

Animal Family

By
Samuel Z. Chen

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Readers:
Rachel Owens, Assistant Professor of Sculpture, Chair
Nancy Bowen, Professor of Sculpture

Animal Family is a collection of ceramic pieces that form a community, sharing a common thread of identity, fantasy, and weirdness. This work is iterative and a fabricated story that transcends my voice into a conversation of the human condition to register ourselves as agents of our bodies and communities. As a queer mixed race Chinese American, these ceramic figures are symbolic of the cultural complexities I've experienced through the communities I belong to. The consequences of this have affected the way I navigate and interact with all sides of my identity. The group of figures are the formulation of an endless inquiry of self inside a social dynamic and responsively an act of what it means to be in a community and family. This family is beautiful, layered, cold, warm, visceral, and honest.

The *Clay Body* is a term used to describe the different variants and mixture components of earthly mineral substances such as hydrous silicate of alumina that make up the clay material- depending on the components mixed in, all clays serve different purposes [Schmidt, 2009]. In the five works I am presenting, I used low fire cone 04-06 clay bodies. Although the structural integrity is limited by the cone (the temperature it is fired to), this low fire body is easily accessible and malleable to use. When I start with an idea, I typically allow the material to form on its own rather than forcing a gesture that will burden it. For example, if I roll a thin slab, it would not correlate with the internal structure of a large -scale project; it will likely collapse under its own weight. Even then, I may use the coil method to produce it, building a scaffolding interior with pieces of clay to support it. This way I can physically feel and visually see the joining of two separate bodies into one. Rose B Simpson is an Indigenous artist who has spoken about the way clay in nature allows her to create a dialogue of the bodies joining together. In relation to her racial background, she speaks about this interaction of materials as a physical

representation of her identity and the trauma inherited from colonization. In her catalogue from the Wheelwright Museum, written by Yve Chavez, Simpson speaks about the slab technique “Like we’re smashed, like we’ve been broken, and the pieces are on the floor and we’re holding it together” [*Chavez, Wheelwright Museum 2019*]. The making process has infected me with a tremendous desire to become one with the clay.

As I explore the uncomfortable, the material presents a physical dialogue of sculpting an idealized object/figure. I take an intuitive approach every time I begin a new project; I am informed by the ways the clay is affected throughout the artmaking process. I work with it in this manner because of its malleable, elastic nature. Since Ceramics are time based, I am attentive to every step. It is important to maintain the moisture, but it can also be unforgiving if one adds too much water or leaves it exposed to the air- in both cases, the piece will crack. When talking about materiality and subject matter, the two go hand in hand. The relationship of the two stems from my curiosity to construct the fields of my mind into something physical, this physicality becomes a talisman. Ceramic art as a material is perpetually silent. The form and inner space of a vessel can hold memories and feelings. But they can also shatter- clay is inherently fragile. Diving through years of memories is uncomfortable but using it presents an opportunity for them to flourish. I am delegating a nurturing and caring environment for the clay and for myself.



My Dog Ebenezer, 1.17 x 1.07 x .5 ft, Bisqueware, 2019

My Dog Ebenezer (2019) was my first ceramic piece. Inspired by my dog, this piece has become the foundation for my entire practice. He was a rescued eighteen-year-old Pekingese/Chihuahua mix that filled my heart ever since he entered our lives. When I look back, I realize that transferring my connection to Ebenezer into a clay form was critical to make. ‘Our’ animals are considered nothing more than companions which fill the void and make us more human. But it’s not only that, they are a part of our family. According to Aaron Mahnke from the podcast Lore, he describes that our loyal companions have been loved by humanity for centuries. In episode 164, he talks about the ritualistic pedestal’s humans have put our pets on such as the

entombed Egyptian cat buried in Cypress. This find was ‘discovered’ in 2001 along with a human skeleton and numerous other funerary items but it supports the claim that people love their pets. In the same episode, Mahnke goes on to provide examples of how cats and dogs have serviced humans throughout history in the form of familiars. He proclaimed that we have both exploited and created hysteria amongst them as a means to keep subordination under the Church. Although the context of familiars was closely related to Witchcraft and devil worship, some were helpful for Middle Age villagers to survive hardships such as sickness and warfare [*Mahnke, 2021*].

Ebenezer was no different, and I created this piece under the belief that he held as much intellect and weight as any person. From the ears to the hands and fingers, to the foot and toes, to the bulbous eyes, I saw the innocence and the person in him. When I initially bisque fired *My Dog Ebenezer*, I wondered if color would add anything to the story of my best friend. Many working ceramicists would declare the absence of glaze would make it look unfinished. But I believe there is strength in its natural state. By firing the ceramics, they can become stoic and frigid vessels that encapsulate a ghostly absence. The suggestion of a color can perpetuate the allusion to an identity and Ebenezer was a lost sentience.



Cracked Bed, 6 x 3 x .8 ft, Bisqueware, 2020

Cracked Bed (2020) was created in the Fall of 2020 after Covid-19 ravaged the previous months. At this time, I was indulging in the application of wax on my pieces. Considered as encaustic painting, I would melt down a pound of beeswax, paraffin, regular economic candle wax, and oil paint to replicate the consistency and texture of skin. Most of my work spawned from the lack of human connection and intimacy during that year. In essence I was thinking about sex, more specifically the lack of sexual intimacy. The wax work is also in response to my overweight body both as a child and into adulthood. When I look at myself in the mirror, it is

difficult to not notice the unflattering scars, hair, fat rolls, fat cheeks, double chin, bloated stomach, red spot acne, tiny eyes... I haven't loved myself until recently. Insecurity is a social and mental killer related to Eurocentric idealizations of beauty. *Cracked Bed* is a visceral representation of intimate dependency and conversely a metaphor for a broken home. Despite the shape of the mattress, this piece is hollow underneath, becoming a blanket while a revelation of change occurs. The ceramic plates are converging, transforming, and subsequently diverging all at the same time but some parts are missing. The intention was to use this domestic and vulnerable object and transform it into something cold and static, that accentuates the grip our bodies have on it.

In Tracey Emin's confessional art piece *My Bed* (1998), she deals with similar ideas of provoking a narrative that is encapsulated by the presentation of her bed after a breakup. Included in this piece were "...crumpled tissues, period-stained clothing, cigarettes, empty vodka bottles, a pregnancy test, lubricant, and condoms" all of which littered the floor around the bed. Critics described how this piece resembled a crime scene or her artistry was a bore, but largely this piece perpetuated her ability to tell a story. Alina Cohen, writer for Artsy, writes "...*My Bed* makes the viewer consider the events and mishaps that led up to the wreckage. The piece is expansive in its ability to conjure a full narrative about depression, self-harm, and eventual redemption..." [Cohen, 2018].

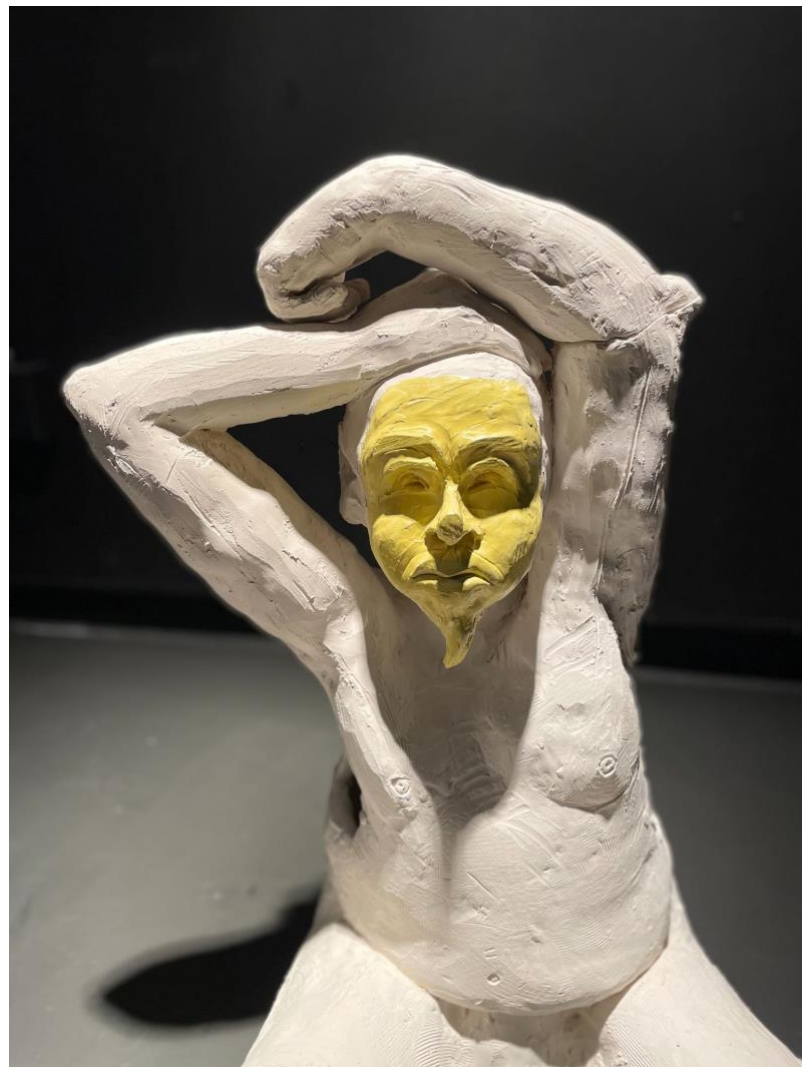


Portrait, 2 x 2.41 x 2.6 ft, Glaze & Bisqueware, 2021

Portrait (2021) came to fruition in the tradition of ceramic figure making. As always, the attraction of the human body comes from a need to replicate real and ideal portraits. Whether it is a face or the entire body, almost every culture and civilization have examples of the ‘portrait’. In my piece, I constructed its arms onto the crown to signify the figure's presumed relaxed state. For the viewer, this may appear to be a comfortable seated stance, but the exhibition of it is intended to be centered in a space. Therefore, if you were to mimic the form, you may come to realize that the perfect posture and sprawled out legs make you uncomfortable- at least it does for me. As I discuss the identity workings of my collection of ceramic pieces, it is important to revisit how a sudden sense of discomfort is widely coded with *Portrait*. The physicality and dynamism of this piece, the textural composition on the surface of the bisqueware combine in this piece as a layered being with the process explicitly on display.

As I sat with the piece and looked at the tiny slit eyes and the wide button nose, I realized I’ve already given it some attributes to perpetuate a person. In response, I painted a mix of medium yellow and white cone 04-06 underglaze, coated with satin glaze, on the face. Yellow is stereotypically used to distinguish and *make fun-of* persons of East Asian descent in the western context through everyday language and industries such as film and other affiliated pop culture archetypes. Such examples of yellow face can be found in productions like *The Orphan from China (1767)* or *Cloud Atlas (2012)* [Lu, 2012] but through my piece, I want to create a dialogue and reclaim the notion that Asians/Oriental are yellow. And as I unpack the narrative about my identity, the color yellow becomes charged. I am witness and otherwise confronted to use these racial signals to act and respond against the hierarchy that installed them. In Jean Kim's discourse titled *Asian American Racial Identity Development Theory*, they state “...racial identity

describes how people deal with the effects of racism, eventually disowning the dominant groups views of their own group and developing a positive self-definition and positive attitude toward their own group” [Kim, 2012]. Through the process of executing it, this piece is explicit and to the point. In Rose B. Simpson's piece “*Reclamation*” (2017-2018), she describes how she kept dressing and undressing the ceramic and asking questions if certain items like a necklace should be added to it. She states “I changed it so many times. It felt like my own life- the many times I have transformed. Now it feels like an honest representation of me” [Simpson, *Wheelwright Museum*, 2019]. Regardless of the racial signals I have presented, the color and the form are a poetic representation of myself and the journey I have experienced.



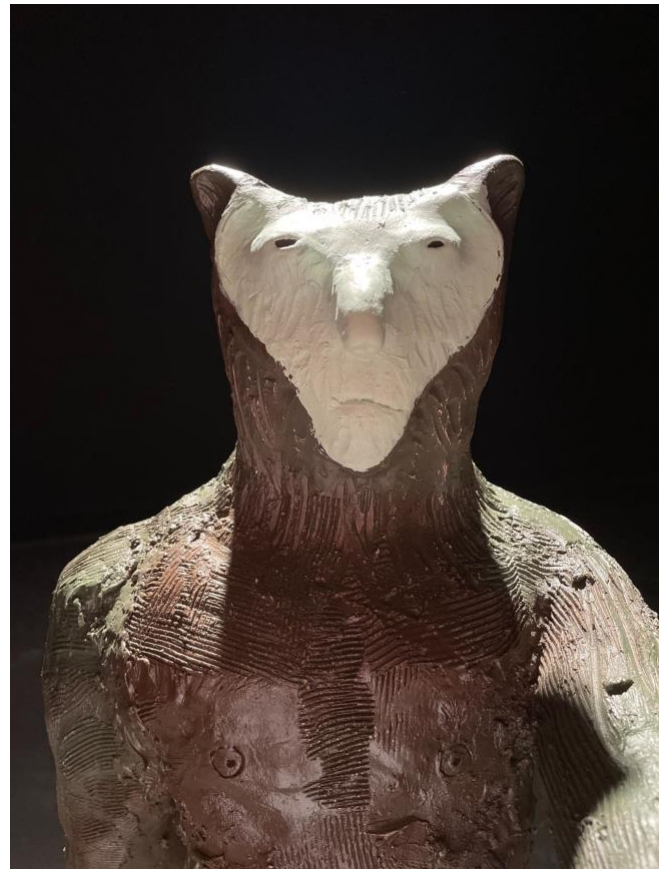


Fox & Sheep, 3.5 x 1 x .6ft (Fox- Right), 1 x 1.6 x .8ft (Sheep-Left), Glazed Ceramics, 2021

Fox & Sheep (2021) is a dual piece which expressed my first full endeavor with color. These colors are desaturated cool shades with an undertone of light brown; both of the faces on

them are colored a light blue/green to accentuate my ideas about identity. But I saw this as a departure from the previous works I've made concerning the bisque state. *Fox & Sheep* is thematically inspired by children's stories such as *Where the Wild Things are?*, *The Goonies*, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* while staying within an identity narrative. In the early stages of this piece, I regressed to a childlike mentality to inform the conceptual process. A lot of this came from an ever-longing interest to incorporate fantasy and mysticism into my work.

In *My Dog Ebenezer*, the signs were already there but its description bases its concepts in familial identity. Whereas *Fox & Sheep* is talking about reality and dreams. In both of the figures, there is a clear overlap of human qualities and animalistic ones. Both feature personable faces and the standing one has human-like feet and hands. In the *Sheep*, I created a porthole to see out the mouth through the anus and vice versa. That experience is both humorous and perverse. Looking at the two of them, I see a correlation to *Portrait* and *My Dog Ebenezer*. Both pairs are acting as man and dog. But *Fox & Sheep* presents a different gesture. In reference to Caravaggio's painting "*Calling of St. Matthew* ", I have appropriated Christ's pointed and downward hand gesture to Matthew which was a signal for him to come hither and follow



[Harris, 2015]. This all relates to a conversation of identity; I am projecting something that can be seen as accusatory or alienating. A community only matters if it is shared by a parent encouraging one to practice the customs they have presented. In an absence of applying pressure, a culture that is foreign in the Western Context is uncomfortable. At home there was always an unnerving sense of spectacle of my face when attending family gatherings. My siblings and I would hear things such as “How come you don’t speak Chinese?” “Why don’t you eat this



food?” “Why are you so big?” These questions were said with love and I believe my uncomfortableness from these encounters is also connected to my sexuality. The figures act as beasts or even monsters in this sense. In Ocean Vuong's memoir *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, he describes how his mother is a monster but defines it as such: “From the Latin root *monstrum*, a divine messenger of catastrophe, then adapted by the Old French to mean an animal of myriad

origins: centaur, griffin, satyr. To be a monster is to be a hybrid signal, a lighthouse: both shelter and warning at once” [Vuong, 2018]. Through *Fox & Sheep*, I created a narrative that transcends my story into something fictional but also crosses over into reality. They are configurations of my personality and imaginations, but I have allowed them to exist and act as demons, protectors, and boundless beings.



Wrap Around, 4.5 x 1.15 x .75ft, Glazed Ceramics, 2021

Lastly, *Wrap Around* (2021) synthesizes all these ideas into one. This piece is ambitious, standing four and half feet tall. Its scale is important to confront the viewer to look upon dimensions that are proportionally slanted. I have also achieved this by sculpting slit eyes that include lids inside these indentations- following the viewer as they gaze back at the sculpture. In this work, I am exaggerating the sense of a character. In ceramic artist Travis Winters' work, he has constructed a collection of characters that are humorous and "... Captivating the imagination of the viewer through open-ended stories, inviting the fabrication of personal narratives, and encouraging an intimate connection with the characters" [Winters, 2013]. Winters' work had an early influence in my practice because his work is colorful and entrapping. He creates a world for his characters; they exist in a mundane day to day narrative that I wanted to create for mine also.

Wrap Around is dramatic. An aggressive tongue points out of the mouth, one arm wrapping onto the stomach, the other wrapping around the back and grasping the neck. Yellow tinted skin, tight pants, one large hoop earring and large ears are features I have created for a character and narrative, borne from my identity. The wrapping of arms is in dialogue with my uncomfortable body experience; the tiny eyes and large ears are



stereotypical of people of Asian descent; the pointed tongue is a defense mechanism of the self against my communities; the tight pants are comfortable but perhaps restricting as well. In Rose

B. Simpson's piece *Secret of Flight* (2015), she is portraying a large male figure to represent the responsibilities she felt of the masculine gender with a female tied to his back. Simpson goes on to describe that they “honor silence and the intimacy of a secret, a whisper” [*Simpson, Wheelwright Museum, 2019*]. Like *Fox & Sheep, Wrap Around* is a departure into a more charged fantasy that is idealized and filtered with hints of the real embedded in the form. Like *Secret of Flight*, I am interested in the poetics of figurative work. A lot of these come into play as I continue my journey with color. Originally this figure was going to remain shirtless, but finer textural details such as the nipples, belly button and happy trail are enhanced from a draw up of the shirt- this is where the blue comes into play. The choice to use it was to apply a color that was in contrast with the yellow skin but works in concert with the green pants. The hair on the crown of the figure was made with my hair to achieve a more authentic texture and consistency.

The medium of ceramics has provided my practice the opportunity to explore the thoughts and feelings that are uncomfortable and compartmentalizing. One of my greatest struggles is to accept the reality of my mind, body, and the communities I am a part of. I respond to this reality with my sculpture. In my work, I take a diaristic approach referencing the relationship between identity and iterative fantasies. Charged as both social commentary and personal experience, the work revolves around ideas of becoming part of a group both chosen and inherited. These works are a family.

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