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SUBDUER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MFA in
Ceramics at Virginia Commonwealth University.

By

LAUREN BROOKE MILLER

The University of New Mexico, MFA (transfer) 3D studio 2010-2011
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Abstract

SUBDUER

By Lauren Brooke Miller, MFA

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Virginia Commonwealth University, 2013

Major Director: Andrea Keys Connell
Assistant Professor, Clay

By reclaiming and translating the use of material in my work, I speak of oneness on a basic physical level. As the body in the images slips in and out of focus in abstraction of material, the objects patiently wait to be interjected into the composition of the space as a whole.

{CHAPTER 1 PREFACE}

My journey through graduate school has been one of unexpected personal and academic growth. At the beginning of this endeavor, I did not understand all the transitions and perseverance I would experience. A desire to educate myself has always been a directing influence in my life, and earning a masters degree has been a personal goal since I was a child. My artistic practice has long been a method for sifting through the emotional attachment of my “forgotten” memories. Despite the far-reaching nature of my artistic practice and its wide canon of influences, the cohesive bond of art, acting as both a personal cathartic release and an enlightening intellectual quandary, has held my practice together. Before entering Graduate school, I did not know how it would change me as an individual, and how much I needed to understand the connection between my artistic practice and my Self. Containment has long been a theme within my work, and the reason I work is to understand my own boundaries, my own containment. After struggling to define my work beyond “being intuitive”, I realized that the process of compartmentalizing my memories led to the non-verbal expression that has generated the abstractions of body and landscape within my work. I now realize the content of my work was generating from my subconscious; I didn’t want to dig very deeply within my Self. My graduate school experience has been an excavation of Self that I needed, in order to continue my life and practice beyond academia.

{CHAPTER 1: PHYSICAL TRANSITIONS}

My first 29 years of life were spent in Columbus, Ohio. I must say that I was always ready to move from that familiar, flat, and very urban environment. Chicago had been the farthest west I had ever traveled when I packed up my belongings in a van and moved to Albuquerque, New Mexico. This radical exposure to a completely new landscape and culture was an invigorating shock for me. The raw, rugged landscape keyed into my interest in the lines of the human body. Yet at the same time I felt that this same landscape devoured me. I was overwhelmed and visually over stimulated. The particulars of that landscape pulled into question my own physical vulnerability, as I had never before felt so diminutive. I was accustomed to the shade of green trees and tall buildings surrounding me. This change in my environment stimulated the research that fed my studio practice, and this interest has continued since I moved to Virginia.

My move to graduate school in Virginia provided another change of location. I immediately felt comfortable here, and am still in awe of the landscape that surrounds me. Virginia is a very diverse state housing 5 ecosystems within its borders in a close comparison to New Mexico's boasts of 7 ecosystems. The lush green was so familiar to home state, yet magnified by the warmer, moister atmosphere.

Another important focus of my research has been in taking note of aspects of my corporeal self: "This Body". My interest became manifest in a bodily presence in my work and in an awareness of the physicality of working with clay. Clay as a material can be seen as analogous, the flesh of "The Body". I have long been interested in the connection

of mining clay from the same earth that our bodies will one day return to. My studio practice interests can be seen through the lenses of the earth, the body and the vessel. The inherent tactility of clay lends itself to this interpretation. The beauty found in the imperfections of the human body mirror characteristics of clay processes. Gravity of heavy wet clay inducing a fold while hand building becomes part of the structure. Each sag becoming part of the overall form while building. Working specifically with clay, I find myself needing to maintain a level of physical strength. Becoming more aware and acting kinder to my body has also fed my work conceptually.

{CHAPTER 2: MENTAL TRANSITIONS}

On entering my MFA studies, I was quite naïve, but I learned to embrace these naiveties and to challenge myself regularly throughout my candidacy. I have been intensely interested in developing my own working philosophy. I have become a curious seeker by absorbing art, theory, critique and popular culture, past and present. I pursued two different presentations at the NCECA (National Council of Educators in the Ceramic Arts), which developed my own voice. My work draws from my experience. At the beginning of my graduate studies at VCUarts I recognized the need to overcome the intense stage fright I always experienced when presenting my work or interests in public. In the interest of challenging my fears of public presentation, in 2011 I applied for NCECA's Student Perspectives talks with a proposal outlining my theories about the categorizations within the field of Ceramics. NCECA accepted my proposal for the 2012 conference and I began working on my first public presentation. The process of conducting careful research, writing a presentation, and clearly expressing my ideas and opinions carried a steep learning curve. The first presentation was moderately successful, so I decided to try again, and was selected to give a second presentation at the 2013 NCECA conference. Although these self-directed assignments have been challenging, I am grateful for this opportunity to cultivate a personal opinion through deep contemplation over the many similarities and important differences regarding Sculpture and Ceramics. It also was an excellent opportunity to reduce my stage fright and gain professional experience.

Through extensive research, I have also gained an expanded knowledge of Ceramic history and it's deep roots in culture. Technically and expressively, my previous experience with clay was always quite loose and sporadic. Focusing on developing my own vocabulary of manipulation has been imperative to my growth as a maker. I have strengthened my studio practice by expending enormous amounts of time and energy focusing on enhancing my technical skills in handbuilding and wheel throwing techniques. Along with building my conceptual and skill based practice I decided to seriously consider my aesthetics. I have been working to tie a more primitive, analog way of making with a crisp, clean, and contemporary presentation.

{CHAPTER 3: EMOTIONAL TRANSITIONS}

When I first began studying with my lead professor Andrea Keys Connell we had a difficult yet ultimately revealing conversation about the intention of my work. I referred to the intentions as intuitive, and thus began a long and difficult breaking away into beginning to understand the content of my work.

I have had a deeply felt sense of emotional isolation for most of my life. This underlying anxiety had fed most of my early work, until recently when I actually became a physical presence in the work. Early in my undergraduate education a professor suggested I explore performance art, as it would bind me to the work more. My thesis work is a culmination of this journey of growth. I am hoping that by allowing my vulnerability to be seen, and through my willingness to open myself up to my inner craftswoman, I will have the courage to allow myself to be seen as imperfect, and no longer emotionally isolated.

The memories I tap into through the work come directly from specific points in my personal history. These residual effects of my family dynamics have left an indelible mark on all of my subsequent relationships. With a complicated family history of mental illness, addiction, and domestic abuse I have worked hard at rising out of the deep-seated shame I was born into, and have emerged as a healthy and whole person. This quiet sense of containment or proverbial covering has hovered above my personal life and dramatically influenced my work.

{CHAPTER 4: THE 1ST GO, NEW MEXICO}



Although I am graduating from Virginia Commonwealth University, my graduate journey did not start in Virginia. In the winter of 2009 I graduated from the undergraduate program at The Ohio State University with a BFA in Ceramics. Moving forward to a graduate program was my next goal. I wanted to combine my desire to leave my hometown and to experience a completely different landscape and culture. This inspired me to apply to the program at The University of New Mexico. My subsequent re-applying to graduate schools while still enrolled in a graduate program was a difficult choice, but one I am ultimately glad that I made. I now know without a doubt that this time has been extremely influential to my development as an artist and thinker.

Although I came from a superb undergraduate program, I was not personally prepared for the level of art conversation found in graduate art programs. Much of my work has been personally cathartic in its making process, and the heightened theoretical questioning and subsequent lack of fluency in the artistic discourse made me feel as though I was out of my league. I believe much of life is serendipitous, but I had no idea at the time the impact the faculty at UNM would ultimately have on me. The hiring of the infamous Dave Hickey and his wife Libby Lumpkin highlighted this. In my first semester in New Mexico I took Libby Lumpkin's Contemporary Art History class and had the pleasure of having

her participate in my first committee meeting in graduate school. In my second semester I took Dave Hickey's History of Critique class, and he participated in my second graduate committee meeting. At the time I was taking classes in the sculpture department, yet I was also becoming closely aligned with the Arita style potters. At the time I could not see the influences of all these encounters, but they were indeed influential.

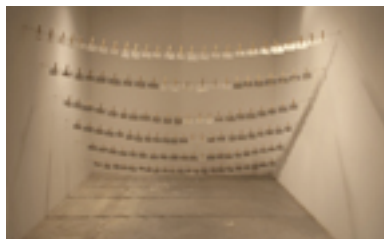
Upon entering graduate school I worked with clay in a very minimal way, forgoing a traditional ceramic practice. This was also the time in which I began to flirt with alternate materials and processes. At the time I was exploring working with grenades handmade in various scales and materials. I was experimenting with various molds and casting materials. I was staging performative situations while experimenting with installation. A memorable comment made by Dave Hickey during my 2nd committee meeting, supporting making objects that seem to “jiggle” through their materiality or content. This correctly describes the kind of subtle movement I was aspiring towards with my objects.

{CHAPTER 5: VCUARTS}



In [Closure] was the first piece I made at VCU. In many ways I came to graduate school both feeling full of myself with Dave Hickey’s approval of my work in New Mexico and like any double edged sword terrified everyone would see into my work as Dave Hickey had, and say that it was “all about sex”. This was terrifying. As a self subscribed contained person who has tried to separate my work from my life, this would certainly not be what I wanted my elite mentors and my classmates to know about me. The subsequent impulse to alter my voice colored much of my first year at VCUarts. In [Closure] was made by making raw clay environments inside a glass dome. I had begun experimenting with in raw clay projects in New Mexico. Moving from the arid environment of NM into a

familiarly moist environment of Virginia supported my interest in growing material on the damp unfired clay within the vitrine's setting.



“A Single Line” began while I was considering how minimally I could work with clay and still produce an object. I also saw this project as material research into working with the fragility of porcelain. I ultimately chose to use a mini extruder to produce a line of clay on a folded section of tulle that could be hung on a line of twine with a wood clothespin. Once I understood this process I could quickly work to produce a line drawing that could then be folded within a portion of the tulle, hung, and then manipulated into an “object”.



Emptiness is Form came from an interest in the natural plasticity found in clay. I have always been interested in movement being expressed through material.

One of my meanderings in graduate school was into the Glass hot shop. I am interested in art possessing a presence of movement, a connection to dance or a life force. I had long been interested in spending some time in the glass shop, as it was the last stop on my craft material pilgrimage. Ultimately what I learned from attempting to work with glass is one

must have the ability to hold and maintain a prolonged focus, and I developed a deep respect for the discipline. This understanding that craft and the making of a proper vessel comes from time and energy invested in understanding process, and that you must love your medium enough to see it clearly through all steps of the process.



HandTools is a series of objects I made during the semester when I was working with glass. At the time I was trying to come back to clay after a long time of not using any traditional ceramic building techniques. I had always been rough with clay, building rather freely. This was counter balanced by an awareness of what the process of working with clay is. I love clay. Clay holds an innate physical connection to the human body. Culture has been sustained itself using handmade clay vessels, and celebrated and memorialized using clay to create monuments that can endure through time, past our own bodies. I am not so much in love with the practicality of ceramics: the science & chemistry of it or even until recently technique. It is a necessity to working with the medium. This is a realization that surprised me even after having worked to earn a BFA in Ceramics. I never truly questioned why I was in the ceramics area even though I have had serious objections to its sub-categories. My subsequent works in graduate school were at least partially coil built,

and HandTools was an important beginning step towards my having hand built objects find their way back into my studio practice. I was interested in making tools that would ultimately be used in transplanting plants for my candidacy show's main outdoor installation. The tools were shown in the gallery as physical residue and as a connection to the outdoor installation. I left the handles raw fired clay to increase their tactile connection to earth. This baring of clay through surface treatment is a reoccurring aesthetic theme in my work. The vessels still being recognized as ceramics is the intention.



CyclicGrowth was the main piece in my candidacy project. This was a multi faceted installation and an interactive piece. In some ways the layered details seemed to confuse the intention of the piece. Much was lost unless I was present to talk to the viewer or if they read the description of the work. I had an interest in creating an outdoor installation consisting of raw clay vessels, which would contain edible plants. The idea of life growing from decay has been a touchstone in my work for some time. I had contacted a local small scale Forrest Green Farm in Louisa, VA to help me select and obtain plant starts for the project. The space where I planned to install the work had been neglected, and had a pile started as a compost bin. All of this needed to be removed for the project. I worked with a

local landscaper to mulch the organic compost found in the space and re-purpose it as filler for the hand dug trench path that surrounded the installation.

This was an important piece in my series of experiments, and another personal hardship I experienced during my graduate studies. This piece helped me to understand how my personal life was directly influencing my studio practice. In November of the previous semester I had learned that my mother was fighting stage 2-lung cancer. At that time I was at the height of self-confidence, and this news certainly dampened my swagger. I had planned a challenging spring semester, and it nearly ate me alive. Much of my candidacy semester was spent thinking about whether there was value in academia compared to the importance of personal and familial relationships in my life. I was constantly questioning myself for staying to complete the semester and for choosing not to go home to help my mother, as it was a chance to perhaps soothe a fragmented relationship between us. I was also struggling with my interpersonal relationships in the studio. I was having a difficult time actually being in my studio, which led to my building a “safe haven”, perhaps posed as an art installation. The difficulty I was having in my personal life and my studio practice would ultimately reveal itself through important lessons.



In many ways “CyclicGrowth” was a successful piece for me, although it was not received as such within my academic circle. It required my writing my first proposal to a gallery to garner permission to use an alternate space outside. This extra step required building relationships with organizers at the space, and this form of relationship building is important in my practice. One of my interests in using this space was to bring attention to a quiet, forgotten area owned by the Visual Art Center. This was its greatest success, as my installation invigorated interest in using this space. Through aspects of the personal successes raised in this piece many questions were raised as well. Working in an outdoor space is an entirely different experience than working in the neutral white space of the gallery. Much of the installation ended up feeling confined, or small. Although there were no architectural boundaries found in a traditional gallery space, I had created an enclosed feeling in the outdoor space by enclosing the installation with the circling trench. The hand dug path surrounding the six raw clay vessels and the center monument contained the space in a way that I could not possibly have recognized until the piece was complete. The line or boundary created by the path managed to enclose the installation even in its outdoor space.

Pottery had never been an interest of mine until I began graduate school. Slowly the vessel has become more and more important to me as a maker. Realizing how weak my technical ability was within traditional ceramic processes I began the long road to becoming comfortable using the potter’s wheel. The Bowl became the focus of my interest. Realizing I had a strong sculptural impulse towards enclosed forms I wanted to focus on making an open vessel. I had also come to understand that I wanted to focus on

creating a framework of discipline in my practice. Over the summer between my first and second years of school at VCU I began to throw bowls, which I would ultimately and rather excitedly gift to classmates and my mentors. This made me realize that one aspect of my practice, which had been missing, was giving. Being open enough to give something to a potential audience has changed how I look at the functional object. The simple yet intricate way of producing a bowl mesmerized me until recently when I had to put production on hold to focus on my thesis project.

I began making a new piece in my studio right after finishing “CyclicGrowth”. “Succulents” was the first planter in a series of life vessels that I have been producing. This interest in giving a living plant a home in an ornate bodily vessel continues today.



When I started graduate school I thought of myself as a self-described rebel in ceramics. I was always joking about making conceptual vessels before I had any understanding of the history involved with such pursuits. I had always said that technique was not important to me, that I was loose for a specific reason. I loved clay, but not necessarily the craft of it. What I have come to understand is that I do love clay, but I as well still need the craft of it to be successful with realizing my imagery. Making the series “Stacks”, challenged me both technically and conceptually. I have been utilizing traditional handbuilding

techniques in the studio in conjunction with my performative interactions. I have been experimenting with and documenting throughout my second year of graduate school at VCUarts. Learning how to construct these stacked forms and realizing what intimate involvement of hand processes has brought to the work has been an important part of expanding my experience.

{CHAPTER 6: PROJECT: EMBODIMENT}

The desire to experience initiates my artistic process, and the physicality of Making propels my work. My work has opened memories, inspired self-reflection, and served as a response to nearly forgotten memories. At the beginning of my second year of graduate school, I embarked on a new journey within my art practice by starting Project: Embodiment. A desire to apply multiple facets of my studio practice into one project drove this work. My work grew from a combination of embodying myself within the work, exercising studio mobility to explore site specific locations, creating collaborations, using alternative clay processes, and using my body as a site of interaction. In this work I refer to the body as a vessel; literally, the body is the physical container of the Self. My body is a placeholder of my memories and experiences, through which I can explore feelings of vulnerability, shame, and the desire for belonging, and can create situations that rely on relationships and alternative uses of clay process as a way to visually navigate these emotional states. My intent is to ornament the body, and through this ornamentation to create a visual composition that the viewer can individually abstract.

In my work I use relationship, materials, and formal aesthetics to create social interactions that are recorded and ultimately translated into visual information in the form of exhibited images. In recent work I have recorded audio of the interaction, capturing dialogue, sounds of the guest artist at work, and sounds of the material. I also experimented with the site of the interactions by changing to personal spaces and creating surreal environments where I could continue studies of covering and ornamenting the body with raw clay. With

three projects completed, I decided to shift the environment so I could address covering my body in more intimate one-on-one settings. My desire to focus on what was happening during the interactions, with fewer distractions, and to maintain the context of the relationship between the guest artist, and myself drove the decision to change the location of the interactions. I began to question what I was trying to accomplish: Was I creating performances? These interactions are experienced, not performed. They are set in a constructed environment, but open to being tailored for each participant relationship.



In the first Project: Embodiment interaction, Mined, I placed my naked body in the “chalk mines” (a natural kaolin deposit in Stuarts Draft, VA, near the Blue Ridge Mountains), and then staged an ornamentation of my body with mini-extruded porcelain-clay line drawings. To document the project, I enlisted professional photographer Sohail Abdullah to do two things: first, to take digital photographs, and second, to concentrate on documenting the process with a Nikon FA 35mm SLR camera using black and white film.

I recorded two additional Project: Embodiment projects (They Never Told Me I was Pretty and Bed#1) focusing on highly intimate spaces: the bathtub and the bed. At that point I had decided to omit the digital photography and concentrate on using 35mm black and white film to record the interactions. Still working with the original photographer, I alternated the cast of participants in the interactions. Although my methodology changed

with the later Project: Embodiment interactions, I remained interested in photographs of the full body in the interaction environment; I also had Sohail photograph the body as landscapes. In all the projects I have executed to date, the images can be regrouped, so that one project can yield multiple shows with shifting content. While I was creating the most intimate Project: Embodiment interactions, I also became increasingly interested in omitting faces and using less identifiable compositions that viewers could read abstractly.

{FINAL CHAPTER THESIS: SUBDUER}

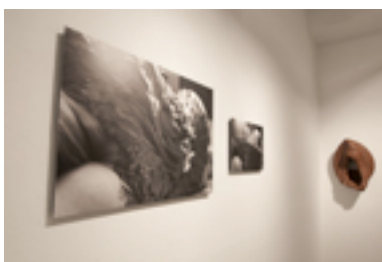
“The devil generalizes and the angels are specific”
(As quoted by mentor Gregory Volk)

“The devil says nothing and the angels tell all”
(As heard by Lauren Miller)

In my thesis installation ‘Subduer,’ I work to create a quiet atmosphere that investigates feelings of vulnerability and belonging while exploring formal aesthetic and material boundaries. This series documents selected compositions from interactions fostered between several collaborators and myself. Creating a potential for personal growth through relationships is the cornerstone of my studio practice. This social dynamic of growth through relationships has influenced my material choices and their contextual underpinnings. Community interaction has long played an important role in Ceramics, my material of choice. My experience in academia has been characterized by close contact with colleagues, as we share space and facilities in our daily studio practices. Throughout my time in academia, I have realized that the quality of relationships in the studio often influences the quality of work being executed in the studio. I am fortunate to have studied with a group of extraordinary colleagues who graciously complied with my requests for collaboration in executing an idea of mine. Using clay’s dynamic physical properties, including its pliable, plastic nature, I have sought to celebrate its inherent physical memory.



In 'Subduer,' a visual tension is created between the corporeal, the clay, and touch, which are represented through images and objects. This tension includes my personal embodiment (as I became the canvas), and the vulnerability of the visiting artists (not knowing quite what to expect). I provided the material (near-liquid clay reclaimed from the project 'Stacks'), the interaction site (the posterior of my body), and the means of documentation (a mini tripod loaded with a 35mm camera set up to the pre-conceived composition). Although I had a clear plan regarding composition, site of interaction, and material, a strong sense of immediacy still enveloped these interactions. After the collaborating artist arrived at the location of the interactions (my apartment), I explained the process and then focused the composition, which I planned to take via cable release. After I showed the shot to the collaborator, the interaction began. As I had hoped, each interaction differed from the others and contained an honest, humbling quality of chance. Each of the collaborating artists used the basic interaction set-up in different ways, bringing their curiosities and aesthetics to the project and giving each interaction a starkly individual imagery. In total, five interactions were recorded for the 'Subduer' exhibition: 'Interaction 1: Ruby,' 'Interaction 2: Marisa,' 'Interaction 3: Julie,' 'Interaction 4: Megan,' and 'Interaction 5: Ruby.'



After the images were processed and the forms built, I began editing in my studio in preparation for the exhibition. I quickly recognized a formal similarity of line within the images I had selected from the interactions and the components I had built for ‘Stacks.’ The exhibition ‘Subduer’ seeks to highlight physical commonalities within the work, emphasizing likenesses beyond the fact that the various works were made using the same clay body.

After experimenting throughout the year with printing on glossy and matte surfaces, and with using various forms of installation hardware (such as rare-earth magnets, clips, and pins), I ultimately chose a very clean, crisp presentation style. The final decision, a mounted image, serves as the ultimate object memorializing the experience. In previous work, I hired a professional photographer to document the interactions. In the later works, my own perfection of technique regarding the camera is obviously lacking. However, because I was looking for an honest interpretation of experience, eliminating the professional photographer (which had created a spectator situation in the interactions) enabled me to embrace a more bare-bones photo approach to the work. Four of the images from the installation ‘Subduer’ are self-portraits, while the remaining two are candid photographs taken by my collaborators at the end of the interaction session. All of the work was photographed through the lens of an FA Nikon 35mm SLR camera. I

chose this analogue approach to photography to record the mark of the hand, as I am committed to the experience. Not knowing the captured image until the film is processed creates anticipation, anxiety, and excitement. This indirect method of capturing the images resonates with me, as it reflects the same element of chance evident in other components of my artistic practice. Through the images I can manipulate the factual evidence of the interaction. The artistic process is one of translating a material into an experience, translating the experience into an image, then translating the image into an object floating on the wall. The original film negative translates to a digital scan; that digital image then translates through ink into an archival Hahnemuhle photographic rag-paper print. I outsourced the mounting process to ARC, a local company. With the mounting finished, the translation of experience to object is complete. The final object is a cold-pressed image mounted to ½” black beveled gator board, hung simply with industrial Velcro.



The mounted images are the main portion of my thesis, but the objects curated into the space add another dynamic relating to the images and one's personal body. The hand-built objects in my thesis exhibition are selected from the series 'Stacks.' Although the original intention of stacking the objects did not occur, several of the pieces were hung on

the wall. My main personal challenge has been focusing on improving my ceramic skills. In many ways, this intensely personal investment opened up for me a deeper understanding of my way of building objects. As I work with clay, my hands speak for me; the work process is physical and responsive to the material. As a descriptor of my work process, the statement “it’s intuitive” no longer seems relevant; perhaps “it’s pre-verbal” is a better answer. If a fold or divot develops during the building process, I often choose to highlight the flaw, incorporating it into the form. This physical imperfection thus becomes beautiful. The forms I abstract from tend to reference the experience of the physical body. These hand-built objects can be read as bodily orifices, skin folds, or body fluid; they can also imply a basic cellular structure. Landscapes I have experienced, in combination with my body memory of particular spaces, have also informed these objects. The element of chance often leads my process of making objects. Challenging myself physically by building larger, more structurally complex forms has been an important step in my growth as a maker. An important marker of my artistic growth was working through the selection of elements that felt appropriate for the show.

The exhibition ‘Subduer’ holds elements from the ‘Interactions’ and ‘Stacks’ series within the same space. In these works I visually connect different media through an exploration of clay processes. These visual connections manifest in the relationship between the single, partially flocked object on the floor and the images and ceramic vessels on the walls. In all of the represented work, the same clay material was repeatedly reclaimed and translated into different projects. By reclaiming and translating the use of material in my work, I speak of oneness on a basic physical level. As the body in the

images slips in and out of focus in an abstraction of material, the objects wait to be interjected into the composition of the space as a whole.

