

Conglomerate

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By

CHANCE TAYLOR

Professor Joe Pintz, Thesis Advisor

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the [thesis or dissertation] entitled

CONGLOMORATE

presented by Chance Taylor,

a candidate for the degree of Master of Fine Art

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor Joe Pintz

Professor Matt Ballou

Professor Kristin Schwain

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Abstract

I use my sculptures to explore a variety of dualities and dichotomies within the Self through formal and material relationships. I am interested in both the rough and the refined, the stable and the precarious, the intuitive and the analytical – I am fascinated by the points where these contrasting tendencies meet. I juxtapose organic, ambiguous vessels with architectonic structures to create a complex landscape of forms that encourages intent observation and asks the viewer to consider their position within society and the wider natural world.

I strive to find balance, both within my practice and the work itself. I am interested in the subtle and unobtrusive beauty that emerges from the thoughtful confluence of contrasting elements. When these elements are brought into harmony, they produce a tranquil beauty that encourages reflection in the viewer. Within my practice, I work to balance intention and emergence; intuition and analysis; my role as artist, as student, as teacher. To strive for balance is to strive to become more oneself. When these contrasting elements are brought together within exhibition, their impact is intensified.

Prologue

I am a potter; I have been now for over ten years. I still find joy exploring form and surface within the parameters dictated by function, and in thinking about the way that objects work and intersect with our lives. But for this thesis body of work, I wanted to push beyond what I found comfortable, and define a new set of parameters for my work to exist in.

Funnily enough, this work grew out of a way to kill time while I spent countless hours reclaiming clay for a studio I worked at back in Fargo. As I waited for the clay to mix, I would sit and absent mindedly pinch bowls, lining them up on the shelf above the pugmill day after day. I began to use the act of pinching, the gesture of pressing my fingertip into the soft surface of the clay, to form patterns on the surface of the vessels. Soon, the patterns and the forms began to influence one another, and in that process evocative natural forms began to emerge. These vessels seemed to have a lot of potential, but I could not see how they fit in with my work and so they were packed away and left behind. When the pandemic hit, I was forced out of my studio and had all but forgotten them. It wasn't until I was packing up and getting to move here for grad school that I rediscovered them and decided to take them with me on a whim, not even considering that these silly little bowls would be the progenitors of my thesis work.

Early on in my graduate studies, I was challenged to get off the wheel, and I did, though admittedly half-heartedly at first. I made another series of pinched bowls, this time more intentional, more refined. My goal was simply to create vessels that were made to be held. I was concerned primarily with the tactile experience of the object – with creating a thing that felt as though it was made specifically for your hand to explore and

settle into the small intricacies of its surface. This was my first attempt to define a new set of parameters for my work to function within.

I began to create more varied forms and soon started arranging the vessels into compositions: nesting them within one another, stacking them, grouping them. They felt to me like very human objects, and so I began grouping them like you would a family sitting for a portrait. I enjoyed these explorations, but still found myself split between making my functional pots and this new work.

It wasn't until the third year of my graduate studies when I really made the decision to commit to this new path. I remember the critique, presenting two disparate bodies of work and struggling to make them fit together. I was split and not fully committing to either path. During the critique, my advisor Joe Pintz told me "You need to commit; stop flirting, take the girl to the chapel and marry her!"

So that's what I did. I began again, pinching another series of vessels, working to develop a lexicon of marks and patterns that drew more explicitly from the natural world. I began to pair these vessels with found objects. First, I used fence posts, bricks, bits of debris, and eventually, natural objects like seeds, eggs, nests. I loved the idea of making vessels that could act as a place of shelter for these delicate natural objects and found the contrast between the organic vessels and the architectural structure of the bricks fascinating. These new compositions combined the organic with the architectonic, the stable with precarious, and the rough with refined. In the best compositions, these varying tendencies coexisted and accentuated one another. In some works, this produced tension, in others it produced harmony. Whatever the case, I found the outcome fascinating.

This fascination with the intersection of contrasting energies became a major motivator behind my work and research. I was especially influenced by Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Reverie*; Soetsu Yanagi, one of the foundational thinkers of the Mingei movement, and his book *The Beauty of Everyday Things*; Robert Pirsig's fantastic book *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*; and Chogyum Trungpa Rinpoche and his writings on Zen and the Tantra. Each of these thinkers deal with dichotomy and duality in unique ways, and each of them influenced the way I have come to see my creative practice. Bachelard divides the creative imagination into the Reverie and the Dream, the intuitive and analytical. Pirsig describes a split between classic and romantic understanding and tries to reconcile these two tendencies within modern society. Soetsu Yanagi introduced me to “Shibui” – the subtle and unobtrusive beauty that emerges from the thoughtful confluence of contrasting elements. I have done my best to balance these contrasting energies both within my sculptures and within my practice.

Chapter 1: Bachelard, Reverie and the Dream

In his book *The Poetics of Reverie*, the French Philosopher Gaston Bachelard explores the masculine and the feminine elements of our psyche through the lense of Reverie and the Dream. Bachelard was an influential Philosopher who contributed to the field of Poetics and the Philosophy of Science. His writings have influenced other philosophers, including Michel Foucault, Jacque Derrida, and Pierre Bourdieu, as well as numerous artists and architects. His explorations into the phenomenology of the creative imagination in the *Poetics of Revery* have been hugely influential in the way I have come to see my creative practice.

In Bachelard's conception, the Dream is masculine. It is recountable, enveloping, concerned with instrumental value. Reverie, the feminine, is concerned with seeing things as they are, with being lovingly enveloped in their snare. Bachelard examines these two axes of the imagination through their appearance in language, using the names of things to examine the nature of things. In this chapter, I will discuss my understanding of Bachelard's Reverie as it relates to artistic practice.

In Bachelard's writing, the Anima and Animus are not reducible to mere biological sex. They are not a role you are born into, and their expression is in no way uniform. Instead, they are twin elements of our being.

“I am not the same man when I am reading a book of ideas where the animus is obliged to be vigilant, quite ready to criticize, quite ready to retort, as I am when I am reading a poet's book where images must be received in a sort of transcendental acceptance of gifts.” (Bachelard, 65)

The dichotomy of Anima and Animus implies a conflict or contradiction, but these are aspects of ourselves that can coexist, and even be brought into harmony. Bachelard describes this dichotomy using Reverie and the Dream, pointing to these two archetypes as ways of experiencing the world that we oscillate between. As a maker, this manifests in the fervor and fluidity of creation contrasted by the careful work of unpacking, contextualizing, and systematizing that work. As a viewer, it is present in the spirit the work is taken in. It is the difference between dissecting and deconstructing the image and being swept up in its feeling – in the emotive and evocative power of the image.

“Before the world thus simplified by water in its repose, the consciousness of a dreaming soul is simple. The phenomenology of a simple and pure reverie opens a path to us which leads us to a psychism without blemish, toward the psychism of our repose. Reverie before still waters gives us that experience of a permanent psychic consistency which is the possession of the anima. Here we receive the teachings of the natural calm and an entreaty to become conscious of the calm of our nature, of the substantial calm of our anima. The anima, the principal of our repose, is the nature within us that is sufficient unto itself. It is the tranquil feminine. The anima, the principle of our profound reveries, is really the being of our still waters within us.” (Bachelard, 69)

The creative act is, at its best, a state of Reverie. The material is treated lovingly, with care. It is molded and guided, but never dominated. To achieve this state requires fluency of both material and technique. To be completely present in the act of emergence, technique must be an unconscious reflex. When that is achieved, one can be fully absorbed in the act of creation.

This Reverie is at the heart of the creative act, it is the state that allows you to dream the infinite possibilities of what could be and channel them into the thing that is

becoming. It is self-conscious, and as a result allows for conscious intervention. In Reverie, the distinction between subject and object, between maker and material, is blurred. For me it is the state of being utterly absorbed in what you are doing, responding intuitively to the material and to the form as it develops. Reverie reveals a subjective reality that is inseparable from the creative act. It is the work of the poet to manifest these reveries in the poetic image, it is the work of the artist to manifest these reveries in the art-object.

In Reverie, the image is loose, unstructured, it deals with the unconscious of matter. It is an oneiric reflection that is not necessarily communicable. It is only when the Reverie is embodied in the poetic image (art object) that it gains expressive power. Reverie idealizes, it dreams of possibilities and of deeper meaning. In doing so, it sacralizes its object, transforming it from a broadly known image to one that connotes personal connection. It transforms from the beloved familiar object into the personal sacred object which we carry with us, and which alters the way we see the world.

(Bachelard, 36)

Bachelard's investigation of Reverie and the philosophy of the imagination brings to mind one of my early mentors during my undergraduate studies, Michael Strand. Michael is an incurable optimist and a true believer in the crafted object as conduit for meaning and a nexus point of connection between people and ideas. It is only in a state of Reverie that a person could come to believe that something as simple as a cup can go out and shape the world. I have included an excerpt from his artist statement that illuminates the impact the made object can have.

“One of the joys of being an artist is the ability to dream without limitations and then acting on those dreams without the fear of failure. With this mindset I can imagine that a cup could be infused with the spirit of the late Charles Kuralt, branching out into the country to seek out stories waiting to be told, or that a cup could hold the potential of the great Desmond Tutu, and be integral in conversations of mediation. Without practical limitations on function, I am free to conceptualize how an object can move into the world as a catalyst to connect individuals through the shared use of functional ceramic ware.”

-Michael Strand, *Misfit Cup Liberation Project*¹

I believe that this quote embodies the foundational belief of all artists: that an object they crafted, an image they conjured, an idea they manifested, can go out into the world and change it and, in the process, reveal something fundamental about ourselves. It is only in a state of Reverie that we can envision our work as a force that can shape the world.

¹ <https://sociallyengagedcraftcollective.org/portfolio/michael-strand/>.

Chapter 2: Gardeners, Gatherers, and Architects

When I was pursuing my undergraduate degree, I heard an analogy for different types of creatives. It presented three creative archetypes: Gardeners, Architects, and Gatherers, and used them to illuminate a few notable tendencies in creative thought and practice. Though this was only a brief aside, it has stuck with me, and I have been thinking about these archetypes and my relationship to them ever since. It has been a way for me to come to terms with my own practice, and finding a way of working that is both meaningful and generative. The following is my understanding of these tendencies, and my relationship to them.

A Gardener stakes out a plot of land, plants their seeds, and tends to them. They find fertile ground and they develop it, coming to know it and its potential over time. The fruits of their labor grow from the creative act. For the Gardener, the act of creation is a collaborative gesture, working with, rather than subordinating. This method allows space for both intention and emergence. The key is finding the correct balance between the two; to allow both the material and the maker to be heard.

Gatherers move from place to place, taking something from here, something from there. Their process seems unstructured, taking what they like from where they like. For them, consistency is not a virtue. However patterns begin to emerge. Over time, the Gatherer learns where to look and what to look for; they become more adept at identifying and incorporating those things that resonate with them. Through this process, their work becomes more reflective of their sensibilities as their intuitions are developed and refined. The gesture of gathering is characterized by openness and perception.

Architects are planners; the path forward must be charted before the physical work begins. They begin with a vision, and their work is to faithfully bring it into being. Form, material, and labor are all put in service of this vision; selected, molded, and directed in service of a known end. The Architect selects their site and their materials based on their adherence to their vision. Though these elements may exist harmoniously, and the creation may feel at one with its purpose and surroundings, the gesture is still one of intention and subordination.

For the first three semesters of graduate school, it felt as though I was moving quickly from idea to idea, form to form, surface to surface – hoping that one of these combinations would take root and grow. I think that I was looking for external validation, for someone to come along and say “right there, that's it” so that I could put my head back down and get to work. At that time, I truly felt that the only path to good art was good work. I no longer believe that good work alone is enough, but I still value it greatly; it is the element of my practice that most sustains me. In hindsight, it is like I was using the wrong tool for the task at hand, struggling with it against the task and myself.

That realization led me to broaden my research and begin to study the Fluxus Movement and Relational Aesthetics. This felt like a route to what was, for me, the deep content of functional ceramics; that being, their potential as a tool to facilitate deeper connections within our daily lives. They connect maker to user, embody a cultural or personal ethos, and point towards the beauty of the mundane.

The work I created after that research was an attempt to illuminate what it was about making pots that I found valuable. This led me to searching out stories and recipes

from people in my life. In exchange for this small part of their personal history, I made them an object that I hoped would honor the recipe and their connection to it. This process of seeking out recipes and the stories they carried put me definitively into the role of Gatherer. I hoped to use these stories as case studies to show the importance of these mundane elements of our lives, the way they shape our identities and connect us to one another. I was pointing towards pots as objects of comfort, or as conduits of culture and personal connection. The work I made then played a supporting role, serving to elevate these stories and fragments of social history.

I was trying to make the sort of art that I thought was valuable, but found myself uncomfortable in the role the work demanded of me. I found seeking out these stories to be emotionally taxing. Once the object found its home, the work felt done to me. It seemed somehow wrong to put these very personal relationships on display, it grated against my ingrained Midwestern sensibilities.

To organize these stories and to present them in a way that communicated their importance would require me to step into the role of Architect. The stories and the relationships they represented would have to be treated instrumentally, as a component of a larger whole, rather than as a precious, personal, event or exchange. The side of my creative practice that I found most enervating, that of the Gardener, was given the least importance in this work. As a result, the work was ill-fitting and unsustainable.

My research for this Thesis has led me to seek out artists using ceramic materials and processes to investigate a larger cosmos of ideas related to fundamental human experiences. I am drawn to the work of contemporary sculptors, vessel makers, and

installation artists who use a variety of approaches to explore ideas related to aesthetic consciousness and the creative imagination. Artists who use formal, material, and compositional relationships to touch on experiential realities. Such artists include Tony Marsh, Matt Wedel, Eva Kwong, and Magdolene Dykstra, each of whom has impacted the way I see my work and practice.

I am likewise drawn to thinkers who explore the nature of imagination and its manifestations within creative practice. This has led me to thinkers like Gaston Bachelard, who divided the imagination into the Reverie and the Dream, and used these archetypes to explore the different ways we experience the world around us. Or Robert Pirsig, who explores the apparent conflict between Classic and Romantic understanding within modern society, calling back to the ancient Apollonian and Dionysian divide. Importantly, these thinkers recognize these dual tendencies as existing simultaneously within the individual, and as things which may be brought into harmony, or at least working order. My aim is to find an internal balance of these tendencies within my practice, and for that balance to manifest itself in the art object.

Chapter 3: The Gatherer

“In the end, the power of the scholars' rocks lies in the way their formal fluidity mirrors the shifting fluidity of the human imagination. Perhaps their seeming naturalness cuts through the defenses that many people bring to more obviously manufactured works of art. Whatever the explanation, these objects set the mind in motion with unusual directness, inspiring and illuminating esthetic experience in a way that is useful, exciting and profound.” (Smith, 21)

The process of selection that is underway when a person picks a beautiful stone from a stream, or a captivating shell from a beach gives us insight into our aesthetic perception and creative imagination. There is something in that object, in the history it holds on its surface that allows you to feel the forces that shaped it. Amongst the debris of the stream or the shifting landscape of a beach, that thing demands your attention and draws you to it. The delight that object, and the act of discovery it represents, brings you is not trivial. It tells you something meaningful about yourself. I think the most developed exploration of that delight can be found in the practice of collecting Scholar's Rocks.

Scholar's Rocks, sometimes called Spirit Stones, are naturally occurring rock formations which have been collected and displayed by Chinese scholars in gardens and libraries for over a thousand years. They function as objects of inspiration and contemplation for poets who drew from the natural world. The stones resemble landscapes, mountain ranges, or a pure expression of the transformative power of nature. Symbolically, these stones can be viewed as a microcosm of the natural world and the forces that shape it. The eroding forces of wind and rain can be felt when viewing their surface.

I am fascinated by Nature's ability to generate, erode, and preserve. I am drawn to objects and structures that bear the marks of creation and deterioration. These natural processes create dynamic, ambiguous, and evocative forms – softening stone, shaping landscapes, preserving remnants of lives and histories we can only intuit. This ambiguity invites sustained engagement and encourages the viewer to contemplate their relationship to the natural world – to the forces that shape both the stone and ourselves. The stones encourage a sort of psychological projection, akin to divining forms in the clouds or the stars, and in the process reveal our own sensibilities and aesthetic values.

I am fascinated by the evocative quality of these stones, their formal ambiguity, and their position between Art and Nature. It seems significant to me that the practice of collecting these stones has persisted for so long, and that their function has remained nearly unchanged. To me, they are a rather pure manifestation of what Pirsig would call “Quality”; after all, what else could differentiate these stones from any other? That the forces that shaped them can be quantified and understood do not diminish their wonder but enhance it. They are embodiments of serendipity. I have used these stones as a point of departure for a number of sculptural explorations. These stones have influenced both the forms I have created and the approach I have taken to finding and incorporating found objects in my sculptures.

My most developed exploration of the role of Gatherer came in the form of my *Debris Compositions*. The impulse that led me to create the *Debris Compositions* is similar to the impulse that I believe draws people to collect scholar's stones. I began by looking out into my surroundings; finding objects that resonated with me and which held

some power, virtue, or mystery. I slowly began to accumulate these objects, drawing from both the natural world and from my own practice. I find myself drawn to objects that have been weathered by natural forces: crumbling bricks, stones softened by the current of a stream, fossils, and kiln yard detritus. These objects served as both environments and inspiration for the vessels that accompany them.

I have chosen to incorporate both architectural remnants and products of nature into these compositions. In so doing, I combine the made and the found, the natural and the manufactured. Signifiers of the “Natural” and the “Human” world are set in relationship, coexisting with one another; all subject to and shaped by the same fundamental forces. Water is present within several of the sculptures, and acts as a record of energy. In Nature, water exists as the crucible of life, as an entity subject to forces that dictate its form and character. It is moved by celestial bodies, directed by the force of gravity, it ripples and flows around forces or objects that disrupt it, yet always searches for a point of rest. Over long stretches of time, it has the power to carve through valleys, shape landscapes and civilizations, but captured within the vessel it is made placid, calm, and transient.

I present the natural and the architectonic as a unified composition. Though these elements are set in relationship to one another, they maintain their individual character. To me, this decision gestures towards the lack of separation between us, our creations, and the Natural World. There is no coherent definition of “Natural”. Collectively, we have had such an enormous impact on our environment that there is very little we have not left our mark on. We live in a Made world. We need to acknowledge our impact on it

if we wish to continue existing as a part of it. That requires a balancing of our needs, and the needs of our environment. The vessels I make exist in relationship to these found objects, often in stark contrast to them, yet there is a feeling of harmony within the composition.

In *Debris Composition #1*, the mass and solidity of a broken firebrick is juxtaposed with the precarious balance of the vessel sitting on its edge. The craggy, irregular refractory, eroded by months of exposure to rainfall and other elements, sits delicately within the negative space of the brick. This refractory is paired with a refined vessel containing water. In this way, the force of nature that shaped the found objects is captured and controlled within the sculpture's composition.



Figure 1. Installation view of *Debris Composition #1* (Photograph by: Tony Irons)

Within *Debris Composition #2* a brick, eroded and softened by the running water of a stream, bridges the crumbling structure of the concrete below it. In this sculpture,

two like materials respond in dramatically different ways to the eroding force of water. The vessel here responds to the softness of the brick, and bears marks that echo the gesture of unearthing the brick from the stream.



Figure 2. Installation view of *Debris Composition #2* (Photograph by: Tony Irons)

In *Debris Composition #5*, two featureless concrete slabs frame the composition, which consists of two salt fired vessels, a black stone, and a discarded piece of marble. The concrete and stones are deliberate and solid, providing structure and support for the vessels. The vessels hold chance marks, drips and catches from the salt kiln. Small moments of unexpected beauty that cannot be achieved deliberately, instead they are received as gifts from the kiln. The composition here serves to support and uplift that serendipitous moment.



Figure 3. Installation view of *Debris Composition #5* (Photograph by: Tony Irons)

Of all of the work I made for this exhibition, these feel the most restrained to me. My hand is least visible in them, and yet they do feel as though they are mine.

Another exploration into my role as Gatherer came in the form of my *Earth Object Reliquaries*. In the *Earth Object Reliquaries*, outer structures act as environments for inner objects, exemplifying the notions of cocoon, womb, nest, or altar – places of transition and connection. The vessels act as a sort of reliquary for the delicate earth-objects contained within, holding, protecting, and preserving them. I have chosen natural and made objects that symbolically speak to fundamental human conditions – fragility and resilience, hope and resignation. The need for shelter and care in the pursuit of growth. The vessels act as containers for and embodiments of these concepts.



Figure 4. Installation view of *Earth Object Reliquaries* (Photograph by: Tony Irons)

Finger impressions and deep grooves cover the exterior of the *Reliquaries*, imparting a human element that contrasts the stark materiality of the vessel. Coarse sand is wedged into the clay before I form the vessel. Paying attention to the way the sand is incorporated into the clay allows me to create areas that are intensely textured while leaving others relatively smooth. Cracks and fissures that develop in the making of the vessel are left unmarred and incorporated into the design. This allows me to respond intuitively to the qualities of my clay; refining and accentuating the flaws and irregularities that emerge as they are being made.

The *Reliquaries* are substantial; heavy, both physically and visually. This gives them a feeling of sturdiness and a protective, sheltering quality as they envelop the delicate forms within. Their surface is weathered, bearing the marks of the atmosphere of the kiln and the shadows of the organic materials they were fired with. The shift between matte and glossy indicates a record of the vessel's exposure to the atmosphere of the salt

kiln and the sheltered atmosphere within the saggar. Within the vessels, interior and exterior space blend together weaving between moments of action and rest, containment and spaciousness, roughness and refinement. These elements exist harmoniously, the forms direct the eye towards the interior of the vessel, a place of shelter and calm.



Figure 5. Earth *Object Reliquary* detail (Photograph by: Tony Irons)

Chapter 4: The Need for Creative work

“Mountains should be climbed with as little effort as possible and without desire. The reality of your own nature should determine the speed. If you become restless, speed up. If you become winded, slow down. You climb the mountain in an equilibrium between restlessness and exhaustion. Then, when you're no longer thinking ahead, each footstep isn't just a means to an end but a unique event in itself. This leaf has jagged edges. This rock looks loose. From this place the snow is less visible, even though closer. These are things you should notice anyway. To live only for some future goal is shallow. It's the sides of the mountain which sustain life, not the top. Here's where things grow.” (Pirsig, 81)

In his book, *Zen and The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, American author Robert Pirsig recounts a journey that takes the narrator and his son from Minnesota to the California coast. The story simultaneously recounts a physical journey and a psychological journey of self-discovery, framed through a discussion of values. Over the course of his story, Pirsig returns to two distinct ways of viewing the world: Classic and Romantic understanding. Much of his thinking is an attempt to reconcile these views.

In aesthetic terms, Classic understanding is described as straightforward, unadorned, unemotional, economical, and carefully proportioned. Its purpose is not to evoke, but to produce order. As a result, its value is measured in terms of the skill with which this order is maintained. It is concerned with what Pirsig calls “underlying form,” (Pirsig, 28) that is, with the inner workings of the thing: with mapping and understanding its components and their function. The Classic mode is concerned with instrumental value, whereas the Romantic is concerned with immediate seeing, with the evocative power of the thing. The Romantic is concerned with quality of experience. Pirsig reconciles modes through an exploration of creative work.

“To a romantic this classic mode often appears dull, awkward, and ugly, like mechanical maintenance itself. Everything is in terms of pieces and parts and components and relationships. Nothing is figured out until it’s run through the computer a dozen times. Everything’s got to be measured and proved. Oppressive. Heavy. Endlessly gray. The death force.” (Pirsig, 30)

The death force Pirsig describes, the thing that he could feel his friends revolt from, was technology. He was tapping into the counter cultural ethos of the 1960’s, the rebellion against the encroachment of industry and the alienation that comes with it. His antidote to this was to recognize the meaning to be found in technical work. In his own words: “The Buddha, the Godhead, resides quite as comfortably in the circuits of a digital computer or the gears of a cycle transmission as it does at the top of a mountain or in the petals of a flower” (Pirsig, 13).

His insight was that quality exists in the relationship between the person and the task at hand. With this realization, he reconciled with the death force of his time. For me, the modern death force is not Technology, it is the systems that drive it. The consuming, homogenizing force that directs our ends towards accumulation and endless expansion. Under this system, things and the needs they fulfill are no longer an end in themselves, that they sustain us is no longer enough. They are instrumental, only valuable in so far as they perpetuate the system by maintaining, accumulating, and consolidating wealth; that is the only value that the system recognizes. The system is so great now that it seeps into everything. Nothing and no-one can simply be; they must be justified instead in terms of profit. The object's purpose is now secondary to this end, this hollows out the meaning from our pursuits. I do not believe that this death-force is something that we can find peace with while maintaining a meaningful and fulfilling existence. The antidote though,

is not as simple as an individual finding comfort and meaning in their work. Their work must shun the new death force, exist in spite of it to show a different path, and a more sustainable, enduring sort of value.

This is what has drawn me to both Art and Craft; I see them as bastions that may be able to resist that force and reconnect us to our humanity and one another. Both practices reach beyond that shallow pursuit of profit, instead aiming to fulfill our needs on a spiritual – a human – level. I believe the pursuit of these things is meaningful in and of itself, but it is more valuable for the insight it can impart. The product of this pursuit is a thing that provides a window to the human condition. Art is unique because it can show us a different perspective of the world. It builds empathy and it teaches us about ourselves, both as a creator and as a person who experiences the work.

Chapter 5: The Gesture of Tending a Garden

The act of tending a garden has always seemed to me like an appropriate metaphor for my creative practice. My first real artist statement was a poem about labor and its rewards:

“You work, toiling away in the dirt and, eventually, you are rewarded for your efforts. You have created something of the earth to which you have a deep connection. It is the fruit of your labor and from the knowledge of this you attain a profound sense of satisfaction, knowing you have made something tangible, useful, and nourishing. Now rest and begin again.”

The following chapter is my attempt to revisit and unpack the intuitions that led me to write that poem. The metaphor seems to have grown deeper and more resonant over time, as it has hovered near the back of my consciousness. I seem to return to it again and again.

A garden is more than a garden. A garden is a species of technology; it is the cultivation of land and the growing of crops, but through the Gardener it becomes much more. A garden can be tended beautifully, arranged beautifully, set to rest beautifully. A Gardener may make an art of the canning of tomatoes or the burning of their fields. A garden is by its nature a thing that reaches beyond its purpose. Though it may serve that purpose well, it is not subservient to it, it is more than a means to an end.

A garden nourishes. It requires that you invest yourself in it and rewards you in turn. Tending a garden may seem like an archaic gesture, rendered obsolete by the advancement of technology and the economies of scale which are integral to modern production. Yet the gesture remains, and those who practice it find meaning within its

inefficiencies. There is pleasure in the tilling of the soil, anticipation in the sowing of the seeds, pride in the labor of cultivation. For the Gardener, this connection to soil and to seed, the time, care, and labor that went into a harvest, invests the fruits of that labor with special significance. It is a sort of value that is difficult to quantify, whose logic runs counter to modern production and the predominance of profit – a value concerned more with quality of experience than efficiency or productivity.

A garden demands sustained engagement. A garden demands attention, and its needs shift as the season progresses. A Gardener must have a variety of skills to fulfill these needs. Tilling the soil, sowing the seeds, placing peas and beans in the shade and tomatoes in the sun – each thing in its time and place so that they may thrive. For the Gardener this is a collaborative gesture, working with the land, with the thing being grown, responding to the necessities imposed by circumstance while still directing towards a specified end. That end too, requires that the Gardener take up a variety of skills. Just as there is meaning to be had in the tending of the garden, so too is there pleasure in preparing, preserving, and presenting the product of that labor. Some Gardeners take pleasure in canning their vegetables for the winter, others find joy in the precise arrangement of their flowers within the home, and some take satisfaction in the delicate relationship of their garden and the bees – the particular way that they sustain one another and, by extension, us. The Gardener sustains their garden, and in turn the garden sustains them.

A garden is directed towards fulfilling a need. A garden is essentially a diversion of nature, an area cordoned off from its surroundings and directed towards the ends of its

steward. These ends may be practical, as in food, commerce, and research, or they may be directed towards another set of needs. A flower garden defies most of the already archaic practical potential of the garden, yet its products nourish all the same, fulfilling psychological, aesthetic, or emotional needs. I think that is the reason that the gesture remains; it points towards something lacking in the current order of things, where abundance is expressed in opulence rather than generosity, and we find ourselves in a deepening spiral of want. For the Gardener, tending their garden may be an end in itself, but that is a solipsistic meaning; the true beauty of the garden is realized when its products and the efforts of the gardener are directed towards the deeper needs of their community.

Chapter 6: The Gardener

I felt myself working as a Gardener when I made both the *Vessel Constructs* and the *Stellae Field*. These were both projects that developed slowly over time. They are the product of iteration and permutation, of sustained engagement within a relatively defined set of parameters. I enjoy projects like these, because they allow me to work intentionally while still pursuing possibilities that appear in the moment. I am able to both direct the work and allow it to develop as an event in itself. I have the freedom to respond to some serendipitous quality in the material, to pursue possibilities for the joy of exploration rather than in service to a pre-determined end.

In the *Vessel Constructs*, a multitude of individual vessels are fused into a single construct. These forms draw inspiration from clusters of fossilized sea creatures. I am fascinated by the way these complex, amorphous forms develop from the coming together of simple, discrete objects. The confluence of geological forces and organic life can be seen in these fossils, where organic and inorganic material blend together into a unified structure. You can intuit history in these objects. These are the qualities I seek to capture with these sculptures.

These sculptures begin as a series of discrete vessels, pinched 20 or 30 at a time. My aim is for each of the vessels that make up the construct to seem closely related, their forms stick to a particular pattern or tendency, but they are all individual. I vary the size of the vessels and sculpt them to appear as though they grew from one-another and existed together. The individual forms blend together and are subsumed within the substrate, there is no delineation between the vessels the thing that connects them. They

are decorated with flashing slips and fluid glazes, surfaces that record the fluvial atmosphere of the salt kiln. The subtly shifting color of their surfaces is a record of that interaction.



Figure 6. Installation view *Vessel Constructs* (Photograph by: Tony Irons)

Within each *Construct*, forms blend and seem to grow together; they flow upwards, outwards, and into one another, branching out and building upon one another. The fluidity of these sculptures reflects the fluidity of the imagination, where ideas and images blend, shift, transform and grow. In this way the sculptures become a manifestation of the phenomenological experience of creative thought.

These sculptures seem to fit within the ethos of the Gardener. They grew slowly, the ideas that underlie them recurred and reemerged in a variety of forms over the past year or so. I gave myself the luxury of time while working on these sculptures, giving each *Construct* the time and the attention it demanded. Each element was made carefully,

assembled deliberately, dried slowly, requiring care and attention at every stage. Because of this, I was able to develop and expand on the forms, increase scale, explore new methods of combining and carving the vessels. You can see a progression in the series, as the structures become larger, more fluid, and more complex.

I indulged in this sort of sustained engagement again while working on the vessels that made up the *Stellae Installation*. It felt like a broad exploration, trying to work out a new formal vocabulary, one that drew more explicitly from the natural world. I resolved to give each vessel as much time as it seemed to demand – some were almost immediate, while others called for far more time investment. They felt like a continuation, an expansion, of the vessels I had made before.



Figure 7. *Stellae Installation* detail #1 (Photograph by: Tony Irons)

I made the decision to try to make each vessel as unique as possible, hoping to open new possibilities by forcing myself to continue to evolve the work. I tried to strike a

balance between the forms and textures I was referencing, and possibilities suggested by the process and the material. This produced a natural variety in the vessels while still creating groupings that seemed closely related.

Within the installation, shell-like vessels balance on charred wooden pillars, creating a landscape of forms that requires precision and attention to move through. The vessels could be perceived as remnants, or as a thing separated from its other half. They are highly ambiguous – elements of shells, stones, and seeds blend within each vessel. Moving from vessel to vessel; one is extremely refined, minimal in both form and surface, the next is complex with strong lines and varied textures. They are all individual, yet unmistakably related.



Figure 8. *Stellae Installation* (Photograph by: Tony Irons)

The patient, deliberate, energy of finger pressing into clay can be felt when viewing the work. On the surface of each vessel, fingerprints coalesce into evocative,

varied, organic patterns. The shared quality of touch unifies these individuated forms, so too does their shared material language. Each vessel is made from the same iron-rich earthenware clay and decorated with terra sigillata. This results in subtle shifts of tone from piece to piece, as the terra sigillata pools within finger impressions or is burnished on raised edges. When contrasted with the rich, variegated tones of the salt fired vessels, these earthenware vessels feel somber and drained of life.



Figure 9. *Stellae Installation* Detail #2 (Photograph by: Tony Irons)

The pillars the vessels rest on are reminiscent of Stelae, monuments which were once used as memorial markers commemorating people or important events. They were believed to delineate physical spaces through which one may access the dead or divine. Within the installation, the pillars serve to separate the vessels physically while pointing towards their commonality. There is a tension in the work between the individuality of each vessel and their role as a part of a larger

composition. When viewed individually, each pillar is stark and mournful; viewed collectively, thousands of discrete gestures come together to form a cohesive whole that speaks more to the relationships between the pieces than any individual vessel.

Chapter 7: The Architect

I felt I inhabited the role of the Architect when making *Touchscape*. The vessels I had been making related strongly to the hand, they begged to be held. For me, the exhibition would have felt incomplete without some sort of interactive component. I decided to create an installation of objects that were made explicitly to be held. I wanted to capture the gesture of a handshake, or of one hand caressing another. My aim was to create a series of objects where that sort of human connection could be felt.



Figure 10. Installation view of *Touchscape* (Photograph by: Tony Irons)

I found that the best way to achieve this was the direct path, holding the clay in my hand and pressing my finger into it to create a very simple vessel. These are perhaps the least “crafted” objects in the show, yet I feel they are among the most deliberate. Their simplicity and naturalness seem to express a confidence that some of the other vessels lack.



Figure 11. *Touchscape* detail#1 Photograph by: Tony Irons)

I think some part of me wanted to elevate these simple objects. My tendency is to equate value with labor, but these objects were so immediate. It took me some time to come to terms with the fact that this idea wasn't furthered by pouring more time into each vessel. I wanted them to be delicate, beautiful objects – things that begged to be touched and held. I relied on the seductive qualities of clay and glaze: The gesture of the hand, the brilliance of the porcelain, and the luscious blue of the celadon glaze work in conjunction towards that end.

Chapter 8: The Exhibition

While preparing for my thesis exhibition, I found myself stepping into the role of Architect; planning, arranging, and composing. Ordering discrete works into a unified exhibition. In some sense, the process was ruthless. Because of the limited timeframe I gave myself to put together this thesis work, many ideas were cut off at the stalk, brushed aside to make way for something more immediately pressing.

My time has felt very precious in the last two semesters. Because of this, my studio time has been significantly more directed and purposeful. There was less aimless play, fewer digressions: my aim was no longer to move laterally looking for a way ahead, but rather to commit to the path before me and follow it. With that commitment comes a certain level of vulnerability, as you are no longer talking about potential, about the thing that could be. Instead, you are working towards a concrete goal, and your progress towards that goal can be observed. Suddenly, there were wrong answers.

In these circumstances, I found the perspective of the Architect is valuable, as their tendency is to find a direct and economical path. Sometimes, an especially critical eye is required, and there is not time or occasion to be enveloped in every possibility. The Architect discerns where time can be most valuably spent and ensures that all components are working towards a cohesive end. This is exactly the view one must take when preparing for an exhibition.

The work in the exhibition represents a gradual evolution of both form and thought. They are explorations of a variety of aesthetic spectrums. The work moves from explicit representation to more implicit patterns made up of finger impressions. Shifting

from the discrete object to the conglomerate; from organic to architectural; from the considered, reserved debris compositions to the free-flowing vessel constructs. The work explores the ends and intersections of these spectrums, and so each element must have a distinct presence within the space of the gallery.

My aim when assembling the exhibition was to create a complex and varied landscape of forms, and for each section of the gallery to be dedicated to a specific exploration. Walking through the gallery; you move from the light, ephemeral *Touchscape*, to the substantial, terrestrial *earth Icons*. The *Icons* are grouped into a triptych, suggesting a familiar relationship between the three forms. Opposite of the *Icons* are two *Compressed Landscapes*, presented on two substantial, natural pedestals. These groupings frame the *Stellae Installation* to the left and right.



Figure 12. *Earth Icon Triptych*, Photograph by: Tony Irons)

The *Stellae Installation* is placed in the center of the gallery, creating a large field of forms that can be walked through. When walking through the installation, you get a birds-eye view of the vessels. To really appreciate the variety of the forms, you must enter into the field. To one side of the *Stellae Installation*, you can see the *Vessel Constructs* grouped together into one composition; unified by the natural pedestals they rest on. Next you come across the procession of *Reliquaries* resting on slabs of brick. The bricks elevate the vessels and tilt them towards the viewer, presenting the interior space of the vessel. *The Debris Compositions* are on the opposite side of the gallery, each presented as a contained composition, separated by the pedestals they rest on.



Figure 13. *Installation view of Earth Object Reliquaries*, Photograph by: Tony Irons)

Many of the works are small enough to fit into the palm of your hand. In *Touchscape* and the *Stellae Installation*, I relied on a multiplicity of objects to give the work a visual weight and presence within the gallery. Both of these installations were

designed to encourage physical interaction with the viewer. The *Touchscape* was placed at table-level, with dozens of individual vessels lined up across three tables with a sign inviting the viewer to touch them. The *Stellae Installation* required that you move through it to view each vessel. The composition created a distance between the vessels and a space that allowed, but did not invite, entry. Because of this, the *Touchscape* felt like a more successful installation, in that the viewer was invited into it, rather than challenged to navigate through it.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

In the end, I found that ideas grow most vigorously through active engagement and attentive work. For me, making is a process of seeing, selection, and discernment that develops through practice and reflection. It often begins with an intuition; possibilities suggest themselves as you work – sometimes born out of some serendipitous event, or an idea that has been developing in the background finally emerging to the surface. For the work to progress, that intuition must not only be seized on but interrogated.

The aim of this process is mastery, discovery, and ultimately connection and communication. The pursuit of mastery is itself a pursuit of self-discovery. Technique must be directed towards a meaningful end; alone, it counts for very little. Technical skill allows for the manifestation of thought and feeling in material. To find a thing worth making requires self-reflection; taking note of the things that speak to you, the things that you find meaning in, and ultimately, your values. This sort of work is instructive, and necessitates active and sustained engagement with one's materials, ideas, and the creative act itself. It is through this process that the mining and the excavation of the Self can be manifested in the art object.

When making, I find it necessary to leave room for possibilities presented by the material and ideas that arise in the moment. I have rarely felt the urge when making to reference a sketch or blueprint – the feeling I hope to evoke in the work is known, but the path is found along the way. It is only when the piece is finished that I can begin to judge it. Here the process of analysis and distinction can begin. It is at this stage when the made

object is no longer seen simply for what it is, the quality and experience of its making give way to its concrete being. It is now not only itself, but a thing that relates to a larger cosmos of influences, ideas, and intentions. This process of discernment and selection is how the path across the mountain is constructed, step by step, piece by piece. Rarely is it a direct path.

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