

Exploration Leading to Self-realization:

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Exploration:

What I find interesting about the process of exploration is the quality of not knowing. When I came to graduate school it was with the intent of keeping an open mind to the possibility of growing. I wanted to be able to take my art to new places. I feel that with the recent emphasis on trying new forms by removing the representational aspects of what I had previously been involved with, I've found a new vocabulary that resonates personally as well as in a wider sense. Though using very familiar materials the things I have made were not familiar, at least not at first. I've gone through a stage or period of anxiety regarding the products and process of this exploration. I think it is a natural part of the process to question what the results are. So I question the process and the product of the process.

Although there has been a progression of objects that started last semester with boxes I call ossuaries, those objects were based and created from a pre-existing concept or idea. The objects that have grown from them were vague and came from no preconceived idea when I started making them. I entered into this process with the mindset of taking risks and expecting failures in order to discover what might be more valuable in both my conceptual thinking and material use. To me, this value lies in growth as an artist with my work.

What I find interesting is the cube or cube-like simple shape. I like that it is static, and with the materials I've been using (concrete), a heavy form both visually and physically. It lends itself to being explored over and over in the vein of multiples; it's the same each time, yet different. Variation comes into play even if I use exactly the same materials in the same form (mold). The materials react differently each time; the aggregates settle a bit differently, the color is mottled in different ways,

the combinations and surface textures have infinite variety that can only be expanded on. I draw on Eva Hesse's statement about repetition when thinking of such things. "...it exaggerates. If something is meaningful, maybe it's more meaningful said ten times." ⁽¹⁾ The repetition of the forms I'm working with has been helpful when exploring new variations.

The continuation of working without pre-conceptions has opened me to the idea that the meaning of the work can be discovered in the process, or that the process can become the meaning of the work. For me now the physical act of making is conceptually what the work is about.

This experimentation with a repeated form led me to the way the objects interact with each other in different combinations or groupings. As individual pieces placed in conjunction with one another, a dialog or conversation was implied. As a grouping, they move from being individuals to being a community. When stacked or combined as elements that comprise a taller piece, the conversation begins to move from the objects alone to a dialog that includes the viewer. When building with them in this way, by moving up in space as opposed to addressing only the floor level, they mimic human stature, rising vertically as we do. By combining the objects and making a larger work from components, I get more of a presence from the materials than I would have if I left them as solitary objects. In the same way that humans become more when living in a community the blocks become more as they are used in conjunction with each other. As building blocks being stacked, when we see this we also must consider the process involved in the making of them.

They become building blocks of new and larger forms, flexible in what can be done with them. Only after the materials solidify can they then

be combined to create the final form. By building upward with the forms they are able to become human in scale, this one to one relationship with the viewer creates a personal dialog. On this level these works are referencing and referring to figurative works, or addressing the human condition.

I find personal enjoyment in the raw materials I've been using; the concrete and the logs project a visual strength that is felt as much as seen. I look forward to experimenting with similar materials in the future to further explore these qualities.

Ownership comes when using materials in a consistent manner. In my case the more I use concrete, the greater my understanding of what can and cannot be manipulated, sometimes the materials dictate what is made. This is another part of the process of exploration. Questions get answered as the process advances. What size I can make with it? How large is too large to handle without special equipment? What are its weaknesses and strengths? How thin can it be before it fails? What are the surface qualities that come from addition of various inclusions?

I have used both concrete and wood as materials in the past, both reference art making and construction in my life. In addition to these materials, the aggregate of every piece has inclusions of natural materials, grass clippings, pine needles, and other various types of plant material from the domestic activities of my life. These materials, conceptual references carried over from a previous idea, were originally meant to be vehicles of memories and experiences that had been part of my past. As an exploratory device and an experiment I retained them when I changed direction; this adds texture to the materials in interesting ways. They also work in a secondary manner in that they act as a binder for the concrete.

The exploration of color in these works is ongoing. There have been successes and failures in this line of inquiry. I think color is extremely important, it has the ability to touch the viewer emotionally. The gray of the raw concrete elicits memories from almost everyone; we have all experienced it, without exception. It can be a forbidding material, institutional or governmental in its drabness. Rarely is it an inviting material color wise. The gray of the concrete suppresses efforts at coloration.

At the moment, it is important to me to keep the basic building block form simple as I explore how they combine to create larger forms. The blocks you find in building supply stores are referenced in this way, cinder blocks and bricks are uniform in size and shape so they can be used to build. The cubic foot appeals to me because it is a basic standard of measurement for volume and mass as does the square foot and its references to area. These shapes are refined to reflect the essence of basic geometry. I find they are very human because they don't exist in nature. Measurement of things is a human activity.

Mass, sections, surface and plane:

The six-sided form has its restrictions due to the shape and the material I've chosen to work with. I do find interesting the plane of each side, the wood that has been sectioned and imbedded in the form doesn't change the plane of the shape but becomes one with it and only gives it more visual activity. These sections hint at the interior of the cube or perhaps some meaning contained within. The shape lends itself to a solidity that conforms to the mass of the material, an example of the materials leading to, or dictating the form. Presently the process is predisposed toward a combination of sizes in ascending and descending increments.

Process:

Once the molds are constructed the mixing of the concrete is standardized, inclusion of other materials is more intuitive in terms of what is added into the mix and how much. I find the process of making the objects, the physical exertion of it. I mix in a wheelbarrow with hand tools. Hundreds of pounds of materials are stirred and combined. I was asked at one point why I didn't use a powered mixer and after thinking about it realized that it wouldn't feel right to do so, that I wanted the physical connection with the material and the exertion of doing it by hand. The repetitive motion of mixing speaks to the drudgery of manual labor; this is also reflected in the repetition of the forms at the end of the process. Just because the physical labor is an identifier doesn't mean that it is a pleasurable experience. Although like most people, I feel there is a certain satisfaction to having done a job well. This feeling of accomplishment is in part due to the resistance of the materials being used, the resistance being overcome.

The hands-on control of the material seems to bring me closer to the objects I create. I like having a personal connection to the objects. So part of the explorative process has become one of the activity of making. This physical activity is manifested in the work via the textures and the trowel marks. Further marks of labor are the gashes and cuts on the ends of the logs. These marks show my presence and the exertion of making. The uneven settling of materials shows more of a hand being involved than a machine. This is not to say that a machine cannot be used to produce approximately the same thing, or perhaps that one will not be involved in a future incarnation of these objects. At present though the more fulfilling method of making them is by hand.

Development:

What was a box has developed into a solid form, the cavity of the container transformed, the materials that filled it combined with the aggregate, becoming one with it. There is no cavity; there is no lid, only the compact solid of the form. The form is still a container, it still holds the materials but now they are inaccessible. This might change in the future, other materials may be added or take the place of present materials, altering the conceptual meaning with each difference.

What were branches and logs buried entirely in the form has changed into the aggressive pushing of these out into space. Orientating the logs horizontally takes them from the recognizable into the foreign for the viewer. Possible changes over time with these may include additions or further chopping or gouging.

What was a thought process based on depicting an idea became a process of activity (or a process of action) that revealed a deeper, unconscious, understanding. Parts of the past conceptual ideas about experiences are carried forward in that understanding, just as the materials and objects retain some of their original characteristics. I look forward to exploring the process further.

Practice:

These pieces embody and are defined by the process of their making as much as by the materials that they are made from. For me what this means is that physical exertion in part defines me as the maker. This is what has become my practice.

Self-Realization:

Ultimately what is made reflects the maker. Two themes emerge for me concerning these pieces, one is Work or Labor, and the second is Gender

identity. The idea that a man works hard is ingrained into me, so the two things are entwined.

You don't hear much about being male or what it means to be male in our society. In part this is what these works are about. How do men define themselves in a world that increasingly has no or little need for the types of labor that needed, for lack of a better term: brute strength. In our current society it is an old fashioned idea that you use muscle to do things. Our current world is computerized and mechanized to remove the sorts of effort I am addressing with my work. We have lost something with our conveniences; it feels good to do it by hand! These works brought me to a personal understanding but I think they also speak to a wider sense of a mans role in the world, the honorable hard working ideas of masculinity that were once respected. To me the work I'm making show the effort and strength involved in the making.

As a person that really had very little in the way of male role models in the home (the ones that were around were not what would be called: positive role models), I had to invent what it meant to me to be a man, or perhaps my idea of a good man. The few positive traits of the role models I had as a child were that they all had very hard jobs, railroad (Grandfather), truck driver (Father), boilermaker/welder (Step Father), these are difficult and somewhat dangerous jobs, jobs that are strenuous and demand physical strength.

I associate working hard with being a man; for me, the physical exertion of work places me in line with the paternal lineage of my family; this is embodied in the activity and the product of making the concrete objects.

The protruding logs are further examples of hard work or labor; they come from a tree in my backyard, a tree that was damaged and had to be cut down. Normally a big project, I cut it down on my own, over a course of weeks, the hacking and cut marks on the ends of the pieces showing the effort.

The aggregate materials that I've been using in other pieces to reference memories and experiences are products of my labor. Domestic in nature instead of industrial but labor all the same. I use the detritus of yard work to obtain these, grass clippings, leaves, vines, pine needles; all become examples of work/labor and the triggers of memory. These activities reinforce my gender identity. These domestic chores, along with the felling of the tree, define my role as a man in my family group and in our contemporary society.

Place:

I see my work out in the world, I have been inspired by the work of Antony Gormley, in "Inside Australia" 2002/2003, his use of the figure to relate to the expanse of hundreds of miles of salt flat is the type of interaction I am interested in. Although most of his work is of human scale, it still deals with the world in a global relationship.

I would like to see my work outside, in the larger sense of being part of the world. Scale (either by enlarging the current forms or increasing their quantity) will be of consideration as well as incorporating the specific environment where a piece would be located. I think that an urban setting where the works would play off of the buildings would be interesting.

The connection of my work with the planet is specific and I feel part of world when I walk. When I place my foot down on the ground, I connect

not only with that specific spot, but also with the entirety of the planet. Our placement of ourselves in relation to the placement of other persons, or other things, is the conversation of the human race. Our placement of objects, large or small, is a continuation of this conversation, or dialog, between members of our species. All of our actions, all of our expressed thoughts, reside and reverberate in the public realm of our society. In a way I think this connection through place is similar to the works of Richard Long with his walking pieces, such as, "A Five Day Walk" 1980, where he touches on interacting with the world.

Audience:

I hope that the majority of people that come into contact with the things I have made can in one manner or another relate to it.

The Working class: Since the pieces are directly informed by the labors of my working class up bringing, it is my hope that people of a similar back ground can find something that speaks to them. With the use of these materials, everyone has some sort of experience with these pieces.

The College educated: I hope that aesthetically and conceptually those educated in the arts can appreciate the works and what they talk about.

And Myself: I am my audience too; these works have to please me and fulfill me as an artist, as a person, and as worker.

These pieces engage the viewer on a physical level. All senses should be present, sight being the most obvious, but I think they are touch-able too. Due to the natural fibers imbedded in them they engage the

olfactory sense. There is no sound, nor taste included as of yet. Perhaps that is in the future.

Influences:

These people and things have informed my work. I feel it would be impossible to define what each person or cultural influence contributed to the person I am or the art I make. I do believe that everything affects a person in one way or another and you make decisions based on those effects. The Zen Buddhist saying for this is “cause and effect are one”.

Eve Hesse, for her experimentation and her multiples.

Constantin Brancusi, for his endless column.

Man Ray, for his use of everyday objects transformed.

Ursula Von Rydinsvard, for the activity of her mark making.

Anthony Gormley, for his use of the planet.

Army Corp of Engineers, for trying and failing to hold back nature.

Andy Goldsworthy, for his architectural works in nature.

Carl Jung, for theories of unconscious motivations.

Joseph Campbell, for his theories of myths and mans motivations.

Martin Puryear, for his use of scale and self-reflection.

Summary/Conclusion:

Exploration has been invaluable in the creation of my current work; I intend to continue pushing the forms as well as the materials in order to achieve more interesting works with deeper meaning. The ideas of self-realization may or may not be what is arrived at with any work in the

future, perhaps there are other discoveries waiting for me. More forms of various types are possible. More experimentation with building materials is appealing to me. Society and the things we use to build our world are open to being explored with these types of investigations.

Works Cited:

- (1) Nemser, Cindy. "Interview with Eva Hesse" *Art Forum*, New York, vol. 7, no. 9, May 1970, pp. 59-63, Print