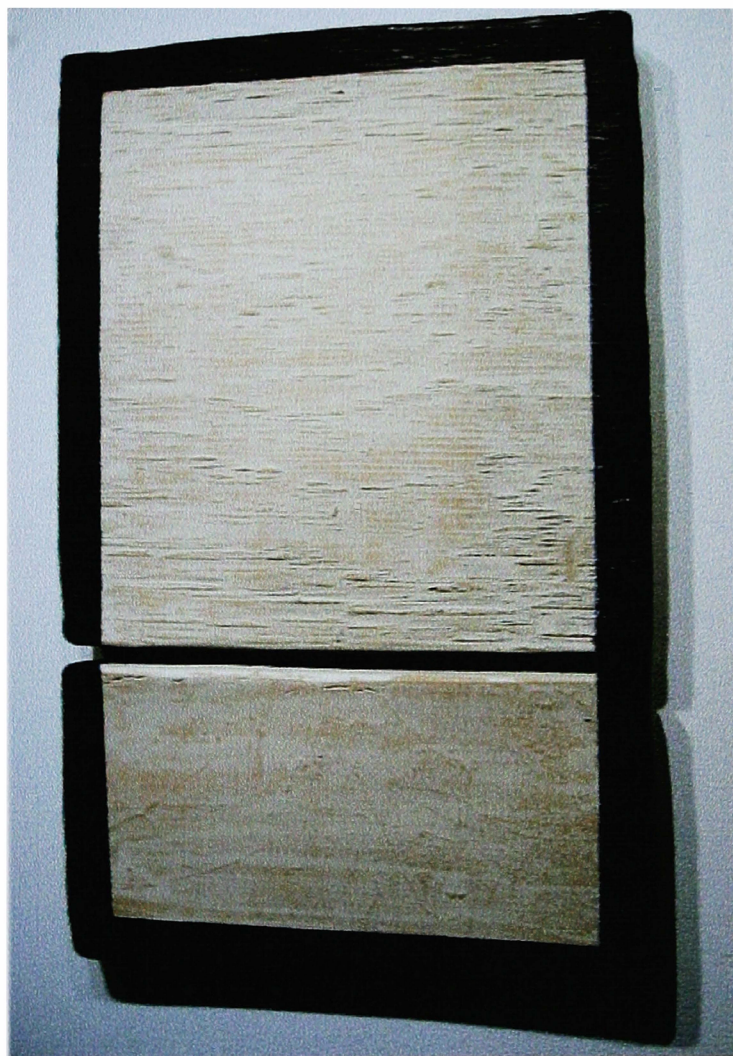


Fig 12. Blank Canvas

My work is grounded in physical places, both natural and man-made. From there it evolves through distillation of personal history, memory and place. I am not hiding the present in the past but I am using the past to introduce the possibility of a shared feeling, a shared experience.

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