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Body As a Vessel

Matt Chenoweth

In partial fulfillment of the M.F.A. degree requirements

4/21/2013

Kira Enriquez

Alden Cavanaugh

Sala Wong

Body as a Vessel

What started as an idea for a cohesive body of work quickly became a journey of self-reflection and a heightened awareness of why I am the person that I am. From early in my childhood I wondered how things worked and how all the parts of a machine could work together for a specific purpose. I was always taking things apart and then putting them back together, sometimes unsuccessfully. Making something or fixing something with my hands always felt so natural and right. I took a college ceramics course and was drawn to the processes used to make ceramic objects and the analogous relationship between artist and clay. My fascination with process drove me to experiment with form through ceramics. Clay undergoes many changes during the creative process; there is always a sense of tentatively finding one's way. Clay is affected by the choices the artist makes in a way that mirrors human emotional and physical life.

Changes in my life have deeply informed the subject matter of my thesis work. I was married three months before my graduate studies began. This was a major change, but my life changed even more radically when my son was born. The moment of his birth opened my eyes to the beauty of humanity and the fact that though the human body consists of the same parts, all people are unique. The human form became an awe-inspiring "machine" with parts working together to sustain life. My use of figurative forms and my way of working acknowledges the relationships and emotions that leave a lasting effect on my identity. At the same time the political atmosphere of the presidential election cycle during development and production of the work had an influence on the concepts and premises of the figurative forms. Specifically, the politics of gender, and of

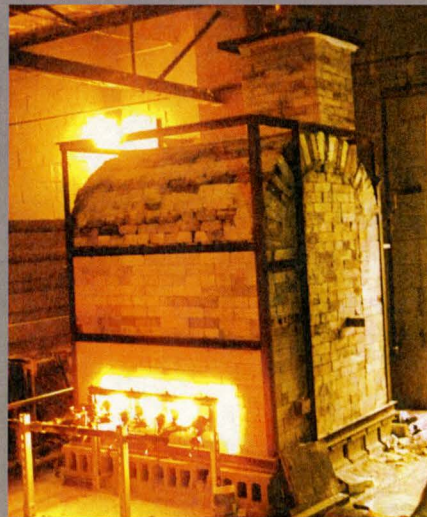
the construction of marriage and family, caused me to reflect on and question received notions of what constitute these close, human bonds.

The idea of process is another major influence in my work. I was a functional potter for the majority of the time I made ceramics. Using the traditional tool for making functional pottery, the wheel, I make nontraditional figurative forms. Drawing on my desire to take things apart, I start with a traditional, functional form, and deconstruct it by cutting it into pieces. I then reconfigure those pieces making vessels resembling the human body. Due to the similarities between pottery and human forms, this resemblance occurs naturally. Pots have necks, shoulders, bodies, and feet. I transform the symmetrical and static nature of the original form into a gestural, moving figure, seemingly with a life of its own.

What started as arbitrary construction quickly evolved into deliberate posturing and positioning of forms to evoke an emotion or lived experience. The forms that result are ambiguous; they illustrate that the human body is just a vessel; its real significance is in containing our personalities and emotions. I was challenged by the technical problems I encountered when making these forms do specific actions or gestures. How do I make this pot look like a person sitting at a table? The evolution of this thesis research, lead me to understand more of the fragility of the human condition, and the correlation with the ceramic process, in which clay goes through stages that reflect the fragility of human life. Clay can crack and break, it can slump and warp; these things are, like the human body, directly impacted by external factors. In the same sense that time and external factors take a physical toll on the body and on the soul, I am using atmospheric firing processes to finish my work and give it a lived character.

Firing clay is a critical part of the process and determines the final color, and surface qualities of the work. The atmospheric firing processes are salt, soda, and wood firing. In each of these types of firings, the glaze is introduced into the kiln while it is hot. It instantly vaporizes, and lands on the pieces in an unpredictable pattern, forming glass. As a result, control of the finished product is diminished, and I learned to embrace this inability to control the outcome. The firing process becomes a metaphor for the loss of control in human existence. We cannot control every aspect of life, nor can we control the actions or thoughts of those to whom we are closest. We are directly affected by the environment we live in and the relationships we share. Soda is my main technique because the variety of the fired surfaces and colors enhance the organic forms of the vessels. The primary clay I chose for this body of work is a China clay based porcelain, the type of clay used in "fine china". This decision was made through research into which clay-bodies are best used in soda firing, and the desired surface and glaze effects.

Soda firing and salt firing have the same principles. Sodium, introduced into a gas kiln, vaporizes and travels along the flame path combining with the silica in the clay forming a sodium silicate glass layer. The difference is the source of the sodium, salt glaze is made from salt and soda is obtained from soda ash. Wood firing stands alone in atmospheric firing in that the fuel for the kiln is wood and the glaze comes from the ash being deposited as the wood burns, melting and forming glass.



*60 cubic foot soda kiln I built
taken during firing*

Each one of these firing processes needs specially designed kilns.

Since I decided to soda fire my work, and the school did not have a working soda kiln, part of my thesis work was to build a soda kiln. I built a sixty cubic foot cross-draft gas fired kiln. The kiln has a roman barrel style arch with nine-inch thick hard firebrick walls. There are four venturi style natural gas burners that produce a total of 1.3 million Btu's of heat. That is one hot fire! The experience of designing and building a kiln is invaluable to ceramics students and I wanted to include this process as part of my thesis work. I documented the kiln build with a stop motion movie as part of the project.

As much as the process inspires my work, the major influence is my family, and the emotions innate in relationships between people. The deep, emotional connections shared within the family, specifically with spouses and children, open one's heart and mind to the feelings of unconditional love and absolute fear. Fear of hurting or fear for safety of one's family is as powerful as love. These are the types of emotions some of my vessels represent: the unbridled uncontrollable feelings that are intrinsic within intimate relationships between people. Other, emotional responses to the environment and social issues seem just as inherent to me as in my social relationships.

Inspiration comes from a variety of sources, and other artists working in clay are of great inspiration to my art and practice. Two artists whom inspire me greatly are Nick Joerling and Chris Gustin. Joerling makes functional pottery in a very expressive way that speaks of movement and gesture. His work is very whimsical with rich colored surfaces and hints of figurative forms. The work of Gustin consists of large-scale vessels that are very gestural with beautiful surface treatments and colors. These large vessels all have some subtle figurative quality such as what seems to be belly buttons or fat rolls, but

one is not quite sure. Gustin says, "I use surfaces that purposely encourage touch, and by inviting the hand to explore the forms as well as the eye, I hope to provoke numerous memories, recollections that have the potential to change from moment to moment."¹ Both artists have a passion for form and exemplify clay artisans and craftsmen. Their work in the contemporary scope of ceramics is both pioneering and innovative.

Each piece I made for my thesis work has a different conceptual idea relating to my personal experiences and viewpoints. The relationship between my emotional connections with individuals and with all of humanity is portrayed through figurative forms interacting with each other and their environments. The abstraction of the figure resulting from my use of pottery forms leads to an ambiguity related to some of my socio-political views on issues where the "political becomes personal," such as marriage and family. Although they are figurative, my vessels can be construed as sexless, raceless, and equal. This furthers my belief that all humans are equal and deserve equal rights. My work represents my emotions and relationships and most of the pieces have an underlying political meaning about which I feel strongly.

Joy, depicted here, represents the emotional feelings of love and happiness people feel when embraced by a lover, or friend. It is about holding someone close and the way this action can show love



"Joy" 2013
soda fired porcelain

between two people. Personally, I see it as my wife and me in a loving embrace, but the underlying ambiguity of the two forms could lead the viewer to a different interpretation. The two people aren't necessarily a man and a woman, social relationships we share will most likely dictate how the viewer interprets the embracing couple. This is in relationship to the socio-political idea of marriage equality, which is a current issue in society today. My political opinions play a role in my life, and therefore seem relevant to the emotional interactions I have with my art.

One of the most intense and unequivocal emotions is the unconditional love for one's child. Represented here in *"Love"*, this feeling seems to be naturally innate, but one cannot grasp the pure depth of it until they experience it themselves, at least that's how it happened to me. I designed this as a self-portrait, but it seems to represent the mother and child relationship. Watching this relationship between parent and child

grow over time, epitomizes the love that humanity is capable of, and one learns the true meaning of selflessness. When you care for someone more than life itself, your happiness depends directly on his or her happiness. It's hard to imagine a bigger awakening to the



fragile nature of life than to have a child, for you would rather die than see something bad happen to your children.

Familial relationships are unique in the scope of social relationships because of the bond through marriage or birth. Another aspect of the family relationship, which seems to be of concern in my thesis research, is portrayed in the piece *Nuclear Family*.

This work represents a changing society's idea of what a family should be, the picture



"Nuclear Family" 2013, soda fired porcelain

perfect husband and wife with a girl, and a boy. As each viewer brings his or her own views and beliefs with them, the ambiguous figures of this family could be interpreted as a different type of family unit all together.

With the current political battles going on to define marriage as "one man, one woman," this artwork is representative of my view that all human beings are equal, and two men or two women in love should have the right to marry and raise a family. This is a feeling that I believe is intrinsic to humanity, but bigotry resulting from fear of the unknown or difference, has existed in many forms throughout history. This is the reason I feel so passionate about equal rights for all people.

Fear is arguably one of the most powerful emotions. It can push people to extreme states of being. Hate and hostility can result when human beings are faced with the unknown or unfamiliar. The fear to take a chance can result in feelings of regret inside

oneself. The fear felt when one is faced with challenges or difficulties in life will force that person to overcome or fail. The will to overcome the challenges and obstacles in life was the reason for creating the artwork titled *"Fear"*.

The three figurative vessels represent different stages of conquering fear. Read from left to right, the first figure is backed up against a wall, frozen from the fear of falling of the cliff. He or she is so scared of failing that they will not even try. The cliff is a metaphor for the

obstacles throughout one's life. The second figure, overcoming some of that fear, walks to the edge of the cliff and cautiously looks over. After prevailing over the



fear of failing and peeking over the edge, only then can one experience life in full. The third figure represents the conquering of fear only to fail anyways. Sometimes no matter how hard one tries, failing is inevitable. This figure is holding on for dear life after falling and has to gather enough strength to get back up and try again. Defeating the fear, the person is stronger so they will try again and succeed.

Another fear for much of humanity is the fear of death. Death is an unavoidable part of life, everyone has their own way of dealing with the emotions related to our own deaths and the loss of our loved ones. Personally I am far less afraid of my own death as I

am for losing the people I love. Having lost loved ones and friends I have come to terms



"Loneliness" 2013, reduction fired porcelain with wood ash

with the fact that I will die someday, but just thinking about a loved one dying can bring out the deepest of sadness. I created the group of vessels entitled *"Loneliness"* to express the emotional responses

from losing someone close to you, and being left alone in the world without them. The fear is not necessarily of death, but of abandonment and loss. One can only express the true emotional impact of the death of a loved one through experience. It's hard to imagine how it feels when someone they love dies, and this artwork represents the emptiness that can overwhelm the body and mind. My personal experiences with death have helped me learn to cope with the feelings associated with this type of loss.

The way many people deal with the emotional turmoil of death is through religion, and the faith they have in some entity, whether it is God or something else. Humanity has many types of religions all over the world. Faith is foundational to religion and people kill and go to war over their beliefs. I mention this because of the social relationships I am dealing with, the relationship between people and god, one religion to another, and with the many people within each different religion, can incite the most powerful emotional responses of anything in all of humanity. The piece *"Faith"* was made with the intention of drawing attention to the idea that all people can have there

own faith in whatever they see fit, and the different faiths of the world should learn to live together in peace. I made this vessel because I want to have faith that humanity can coexist and make the environment a better place for all to share.

There is a very poignant socio-political issue that arises from faith. The freedom of religion was established so every person could practice whichever religion they wanted, or none at all. The separation of church and state is the only way to ensure this freedom. This is an important issue to me because I increasingly started following politics and

learning about the issues facing society in this country and humanity as a whole. I believe that everyone has faith in something, a deity, an idea, or just faith in them self. Faith can lift your spirits and pull you up when you are down.

When we as humans fall, our goal is usually to get back up. Emotional pain can debilitate and knock us down. My experience with emotional pain throughout my life helps me to see the point of getting back up. It seems so easy when one is in pain, to give up and lose hope. There is a point when the pain becomes so strong one cannot tolerate anymore. This is the most crucial time and getting through will determine the way one can grow from the pain.



"Faith" 2013
soda fired porcelain

The absolute power pain can have over a person is the reason I chose to create the artwork entitled "*Pain*". This piece represents that fallen person whom struggles to get back up, crawling on the ground for help. When viewing this piece, the interpretation



may point to a physical pain, but emotional pain seems to accompany physical pain and both can be devastatingly incapacitating.

The causes of emotional pain humans suffer from are as varied as

are their intensities. The next group of vessels I produced represents the feelings of pain one gets when arguing with a loved one. "*The Argument*", is a commentary on the roles of combatants in a fight. It is not a physical brawl, but rather an emotional sparring match in which one person is losing terribly. This piece symbolizes two sides of an emotional exchange but clearly one participant is feeling a bit cornered, the feeling would be the emotional equivalent of physically having ones arms tied behind their back. There are many different emotions related to this type of social interaction and



arguing with a loved one can make one physically sick, but without this communication things will inevitably get worse. The idea is that these disagreements are a necessary part of life and I am trying to acknowledge this fact and try to better communicate with people in general.

The forms I create start as standard pottery forms originating from historical Japanese or Ancient Greek ceramic precedents. I have a personal affinity with the curvaceous, elegant, classical forms used by the potters of these cultures. Pottery is of major importance in understanding different cultures throughout history. Because of the permanence of the material, examples of the forms, thankfully, still physically exist. Another historical precedent that I am representing is called Kintsugi, which means “golden joinery” in Japanese. This is the art of fixing broken ceramics with a resin made to look like gold. This is relevant to me because just as the human body can have imperfections so can ceramics. Drawing attention to the uniqueness of a crack by adding gold is analogous to seeing the beauty in imperfections in the human body.

The expression of emotions through the creation of these ceramic vessels challenged me to dig deep and learn about myself while trying to master this skill. The emotions relating to our social relationships that I have expressed through this thesis exhibition are only a drop in the ocean of the full spectrum of human emotions. One’s personal biases will lead to an open interpretation by the viewer. My goal was simply to convey my own experience with emotion and relationships visually through these vessels. The intricate labyrinth of the interwoven feelings between people forever changes, but these visceral emotions stay true to all humanity.

Through the exploration of these personal feelings and concepts, working with ceramic vessels, I have discovered correlation between the ceramic process and life. We as mortal human beings, change physically and mentally, and are constantly affected by our environment, emotions and relationships. The changes clay goes through seem to emulate various facets of human life. Just as the human body can break, so can a ceramic object. Pottery is made with volume intended to contain something inside. The vessels I have created by altering pottery forms to mimic the human figure, represent the idea that the body is just a vessel that contains life and the many relationships and emotions experienced by humanity.

Technical Information

The temperature I am firing to is 2350 degrees Fahrenheit. This is referred to as cone ten. Ceramic artists use pyrometric cones inside the kiln to visually measure the amount of heat. The cones are stood upright in a lump of clay and placed in the kiln with the ceramic objects. As the firing progresses, the cones bend and melt at specific temperatures.

Australian artist, Gail Nichols, invented the method I used to introduce sodium into the kiln. A mixture of calcium carbonate, soda ash and baking soda helps the sodium disperse throughout the kiln.

Flashing slips are applied to the pieces, as opposed to glazes, to achieve greater variety of colors and surface textures. These flashing slips are made primarily of different colored clays.

Recipes from this thesis work:

Grolleg porcelain Clay Body

Grolleg 55
Custer 15
Silica (200m) 27
Calcined Alumina or
tubular alumina 3
Veegum T 2

Helmer Flashing Slip

Helmer Kaolin 70
Nepheline Syenite 30

Oestreich Red/Black/Green Flashing Slip

EPK Kaolin 40.00
Custer 15.00
Silica 15.00
Taylor ball clay 30.00
+Copper Carb 6.00

Soda Mixture²

Light Soda Ash 20
Baking Soda 30
Calcium Carbonate 50
Water 9 US fl. Oz. per lb. of mixture

Bauer Flashing Slip

EPK 41.9
OM-4 ball clay 41.9
Borax 5.7
Zircopax 10.5

Notes

1. Quote from Chris Gustin Artist Statement "About the Artist: Statement."
Ceramic Studio Artist Lectures Workshops Tea Bowls Pottery Exhibits.
<http://www.gustincermics.com/about/statement.html> (accessed May 1, 2013).

2. Gail Nichols *Soda, clay, and fire*. Westerville, (OH: American Ceramic Society, 2006)

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