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Thank You For Tody

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Syracuse University

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this thesis paper is to describe my current projects and research within my studio practice. First, this thesis illustrates my personal journey from addiction to recovery and therefore sets the tone of gratitude for the rest of the paper.

Next, the paper discusses my methodology and processes within the ceramics medium. Then, the thesis goes on to draw conceptual parallels between fine art and the culinary arts, leading the reader back to core concepts within recovery and art making.

Finally, the paper concludes by discussing core values discovered throughout my tenure as a maker and reaffirms why I chose this profession. It allows me to give.

Thank You For Today

By

Britton Matthew Thorp

B.F.A., Ohio University, 2008

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts.

Syracuse University

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The first thing I do upon waking is say “thank you.” I put on the coffee, go outside with my pup and greet the morning with meditation. I think about all the gifts I’ve been given and how far I’ve come. It wasn’t always this way, however. I used to wake up depressed and alone with only one thought ruling my mind, my next drink or drug. I would lie, steal and manipulate to get it, just to blot out the pain of existence.

I am a recovering alcoholic and addict; however, this does not encompass who I am. (Anonymous, 24) I am an artist, a chef, a musician. I am a loyal brother and son. I am a romantic, a dreamer, a maker. I am not one thing but many. I am so thankful for where I am today in contrast to where I used to be. This gratitude is the foundation of my art making practice, it is also the lens through which I choose to see the world. I shouldn’t even be here, even from the beginning.

I was born two months premature. I was so restless in the womb that I tied the umbilical cord around my neck and had to be delivered by emergency caesarean section. I was born three pounds five ounces and could fit in my dad’s hand. I spent the first month of my life in an incubator with a machine attached to my heart. From the very beginning, it was clear that if I wanted life, I would have to fight for it.

I’ve been shot at and stabbed. I’ve overdosed more times than I’d care to admit. I’ve struggled through the hallucinations, seizures and delirium tremens of withdrawal but, somehow, I’m still here. I’ve been through nine rehabs, five sober livings and twenty-four medical detoxes, but with all that, I could never seem to stay sober. Then something unexpected happened: my insurance dropped me. In so many words, I’d

just been going through too many recovery facilities. I didn't know it at the time, but this was the beginning of something new. Looking back now, I can realize that the rehabs were enabling me; they were my safety net. When life would get too hard, I would flee and the only way to get back to a rehab was to use again.

I burned everything to the ground one more time before I ended up at the last house on the block, a modest 3-bedroom house called the Unity House. It had room for twelve guys, but it was all filled up. It was January in Michigan and temperatures were below zero. They gave me a cot in the basement with some old blankets and laying there that night I broke down and cried. Not for sadness, or loneliness, or despair but for the first time because I was thankful. I had hope. I had nothing to my name except my backpack and guitar, but they took me in. I'm convinced if they hadn't shown me that act of kindness I'd be dead, if not from the cold, I would have drank myself to death that night.

I'm happy today to say I am 3 years sober. I take it one day at a time. I say thank you first thing in the morning, I work hard, trust the process, and I try to give to anyone I can. In the evening, I take inventory of my actions from the day and make adjustments and improvements accordingly. My process of making is an active meditation of gratitude; the work then becomes a gift to give, adding value to the lives of others.

Today I have a life far better than I could have ever dreamed. It is not perfect, but progress counts more than perfection. I have a roof over my head and food in the fridge. There was a time I couldn't say that. I have an awesome dog, good friends and I am part of my family's life again. Every morning, I get to come into the studio and

make. I get to do what I love every day. I make work to personalize and enhance everyday actions through functional, utilitarian wares. Whether it's the quiet morning cup of coffee or a dinner with friends, I want my artwork to enrich life. It is a conduit for celebration and connection.

I became enthralled with ceramics in high school, working diligently over the potter's wheel every day in pursuit of excellence. I had an incredible teacher who always encouraged me and pushed me to improve. It is because of her that I eventually chose to attend graduate school, so I might teach others what was so generously taught to me. I continued as a traditional potter for the next eight years until, in undergraduate studies, I found mold making and slip casting. This marked a profound shift in my studio practice. For the first time, I didn't have to start out with a round object.

The meticulous precision and order required in mold making spoke to me. (Martin, 12) There were no shortcuts and there was little room for improvisation. It gave my practice structure. When I teach my students, I relate mold making to baking instead of cooking. When one cooks, it can be rather organic. One can add a little of this and a little of that and it may turn out great. With baking (or mold making, in this case), winging it is almost surely a recipe for disaster. One must weigh the plaster and time the castings. Making molds rewards an attention to detail, which I have come to relish.

I began making my forms out of medium density fiberboard first. MDF is just sawdust and glue. It has no grain, so it sands beautifully. This material allowed me to achieve a cleanliness of line that I previously couldn't achieve with clay. My quest for refinement was underway and continues to this day. Using a precise geometric

language, I would design, cut, trace and stack each layer of MDF to swell gently upon a predetermined line. Initially, this language was influenced by fractals, the golden ratio and sacred geometry. Within the creation of art, math and order were the underlying forces driving the work. It was extremely satisfying to watch the silhouette take shape one layer at a time, as if the forms were growing on their own. Jokingly I would say, "It's like I'm making my own Legos," but that's how it felt. Within the rigid structure of the process, I found play.

Once the forms were stacked and glued to my satisfaction, I would sand them meticulously and seal them with a latex primer. This would conceal all evidence of the process, leaving the viewer with a sense of mystery as to how the objects were crafted. I would then carefully encase the forms in plaster to make a mold. Mold making is not a quick process, so I learned to lean into it and find satisfaction in its meditative process.

Recently, there has been a shift in the way that I create my mold making prototypes. I no longer cut and stack the MDF layers, or even work by hand. I design my forms on the computer first because I feel technology achieves the ultimate precision. The designs are then rendered into code and prepared for a 3D printer. They are printed in a plastic polymer, sealed, sanded and prepped for the mold. I often contemplate if I'm somehow losing some of the "handmade" by implementing these tools. Perhaps, but I'm realizing that refinement and precision are more important to me than making everything by hand.

When the molds are finished and dried, I carefully remove the prototype. Then I pour in a specialty liquid clay known as slip. When the slip sits in the plaster mold, the plaster slowly absorbs the water from it, turning the slip to solid clay. The longer the slip

sits in the mold, the thicker the clay wall becomes. Once I reach my desired thickness, I pour out the remaining slip, leaving myself with a hollow clay replica of the prototype.

(Martin, 28)

The clay forms go through an initial firing so that they become porous enough to accept a colored glass surface called glaze. (Britt, 22) I've spent over 15 years refining some of my glazes-testing, firing and adjusting. The amount of chemistry involved in successful glaze formulation is staggering. (Cushing, 14) However, glaze chemistry, like many other technically challenging aspects of the ceramic process, has grown to become one of my favorite parts of the process.

Once I have a glaze palette I'm happy with, I fire the wares in a Soda Kiln. This is something that very few do because of the technical challenges. In the most basic sense, a soda kiln marks the track of the flame as it rolls over the pots. (Olsen, 33) I describe it to my students as the way water flows through the rocks in a river, the result being a fluid gradient of gestural color, like the Aurora Borealis. This firing technique has captivated my interest for some time. I find there is a beautiful juxtaposition between the crisp, geometric lines of my pots and the untamed mark of the flame. The kiln allows me a chance to let go a bit and relinquish some control. It breathes life into the surfaces of the pots, making each plane and facet a microcosm and yet infinitely galactic. This place between order and chaos, between control and letting go, resonates deeply with me and echoes my personal search for balance.

Control is something I often contemplate. In active addiction I didn't have control over anything. I just bounced from one reactionary emotional response to the next. Everything was always someone else's fault and I never wasted an opportunity to play

the victim card. Today, I don't know if I have more control, but I can say I have more acceptance and that has led to a life that is more manageable. I have learned to manage my expectations both of myself and others.

Because of this, I have become less prone to anger, resentments and fear.

When I came to graduate school, there was definitely some apprehension, however. At six months sober, would I even be able to make work without alcohol and drugs? Would I enjoy it? Looking back now, I can say that those mountain top experiences fueled by substance weren't there, but neither were the valleys. I've learned that when I consistently show up, even when I don't feel like it, discoveries occur. Often, they manifest themselves in the most unlikely places, like failure.

I am no stranger to failure. In life and in artmaking it happens often. We all have a choice when it happens: either admit defeat and give up or choose to analyze why something didn't work and make the necessary adjustments. Ceramics as a discipline is riddled with failure. One must do a hundred things perfectly to arrive at a successful piece. Rarely does this occur, but hidden down deep within those miscues lies discovery, if one only has the tools to mine it. I've had pieces blow up, whole stacks of work tumble to the ground in a firing, glazes melt and crater. Many would call these failures, but had they not happened, I wouldn't have achieved the unique results that have led to new work. Thomas Edison said, "I have not failed 1,000 times. I have successfully discovered 1,000 ways to NOT make a light bulb."

In those rare moments that everything does fall into place and I end up with a fired piece that I'm satisfied with, I then consider how it will function in the world. How

will it add value? What exactly is that value? For me, the value lies within elevating and enhancing the simple act of refueling the body. We could so easily eat all of our meals off of paper plates and drink all of our beverages out of plastic cups. Many do, but this act often derives from convenience and affordability. My work stands in direct opposition to disposable culture. It advocates for slow time and asks for attention, not to itself necessarily, but to the moment. Occasionally this mindful shift happens, and the function of the work expands. In doing so, it becomes something else, something new, a catalyst for connection. It elegantly reacquaints us with our humanness.

This elegance is something I consider often while making. (Hickey, 27) I was raised in a blue-collar family. We had enough, but nothing extravagant. I grew up eating Midwest classics like tuna noodle casserole, chicken and dumplings and sausage, biscuits and gravy. I think it's safe to say that 30% of all dishes were comprised of Velveeta cheese. These are my roots and this is the food tradition I come from. Over the last ten years, however, in addition to being a potter, I worked as a chef in some renowned restaurants. The food I cooked was a far cry from the Midwest casserole. There was a disparity between the food I grew up on and the food I learned to cook in the professional kitchen. As a chef, I plated with tweezers, using foams and gastriques. The food and plating were very heavily influenced by French techniques. The dishes were beautiful and delicious, but as cliché as this may sound, they lacked the soul of my mom's chicken and dumplings.

Working as a chef in the restaurant industry has had a profound effect on my studio practice. In the culinary world, there is a term used quite often-Mise En Place, which directly translates to "put in place." Those familiar with it often think of it as simply

being set up for success; to have things prepared and organized in a manner which expedites service. While that is a core component of this philosophy, I would argue that it is much more than assembling ingredients, pots and pans, plates and serving pieces for a particular time. It is a state of mind. Someone who has truly grasped the concept is able to keep many tasks in mind simultaneously, weighing and assigning each its proper value and priority. This assures that a chef has anticipated and prepared for every situation that could logically occur during service.

When people visit my studio they often remark on how clean and orderly it is. I respond with a learned phrase: “work clean- work fast.” I guess old habits die hard. However, there must be more to an orderly system than just productivity. With Feng Shui for example, considered the art of placement, an object resides within the context of its environment and therefore affects the balance and harmony of the energies within the given space. Through thoughtful placement, a space can be arranged to evoke certain feelings. This sensibility is often employed in galleries but it is just as important in high end restaurants.

The restaurant is also known as the service industry. I find this interesting. As a chef I was able to hone my skills through repetition, the product being a dish that the guest would hopefully enjoy. The experience was layered, from the theatrics of the dining room, décor and place setting to the visual presentation of the food and ultimately the combination of flavors. Everything was considered and *served*. This is also how my ceramic work functions. I carefully design and craft the forms, considering every minute detail throughout the process of making. The work then reveals itself through function not only serving the user but allowing them to serve others.

Like those beautifully plated entrees, I don't ever want my work to become so technically driven that it loses its essence, its soul. I want it to be elegant but still be welcoming. Refinement and precision are noble pursuits in object making, but those alone can come off as cold and sterile. The way to reclaim a sense of warmth and utility is by allowing these forms to fulfill their function in the domestic space.

I realize that as a practicing artist, it is expected that work be shown in a gallery. This, however, is not the final destination of my wares. The pieces I craft are destined for the home. They are meant to be used and to reveal themselves through their function, allowing the user a moment to pause and appreciate intricacies of daily life. Whether it's a coffee mug, platter for a casserole, or flower vase, my work is made to give. In the same way that I consider the designs and surfaces of my work, I consider its role in the hands and lives of its future owners.

My sponsor once said, "Recovery is a debt that I will never be able to repay, but I'm sure as hell gonna try." I live my life today in service of others, because for so long I only served myself. It could be cooking for a friend, making a set of plates someone will use for a dinner party, or helping another struggling alcoholic who thinks he'll never make it. (Anonymous, 12)

Pottery has become another avenue through which I can give. Pots have always told stories, and through use and ritual they become important markers of time. Well-used pots show their beauty through scars and imperfections; they wear their experiences and hold memories, just like us. I love imagining the stories mine will tell.

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VITA

NAME OF AUTHOR: Britton Thorp

PLACE OF BIRTH: Sioux Falls, South Dakota

DATE OF BIRTH: June 29, 1984

GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE SCHOOLS ATTENDED:

Ohio University, Athens, Ohio

DEGREES AWARDED:

BFA in Ceramics, 2008, Ohio University

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

Professor of Record, Slip Casting and Mold Making, Syracuse University, Syracuse,
New York 2019 - Present