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# Fully Loaded

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# FULLY LOADED

by

LAURA MARIE MARTIN

Under the Direction of Mark Burleson

## ABSTRACT

My ceramic sculptures are abstracted portraits of friends and family. They reveal no clues about the age, the gender, or the physical identity of the subjects. Instead, they are abstracted character traits rendered in clay with a biomorphic sensibility. I translate a particular personality trait of a friend or family member into a tangible object and arrange those pieces referencing botanical forms. I tend to choose the negative traits that cause friction in our relationship. My work is a way of acknowledging and dealing with the struggle these traits have caused. I structure my pieces as a floral arrangement to transfer an otherwise unfavorable experience into a positive one.

INDEX WORDS: Throwing off the hump, Slip, Slip and score, Slip casting, Darting

FULLY LOADED

by

LAURA MARIE MARTIN

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2012





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2012

FULLY LOADED

by

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this to Eleanor K. Martin and Wayne D. Martin, my Mom and Dad who are my biggest fans and loyal patrons. Thank you for showing me at an early age that art is important. I would also like to dedicate this to my two big brothers David and Stephen who were responsible for every baby tooth I lost and getting my skin thick enough for art school. The four most important people in my life who have never let me down. Thank you for showing me the kind of person I want to be. I love you. I never could have done it without you.

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**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b> .....	v
<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b> .....	vii
<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
<b>2 RONNIE</b> .....	2
<b>3 PORTRAITURE</b> .....	6
<b>4 RANDY</b> .....	9
<b>5 INFLUENCES</b> .....	11
<b>6 RED</b> .....	16
<b>7 MATERIALS AND PROCESS</b> .....	19
<b>8 CONCLUSION</b> .....	24
<b>REFERENCES</b> .....	23

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. <i>Sunny</i>	2
Figure 2. <i>Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1</i> or <i>Whistler's Mother</i> by James McNeill Whistler	7
Figure 3. <i>Portrait of Ross in L.A.</i> by Felix Gonzalez-Torres	8
Figure 4. <i>Big Red</i>	10
Figure 5. <i>Amazing Blue</i> by Michael Lin	11
Figure 6. <i>Flirt</i> by Jason Briggs	12
Figure 7. <i>Cinesias Entreating Myrrha to Coition</i> by Aubrey Beardsley	13
Figure 8. <i>Summer</i> by Alphonse Mucha	14
Figure 9. <i>Fables Cover Art</i> by James Jean	15
Figure 10. <i>Just Peachy</i>	18
Figure 11. <i>Just Peachy</i> detail	19
Figure 12. <i>Big Red Detail</i>	21
Figure 11. <i>Gold Finger</i>	22
Figure 11. <i>Triple Dong</i>	23

## 1 INTRODUCTION

“Taking an alternative approach to traditional portraiture, Martin detours from the mimetic rendering of facial features to focus on the representation of individual personality traits, translating abstract characteristics into visual form. Each piece is loaded with elements that contain imagery and meaning. To balance these human imperfections, Martin juxtaposes her emblematic body parts with a collection of meticulously rendered flowers, revealing her own personal penchant for gardening. The additions stand as symbolic gestures, bringing the artist into the work. Thus, more than a mere likeness of one person, the final bouquets depict the portrait of a relationship, extending the metaphor that like a garden, a friendship, too, requires cultivation.”

-Rachel Chamberlain



**Figure 1. Sunny**  
9"x8"x7"

## **2 RONNIE**

Ronnie was always the center of attention. He was the class clown, the life of the party and the bell of the ball. Ronnie was also a junkie. I met him at a party when I was sixteen. I remember my friend Austin going on and on about how talented Ronnie was and a "really brilliant person, if only he wouldn't eat pills all day." At that moment Ronnie perked up and said "Pills! I forgot, I've got pills!" as he pulled a plastic bag out of his pocket and it rolled open when he held it out in front of his face. He ripped into



the plastic sandwich bag and literally threw a fistful of pills in the direction of his mouth. He probably managed to get several in the hole. The room watched and laughed as the other pills rolled down his beard then his coat. This whole scene lasted only seconds but long enough for Austin to finish his sentence with saying ...“Exactly.”

I should have known then, I should have stayed away. That was fair warning, more than fair. That was a 6’4” red flag. But he was just so funny. He was hard to get to know, late nights and bad habits gave him a terrible memory. I always had to remind him who I was. I would see him at a party and I would say “Hi.” I could tell he did not remember me so I would start to remind him...

“Remember me? I met you at Austin’s party a couple weeks ago...no?, We were both dressed up as Tom Baker last week for Halloween and we agreed he was the best Dr. Who...no? You erased all my late charges at the video store when you were working yesterday...This was yesterday!...no clue, huh.”

As a test, I gave him a plane ticket with my name on it and told him I needed it back in two weeks before my flight. I told him “It’s very important that you give this plane ticket back to me before my flight in two weeks but in the mean time you learn my name.” He said he was nervous about it but up to the challenge. That plane ticket was two years old. He did not notice.

The next time I saw Ronnie he was trying to sneak KFC into a movie theatre. I laughed out loud when he got busted with fried chicken by the ticker taker. He must have heard me because he turned around, and to my surprise not only did he have my plane ticket in his wallet but he remembered me too.

Over the next two years he would introduce me to Ingmar Bergman and Woody Allen and we would compare and contrast. He read Kurt Vonnegut and Hunter S. Thompson novels to me. He showed me *Koyaanisqatsi* and *Citizen Kane* and we talked about the importance of lighting and perspective. He played Brian Eno and Bonnie Prince Billy albums for me. He taught me how to play guitar. He showed me the wonderful world of John Waters. Before he played *Harold and Maude* for me he said “This is gonna be your favorite,” and he was right. I told him I always wanted one of those big, red balloons that car dealerships have tied to their roofs. The next morning I had one tied to my truck’s ball hitch. Those balloons are the size of a car once you pull them down out of the sky. It must have been a running theme with him because when I got home from school that day I went to my bedroom only to find that it was flooded with red balloons that flowed out into the hallway and down the stairs when I opened the door. It was good.

It was good, until it wasn’t. A couple years in I noticed that his memory again began to fade, like it used to when we first met. He became inconsistent and unreliable. He started wearing long sleeves in the summer and his head would nod up and down in slow motion for hours. He was either bouncing off the wall or nodding off. I found him early one morning with some “new” friends at his apartment watching a stack of Jim Jarmusch movies projected on a dirty bed sheet. From the looks of them, they had not slept in days. They were zombies hovered around a table that had a near empty bottle of whiskey next to a small avalanche. I looked at Ronnie and he back at me with a blank look on his face. He did not recognize me; it was just like the first few times we met.

I foolishly stuck around for two more years after that. A terrible two years trying to save him or fix him or help him. It took me two years to figure out that was not going to happen without his consent which he was not ready to give. I read about him in *The Blotter* several times, I watched him get kicked out of bars, get fired from jobs, and lose lifelong friends one by one. I was scared that if anything happened to him it would be my fault which made it almost impossible to leave for good.

One of the last times I saw him he was working in a soup kitchen where I drop off cans of food once a month. As part of his probation he would serve food but he always stayed behind to chat with the regulars. He was clean and seeing him that way made me proud. There he was, even at a soup kitchen he was at the head of the table surrounded by homeless men discussing the existence of life on the sun. I watched him listening to them and trying to respect their views on the galaxy. I finally felt free to go.

One year later I got a call from a mutual friend. She was frantic and yelling something about Ronnie being locked in her bathroom. I got to her house as fast as I could. I knew what it meant when Ronnie would lock himself inside a room. We broke the door down. He was laid out on the tile floor next to the dark side of a spoon and his arm wrapped up tight. He was the color of an eggplant. This was not the first time he overdosed, but it was the last.

Ronnie often quoted Orson Welles, but the one that always stuck with me the most was when he said "If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story." I wish ours would have stopped the day of the red balloons.

### 3 PORTRAITURE

Portraiture is one of the oldest, most universal forms of art. It deals with the nature of representation, aesthetic experience, and the relevance of cultural frameworks in defining the self. It is reasonable to think portraits embody accumulated cultural wisdom about what it is to be human. Portraits convey aspects of the sitter's moral character, class, emotional life, and the personality in their depictions.

Images of pregnant women depicting the importance of fertility are the first known portraits, such as Venus of Willendorf dating back to 22,000 BC. Ancient Egyptians made portrait masks so the soul could find its body in the after life. Medieval art consists of likenesses of Deities and spirits because an artist's patronage generally came from the church, the subject of art and the mediums of art shifted to the church as well.

Traditionally artists look to physical features to express the personality of their subject. Davinci gave Mona Lisa a mysterious smile. Munch depicted a man on the edge of insanity, screaming or rather the world screaming around him. The scene is filled with panic and anxiety as he grasps his face in fear. Whistler's mother was painted still and steady with the presence of a woman who would always be there. These portraits rely on the recognizable elements of human features. The smile, the body language, and the dress of the day tell so much about the character.



**Figure 2. *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* or *Whistler's Mother* by James McNeill Whistler**

At the end of the nineteenth Century, abstract painters were working in the first style of abstract art, cubism. Cubist painters like Braque and Picasso broke the subject down into geometric shapes that are later reassembled into a pile of objects. This way, the viewer is able to see from a different viewpoint, one of angles and elements. For them, cubism allowed the portrait to transition from the conventional physical appearance to a compilation of object and form, thus creating ambiguity.

More recently, Felix Gonzalez-Torres used a pile of candy to represent a loved one dying of an AIDS-related illness in *Portrait of Ross in L.A.* The amount of candy was equal to Ross's ideal body weight of 175 pounds. Visitors to the gallery were welcomed to take a piece of candy and soon the pile deteriorated as did Ross. At the end of the day after the crowds were gone the candy would be replenished back to its initial 175 pounds suggesting the idea of perpetual life. By using candy, Felix allowed the viewer to engage with his piece using multiple senses of sight, touch, scent, and taste.



**Figure 3.** *Portrait of Ross in L.A.* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres

#### 4 **RANDY**

Randy lived up the street from me when I was still in the single digits. She was older than me and she went to public school which made her kind of tough by default. She was never very nice to me but I hung out with her anyway for some reason. I guess it was slim pickings in the neighborhood that year.

Her house was at the top of the hill which is where I saw her one Christmas morning to see what Santa had brought her. She got a big girl bike. By that I mean there were no back peddle brakes and no training wheels. It had only two wheels and hand brakes. It was a serious grown up bike. She asked me if I wanted to ride it and even as a very little kid I was never one to say no. Now, at the time I was slightly worried about the lack of training wheels but I did not want to let Randy see me sweat so I jumped right on and started rolling. The last feeling I had before barreling down the road were her fingers giving me a much unneeded push.

The seat was so high I could not reach the ground and the brakes were not working as I feverishly peddled backwards. Randy neglected to tell me the brakes were on the handles. It was pure terror. I saw the houses pass by in a blur in my periphery as I searched for a grassy yard in which to crash. I knew I was going to have to take a dive since the hill was just getting steeper, but when? An oncoming car made that decision for me. It was like I just unwillingly entered into a game of chicken.

I decided on a modest thicket. The bunch of bushes was rather skimpy but it was better than crashing into the car. Or so I thought, they were actually threaded with thorns and poison ivy. The poison ivy I found out about the next day but the thorns and two broken fingers made an immediate appearance. I still remember Randy casually



walking down the hill after me and when she reach the site of my crash and burn she looked down at me and said “I knew that would happen.” I remember lying there in pain wondering why she had not let me in on those pearls of wisdom before I took off down the hill. What a jerk.



**Figure 4. *Big Red***  
12”12”6”



## 5 INFLUENCES

My compositions are highly influenced by Taiwanese artist and designer Michael Lin. It is in his use of negative space that I am most interested. His work moves away from the idea of painting as an object and are more about creating a space to occupy. He covers all surfaces including walls, floors, rugs, couches, and pillows and completely envelopes the space. His work is surprisingly political given the look of his floral print paintings, so his message is delivered through a less obvious route. Lin uses the imagery of indigenous flowers of countries that have had conflict with China, mostly Taiwanese species. His work is about struggle and political hardship but it is conveyed through delicate oversized flowers which somewhat softens the blow of a heated subject, like a spoon full of sugar.



Figure 5. *Amazing Blue* by Michael Lin

I have appropriated Michaels Lin's signature blue that he uses for almost all of his painting's backgrounds. It is a blue that mimics the sky and therefore enhances any floral hue. I have also arranged my ceramic bouquets on a blue square or rectangle leaving much of the space as empty as Lin does. The large color field brings attention to each piece, giving a color to pop off of and a personal spot in space rather than a bare white wall. The negative space also alludes to the somewhat negative traits that are being discussed in each piece.



Figure 6. *Flirt* by Jason Briggs

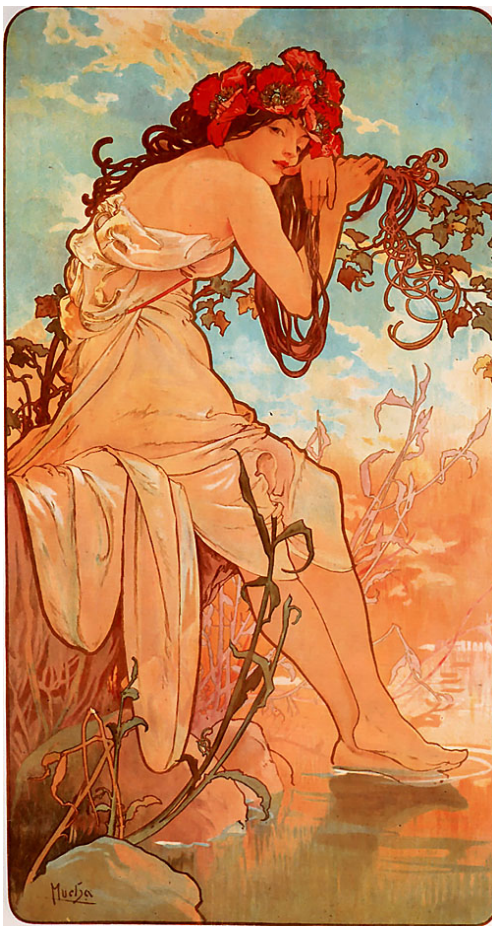
Jason Briggs turns clay into flesh. Through tufting, stitching and puckering porcelain he creates a corporal collage that makes my skin crawl while pulling me in closer. His work activates both a sense of repulsion and attraction. I am also influenced by Aubrey Beardsley's tawdry sense of humor. He will catch a character with their pants down or depict them with larger than life phalluses while dressed in the most proper of late nineteenth century fashions. In this way he reduces his subject's personalities down to little sexual deviancies, similar to how I reduce my portraits down to one particular trait that is not always their best.



Figure 7. *Cinesias Entreating Myrrha to Coition* by Aubrey Beardsley

My work aspires to have the sense of humor but also the attention to detail that Briggs and Beardsley incorporate. Adding phalluses to the bouquets can create a snicker but the intention is for more than a just a laugh. Using private parts are an easy way to draw attention so I try to disguise them in a heavy coating of texture and glaze to enhance the reveal and hide it from viewers who pass by too quick to stop and notice.

For color I look to Alphonse Mucha's flowing organic structures and lines inspired by nature. He epitomized Parisian art during the fin-de-siecle period, which is the main era I draw from for form and pallet. I like to candy coat the surfaces in his pastel blues, greens and pinks with an emphasis on the satin glaze to achieve the soft feel of his illustrations and his small pops of color.



**Figure 8. *Summer* by Alphonse Mucha**



James Jean inspires me for the same reason but he brings a contemporary edge through his graphic novel type of illustrations. He has an incredible understanding and use of light and fluidity. Like Mucha, he uses pops of color to emphasis small details which is why I use extremely bright colors on the added elements like a neon green bullet or a bright yellow finger. There is a heightened sense of sexuality in their work that is captivating without being over the top.



Figure 9. *Fables* Cover Art by James Jean

## 6 RED

The funny thing about this story is that I only knew part of it for a long time, my part. I overheard my Dad and brother telling the other side of story at a family reunion ten years after it actually happened.

I grew up in a town known for its music scene. There were so many bands to see and so many years till I was legal to see them. I have never been known for my patience so to avoid the wait I carried an I.D. I acquired of a woman who was 37 years old and 4'10" tall. I was 14 and 9" taller but, hey it worked. Needless to say by the time I turned 21 the last place I wanted to go was another bar. However, my best friend used to wait for her Dad to fall asleep around midnight before she would ease his little sports car out the drive way and over to my house. We would head downtown jamming out to some Robert Palmer and George Michael all the way there.

It is silly when I think about how many bars I got into with that ladies I.D. but it is even crazier how I would pass it above my head to my next friend in line and always get away with it. We already felt like we were pushing it just getting in so we did not want to risk trying to get drinks too. Her parents were fundraisers who threw lots of parties which meant there was a never ending supply of wine and cheese at their house at all times. She would grab a couple bottles of red from the wine closet and I would bring my older brother's beer funnel. Try funneling red wine on your knees in a gravel parking lot between two open car doors so no one can see you. Now, I could not say what band it was I snuck out to see that night or what hour in the morning it was when I got home but I certainly remember what happened when I did.

My room had a balcony coming off two French doors. When I turned twelve my parents removed the stairs from the balcony. It was almost as if they were thinking "Our daughter is about to become a teenager, let's make it a little harder for her to sneak out." I remember in the dark of the night, silently stacking a series of lawn furniture tall enough to climb up and reach the bottom of the deck just to shimmy the rest of the way up the brick wall. It was a routine. In the summertime those big garden spiders would spin their webs from the awning to the ledge of the balcony and there was always the terrifying chance that in the dark of the night I would crawl smack into one. This was a chance I was not willing to take. I had a fix for that too which consisted of me throwing whatever I could find from the yard in my line of fire. That night it was a soccer ball.

From where I was standing I thought this was a pretty good idea. The hope was that the ball would fly through any major webs and clear the path for a gal who cannot imagine many things worse than unexpectedly walking face first threw a spider's web. From where my Dad was standing, it sounded like a burglar trying to get in the house.

Apparently while I was clearing the way for my big break in, my Dad was wide awake working. See, F.B.I. agents tend to keep rather strange hours and rather lethal weapons which is a particularly good reason to not sneak into their homes. As soon as he heard the muffled thumps that was his cue to get armed. He hustled down a flight of stairs to my brother's room who was aggressively awakened when my Dad rolled him over and put a rifle in his arms saying "Get up! We've got an intruder."

By the time I climbed the top of the plastic furniture mountain I had made I was exhausted and still weary of webs. The doors creaked as I slowly pushed them open to a pitch black room. Before I could hit the lights I heard my Father's booming voice

announce “Surrender!” Did I mention he is also a former Marine and Chicago police officer? I think he was having flashbacks. Before I could get a word out he let me know that he had a Glock pointed at my head and strongly suggested I not move. Of course the red beam from the laser sight in my eye was more than enough proof for me. I did not even know about the second gun man at the time. I did not say anything at first, there was still apart of me that was not ready to give myself up, then I realized that was insane. I finally yelled “Dad! Don’t shoot! It’s me!” I hit the lights to see my brother standing at one side of the room with an M16 military rifle still pointed at me and my three hundred pound Father in a pair of BVDs and a Leather Jacket with the Glock he was yelling about one minute earlier.

What a sight. I still have not decided whether I got off easy that night or not.



**Figure 9. *Just Peachy***  
9"x10"x8"



## 6 MATERIALS AND PROCESS

I work with clay because it allows me build, bend, stretch, shrink, warp, throw, alter, adhere, cast, bind, and twist to achieve the structure I desire. The same material that builds the structure also binds it together. Clay can take on any form so the possibilities are endless. However, there are rules to working with clay. It needs attention and care. It requires consideration and awareness and these details reveal themselves as one's relationship with the material progresses. Ceramics can be heavy yet fragile, adding another level of difficulty. I find it interesting that a piece fired to 2200oF can feel so permanent when it gets out of the kiln, but has the potential to break into a thousand pieces, a reminder of its ephemeral qualities.



Figure 11. *Just Peachy detail*

I use porcelain to build the forms and also for the surface texture. It makes sense to use something as natural as clay when reproducing botanical forms. However, the processes undertaken to finish a piece can be very stressful. The drying process, the heat from the fire, the silica from the glass all cause stress on the structure of the clay. I see a connection between this aspect of the clay process and the strain a relationship can go through at times.

I throw on the wheel to make the foundation, creating the basic shape of the piece. I throw small pieces off the hump to create the individual elements that will cover the foundation. I then alter the thrown pieces. Altering can happen through cutting or darting the clay and then slipping and scoring it back together. Another alteration happens by knocking the piece on its side to bend or slouch. This way each piece has more character and distinctiveness than something strictly thrown on the wheel. It also aids in giving the work a more organic appearance.

After the alteration is done I employ a method known as slip casting. This is a way to make a copy of a three dimensional object. This first step is to make a plaster mold of the object. After the plaster dries and the cast object is removed, slip is poured into the mold. Slip is clay and water mixed into liquid form the consistency of paint. The plaster pulls the moisture out of the slip which creates a shell. The excess slip is poured out and the left over shell is left to dry. What is left is a copy of the original object. Slip casting helps with the production process. This is useful when working in multiples. It saves a lot of time and produces similar shapes that give the overall form the appearance of unity and cohesiveness.

After the structure is built I apply a coating of slip to each piece by using a spray gun. The spray gun is filled with the same slip that I used to join the pieces together and also for the slip cast elements. For a thick application I stand back five to ten feet from the piece and spray up to thirty coats of slip. A thick coat will take hours to apply. It is important not to let too much time to pass in between coats however because the sprayed shell of slip will begin to dry and flake. The thick coats can resemble moss or algae growth and in depending on the final color can also look a lot like coral. To achieve a heavily textured surface it is best to let the slip thicken up to the consistency of syrup and spray at a lower PSI around thirty pounds per square inch. A more subtle texture, like sandpaper, requires less time because there are less coats needed. Also, the slip consistency should be close to buttermilk and the PSI can go up to fifty pounds per square inch. I give about three feet of room between me and the piece when spraying the texture to create a finer and more delicate finish.



**Figure 12. *Big Red Detail***

After the surface is built up, it is time for color. Under glazes work well because they are very stable and come in a large variety of colors. They also keep a very dry surface which allows for glossy pops of color to be added later for a more dramatic or wet effect. I use very bright candy coated colors that can be found in picture plants, orchids, lilies, and tropical species. The vibrant colors are used to reference plant life but also to draw attention the way flowers use color to attract bees. There are patterns and stripes which can only be seen in ultra-violet which are invisible to us, but to a bee are guides to the nectar. I attempt to reproduce these guides through texture and subtle traces of pattern.

When the work is done being glazed fired it is placed on the wall. Presenting it on the wall gives it the traditional placement of a portrait and is able to viewed all at once as a portrait would typically be viewed. They are placed at average eye level as to be able to confront the piece face to face. Each piece sits on a field of color. It acts as a frame and a complementary background. The color field is a simple shape as not to distract from the work but to enhance it.



**Figure 11. *Gold Finger***  
**9"x12"x8"**

## 8 CONCLUSION

The work included in the FULLY LOADED series has been an experimental process for me. Each piece became a glorified test tile which has been my favorite part of the process. Working in clay has always provided the gut wrenching experience from opening the kiln to an explosion to a “just not what I expected” disappointment. It also makes me wait with bated breath at the excitement and anticipation of what is behind the kiln door and that is what keeps me coming back for more.



**Figure 12. *Triple Dong***  
36”x12”x9”

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