

Sweet Friends, Mistakes, and Other Hiccups

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I often find myself holding one of the ceramic sculptures that are scattered throughout my studio among fragments and works in other materials. Most of the ceramics are placed haphazardly on tables or on the floor, just asking to be tripped over or thrown to the ground. I am constantly rearranging them and manage to break one every time I am in the studio. My space is a mess, there are strange smells, and there is colorful crap everywhere.

I am constantly tripping. I bump into one of the shitty foldable tables. Its flimsy legs wobble and I see the sculpture sitting precariously on the edge teeter. As a bead of sweat leaks from my scalp and I silently say a prayer, the piece falls and shatters into innumerable pieces. This happens so often that I barely react anymore. Usually, a reluctant smile of acceptance gets plastered onto my stupid face as I look at the aftermath, and it then evolves to laughter. If one breaks, it doesn't matter because there are still dozens of them. There are so many of them that they have become a hindrance. I often imagine taking a baseball bat to all of them.

Most of the ceramics are monochromatic, finished in candy-colored glazes that are simultaneously playful and sickening. They embody a duality in their forms: a main, extruded circular pipe holds up a mass of noodle-like material dangling off the sides. These forms resemble fettuccini, spaghetti, tagliatelle, egg noodles or other simple carbohydrates that we are told to avoid, which makes these sculptures feel decadent and sinful in the era of trendy keto and low-carb diets. However, I admit that "sinful" may be a stretch because in fact they are relatively polite forms, despite the possibility that they may be read as phallic.

There is an excess of these extruded noodles. They are either crammed into the opening of the circular pipes or laid "artfully" on top; how nice. The sculptures are top-heavy and the weight of the extrusions bends the pipes slightly in one direction or another. Gravity is inherent in these works because it is an unavoidable aspect of this world and attempting to subvert it feels so fucking lame. Sometimes two pipes are tied together as though they are hugging; other times the noodles of one are fed into the other's orifices as though they are kissing with too much tongue.

As the clay becomes drier over time, the pieces slowly grow harder and more brittle; the material eventually reaches a bone-dry texture. At this point it can be fired at an outrageous temperature where it will be forever petrified in its position. As I move the pieces from my studio, they tend to crumble in my hands, so I always have to run awkwardly to the room with the kilns.

Usually, I have a heavy-handed process that is missing from the making of these ceramic works. I know I am holding back; there is not much to them. They are formal, and awkwardly elegant, like a tall, graceful person with no confidence. I like to think that they would sell easily and that bothers me, but only slightly, because I did take on loans to get a degree that seems to have taught me everything except how to navigate the

vapid, hyper-commodified, market-driven world of the visual arts that I will (hopefully) be thrown into.

I always wanted to make work of cultural significance, but I know that these objects are not that. This work is just an embodiment of my love affair with the material and the extruder that I use to make it. When I pull the lever of the extruder, I often envision soft serve ice cream coming out, and I am almost disappointed knowing that it will always be clay.

Clay has one of the longest histories of all the art mediums, but I often find myself unable to look at it as having any sort of grandeur because I see it as just a history of people playing with mud. It has become a fetish material to many collectors since the turn of the 21st century, and I hope that I will be able to cash in on this relatively new contemporary craze, which has been quite fruitful for artists like Brian Rochefort and Anton Alvarez. Although one of the good things about these market trends is that they allow for significant artists like Ron Nagle, Arlene Shechet, Nicole Cherubini, and Kathy Butterly to be seen more regularly.

I often find myself engaged in an argument with myself: part of me wants desperately to create something with integrity (whatever that means in our silly country.) The rest just wants a disgusting amount of money. I am resigned knowing that often this internal dialog leads to the same realization: my fantasies of success in the arts are shallow and simply reduce my work to becoming nothing more than a tax write-off.

An attempt to try and turn my dreams of money and success into reality; a botched attempt at networking:

“Hey! Tom, right? It’s Stephan! We met before.”

“Hi! How are things?”

Tom extends a fish hand to me and looks around quickly. I don’t think he wants to talk to me. We’re at Broadway gallery on a Friday night. It’s packed with a much ritzier crowd of art enthusiasts than I am used to. Mainly white men in nice clothing with furrowed brows trying to make sense of the mixed media resin collages that are being exhibited. There are some older women walking around covered in jewelry, socializing in a proper fashion with practiced hand gestures; they are filling the room with polite laughter. I guess I am in the right place if this fucking social climber is here. Tom likes to be seen with only the right people; my presence here is clearly bothering him.

“I’m sorry, I don’t remember...”

“I’m Max’s friend. Remember at John’s party, it was at Mary’s place. John got really drunk, twisted my nipples and made the worst puttanesca I have ever had.”

I am tipsy and know that I shouldn’t be so honest, but I don’t care.

“Hmm.. I don’t remember it being that bad.”

“We also ran into each other in Massachusetts. Ian was showing his marble sculptures there.”

At the time, Tom was trying to get an invitation to the dinner being held for the artists there. Ian and his wife told me they were trying to create distance from him so they would not be put in an awkward position. I wonder if he was able to talk himself into an invitation.

“I don’t remember being there.” Tom says. “You mean at my gallery? He exhibited work there last year.”

“No, not at your gallery. I wouldn’t go there. It was at some garden. I am sorry I forget what it was called.”

“Ohh uh-“

“You were wearing some really shiny pants or were they shoes... Oh that’s right! It was your shiny shoes! How could I forget those shoes!”

I start laughing. I love how bad this is going. He smiles in kind and is hating me; it is always fun when the feeling is mutual.

“I do have shiny shoes. Do you mean in the Berkshires?”

“Yes! That’s Massachusetts, right? You were following around that collector who ran the event. Betty or whatever.”

“Oh yes. Now I remember. Hi Stephan.”

“Well I’m going to go. Bye Tom.”

“Nice running into you.”

“Same here.”

He scratches his head as I walk away. I watch him for a minute or so to see what he does next. I thought he would immediately blend into the crowd; I wanted to see how he approaches people so maybe I could figure out how to network like this pariah. He just walked to a corner and pulled his phone out, which was disappointing.

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I was salting meat and shaping dough for its final rise; my parents were coming up for a visit the following day for dinner and to meet the 150-lb. Alaskan Malamute I was taking care of. I seldom check my email on break; however, at the time, I was supposed to teach a summer class so I was checking my email constantly. I received the following email from the facilities manager:

Stephan,

After investigating a strange smell in room 1050A I discovered that it was coming from your studio. I’ll need you to come clean out whatever is causing the odor ASAP.

Thanks

After reading this, I was immediately overwhelmed and pissed. I noticed the smell two weeks ago and decided out of laziness to let it fester. I rolled my eyes in frustration and then made eye contact with the dog. He held it, growled playfully at me then walked over and leaned into me. This shoved me into the kitchen counter and knocked me into the chuck roast I was preparing. Blood stained my white shirt and I shoved the dog hard away from me, took off my shirt and threw it at him. He started licking it and I tore it away from him; his tail started wagging.

When I walked into the arts building, I could smell what she was talking about. Filling the hallway was a sulfuric odor similar to when brussels sprouts are boiled; not pleasant, but complex and bitter like a meal you would serve yourself when you decide to get “healthy.”

The three doors that I walk through to get to my studio are never closed, but they were that day, and the smell got worse with every door I opened. When I got to my studio, the odor was overwhelming and made me wish for the unpleasant smell I experienced back in the hallway. At first, it smelled similar to an expensive cheese my brother served me years ago that tasted like hot trash. However, when I lingered in this space there was a clear scent of death emanating from the studio; it was like raw beef that has been sitting out for way too long.

I abandoned this installation weeks earlier, after my final review. It didn't go very well. One professor told me to think about why I am even in this MFA program and another told me that I should go fishing. Very helpful advice.

Usually, I would enter this installation through a skinny hallway that was made of carpet remnants, which, from afar, looked like a furry cave, playful and inviting like the entrance to a funhouse, but then immediately uncomfortable, like entering a funhouse. The day after my final review I kicked down a wall out of frustration, which collapsed the original entrance made of carpet. However, the new hole in the wall made a very convenient entrance to the cesspit that I now had to deal with.

There were three brightly colored rooms in this installation. The first was the sky-blue room that had the new entrance from the wall I kicked in. The floor was lined with artificial turf, and sitting on this fake grass was a crusty pink sculpture. The base was a glazed coil sculpture that resembled a garden hose. Sitting on top of this green vessel was once a plastic pink chair and end table that I bought from Lowe's; it was the cheapest patio furniture available at the time. The furniture and the ceramic hose made this sculpture into an odd ode to summer. Specifically, to that of a time when you are at the lake with your friends and spend the whole time getting hammered on a boat. Your brain is dull, you are hungover, and you will be feeling the sunburn on your back for the next week; every ex I ever had called me “lobster” in the summer because I don't tan, I just turn pink.

Originally, there wasn't supposed to be a sculpture in this space, it was just supposed to be a plastic chair and an end table that I covered in a material called

ballistic gelatin. At the time, I was attempting to make some haphazard commentary on the casual nature of institutional violence in this country. This installation was just another botched attempt to make a greater commentary on society. Often, I choose materials that are used to construct domestic suburban spaces as an apparatus to deliver an overplayed, redundant negative criticism of suburbia as whole.

The night before my final review, I ran into an issue: I couldn't fit the chair or table through the original entryways I created in the space. So I threw them over the wall and into the blue room. They broke. It was 3 AM.

I immediately scrambled, desperate to fix this plastic furniture, but knew it would be impossible at this point so I mashed the table and chair together, fastened it with screws, then covered the structure with joint compound mixed with paint. This surface treatment was chosen out of laziness; I didn't want to paint the surface once the material was coated. The joint compound did not dry properly, rendering the surface cracked and pink. It reminded me of grade school. I suffered from eczema and was also a husky boy. I was a fat kid covered in rashes and was very easy to bully.

The sculpture looked tired. It did not want to stand. It was top-heavy, unbalanced and leaned to the left. The crusty pink structure looked like a pedestal and it was holding up a glazed pink ceramic object. This was one of the better sculptures I made in this program.

The blue room I was standing in was the least smelly of the three. The next room was pink and there was a pile of dirt laying on top of carpet. It was once covered with a lush bed of grown grass grown using high-end LED lights. These lights are advertised to grow flowers and vegetables inside, but most people on the internet use them to grow dope efficiently in closets.

I bought these lights because at the time I believed that I was experiencing Seasonal Affective Disorder. My therapist later corrected me saying that I have Persistent Depressive Disorder, which means that I am going to be sad regardless. I purchased the lights in my delusional self-diagnosis as an industrial source of happy light that I could lie under if I got too sad; it never worked. The installation before this only used halogen lights and I spent the majority of December of that year sitting under them like a lizard on a hot rock.

The carpet is completely filthy when I walk into this pink room. The grass is now brown and dead. Plastic covers the walls. I was attempting to create a self-sustaining environment like Hans Haacke's *Condensation Cube*. I was getting tired of coming in here to water my grass and I thought plastic would work to trap moisture. However, it worked too well, transforming the carpet into a sponge. When I was walking through the space, the carpet made a squishy sound with every step, which was disgusting, but also oddly satisfying.

When I looked closer at the walls, I noticed there were specks lining the drywall. At first, I was horrified, thinking I inoculated black mold in this space and was

momentarily relieved when I discovered that it was only an incredible amount of dead gnats and mosquitos trapped in between the plastic and the wall.

I walked into the third and final room from which the source of the stink was emanating. This room was yellow, half the floor covered in carpet and the other in vinyl. The walls were covered in ballistic gelatin. I was using this closet sized room to figure out how to showcase the gelatin, which I was determined to use as a material in my practice.

At first, it was painted on, creating a glossy finish to the walls. I then poured it into plastic bags and stapled them onto the wall. Someone came in and said it looked like bags of piss. I hated that and took the gelatin forms out of the Ziploc bags and placed them on the table. However, they fell apart because the room was too hot from the halogen flood light illuminating this space. The gelatin was shown on the floor in a pile during the final review because I gave up at this point. I didn't care what the professors had to say about my work; I didn't care about anything by that time.

As I didn't put enough hydrogen peroxide into the mix, all the ballistic gelatin was covered in white mold. There were tiny black specks everywhere, which at first looked like a heavy coating of dust, but again, on closer inspection, were bugs; there were bugs everywhere and most of them were dead.

The sight of all of this made me gag. I ran out of my studio and went to the store immediately. I bought gloves, aerosol cans of air freshener, and several bottles of lemon scented ammonia; there wasn't any bleach due the supply chain shortages caused by COVID. I returned to my studio, took off all the drywall and began pouring ammonia everywhere. It burned my nostrils, eyes, and lungs. Exhausted and confused by the burning sensations I was experiencing, I gave up; I still had food to prepare for my parents' visit the following day. I sealed the opening with plastic and then sprayed a whole a can of air freshener around my studio. I wonder if Dieter Roth was ever disgusted by the heinous odors of some of his sculptural books; I assume raw meat, chocolate, bananas, and rabbit shit decaying all have a similar pungent odor to that of gelatin; no wonder there was always an issue in the display and conservation of Roth's works.

When I got home, I took my shoes and clothes off. The dog started sniffing them more attentively than usual. He then started licking my shoes. I took the shoes and clothes away from him and threw them outside.

My parents came the next day; we ate dinner and then walked the dog. They insisted on seeing my studio and I took them there begrudgingly. Upon entering the building, they immediately made a comment about the smell and I smiled and said, "It gets worse." When we got to my studio, my mom looked at the space, put her hands to her face, aghast, said "good lord" and started laughing and I joined in. She eventually looked at me, frowned, and hugged me. My father looked at me the way I always looked at the installation: confused, frustrated, and resigned.

The horrific odor of this installation was the work. It was an embodiment of all the grandiose notions I was releasing from my studio practice like a nasty fart. I spent the next few months cleaning this space out; I can still smell the installation when I think about it.

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I am scared to get close to this sculpture. I walk heavy and believe that my clunky movements around it will cause it to topple. As I get closer, the precarious nature of the structure is clear. If I even breathe on this object, it might fall. There is no structural integrity and that is thrilling.

I need to be delicate in how I approach this piece; it doesn't want me to come close and I hate that, so I rush up to it and jump up and down around it. It's fine and I'm fine.

The sculpture is top heavy. Two cylindrical glazed ceramic pieces sit atop a structure beneath. The ceramic parts originally broke when I tried to sandblast the glossy pink surface off of them. I tried to put the pieces back together again using Bondo Metal Filler. However, my mending was overkill; way too much pink paste was added and now the object will never be what it was. It no longer stands upright, so I laid it on a thick slab of pink latex paint. This section was ripped off the crusty pink sculpture from my stinky installation; the rest of it was thrown into the Dumpster on campus last year.

The pink ceramic lying on the slab of pink paint is placed precariously on three spindly wooden legs that are, you guessed it, pink. This sculpture overall is a fleshy, cartoonish pink that you might see in a Philip Guston painting. I admire Guston for choosing to lean into abjectness in the face of the horror and evil that seems to become more apparent to us every year.

The legs are milled and are sold at Home Depot. Lazy DIY YouTubers seek out this style leg to make "farmhouse" dining tables on a budget. The surface of these manufactured legs is subtly ribbed. They were originally painted and then wrapped in plastic. I forgot about them last February, lost them in the detritus of my studio, found them later that year, unwrapped them, and saved them only to cram them into the extensions of three metal stool legs. They didn't fit at first so I forced them in, using a hammer. The stool legs are the only part of the object that are not pink. They have a very institutional look that in comparison makes the other elements of the object seem even more pink.

The sculpture overall has a very dainty demeanor. It looks meek, weak and desperate, like someone trying their hardest to hold back tears. I want to hug and console it, but no, I shouldn't. Last time I hugged someone I made them cry; I was thrown over their shoulder and the wind was knocked out of me. Things didn't end very well with the last person I was seeing.

My practice can be summed up like this: I build things and then I break them. The work is a performance of trying to put things back together that no longer fit. I think often about going back and the idea of loss. I am holding onto a memory, holding onto a moment in which I am trying to make something that will remain. Are memories something lost or are memories something we still have?

The last major relationship I had ended in a parking lot in Alexandria, VA, in December 2020. I drove down there to help my ex pack up her things. The relationship had been dead for a long time. We'd stopped having sex a year earlier and we were just good roommates at this point.

We both kept it together until I tried to say goodbye to our dog Athena; I wasn't going to see her again. Maddie took Athena over to my car and we knelt down next to her. I went in to hug the dog and she jumped away from me. My ex started sobbing at this point and shoved her into my chest. My ex and I then embraced each other one last time. I got into my car and cried.

In 2021, I developed the strongest bond I have ever experienced with any living being. It was with an enormous dog that I was taking care of that year for a friend; I gave the dog up in December. When I dropped him off, I was overwhelmed with emotion and kissed him on the mouth, no one liked that. I had a horrible taste in my mouth and the dog sneezed. I left afterwards not knowing what to do. If I lingered any longer my friend would have seen me cry.

On the five-hour drive back to my apartment, I made peace knowing that our relationship was over. However, once I got back to New York I was confronted by his presence: fur everywhere, a favorite toy of his I forgot to pack, black marks on the wall where he preferred to lie down, a lingering odor. I was overwhelmed by all the good and bad memories we shared as I attempted to clean my home. A year of fur is hard to remove and it is especially difficult when I am unmotivated to get rid of it. I decided that, if I couldn't remove all his fur, it would be ok, because it might keep the mice away (at least for a little while.)

A few weeks before we parted ways, I started walking backwards because I heard it is good for your calves, feet, and knees. He didn't care much for this because I would stare at him the entire time. I think I was trying to look at him so much I would be bored by his handsome face and experience a level of visual satiety that would carry over for years. Of course, this was done in vain because within less than two weeks I longed for his presence, specifically how he would lean on me and growl playfully at me when I walked through the front door.

I am miserable, but I am thankful for this misery, for the immense pain of a deep bond that was severed. I still do the same walk solo and still walk backwards, but I feel like an idiot now. At least I have nice long pink legs.

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From afar, the rocking chair looks like a big chunk of yellow birthday cake. The cake-like material is drywall painted pastel yellow and is textured. It is constructed in an L shape and sitting directly on the legs of what was once a rocking chair. The drywall came from a past installation that didn't work out; most of it is in a landfill somewhere. The edges are coated in an excess of joint compound that is crusty and looks like premade frosting. The color is lilac, which is unappetizing on a cake. A continuous brushstroke is dragged through this frosting; it traces the edges and makes the object appear soft. However, there is nothing soft about this piece. I drag my hand across the cake-like yellow material and cut it. Gelatin was mixed irregularly into the yellow paint that coats its surface, which makes it jagged in some areas.

When I move my hand away from the structure, it begins to wobble back and forth because of the rocking chair legs. They are installed on the bottom, almost parallel; they go off in slightly different directions like someone skiing down a mountain with too much confidence. The legs are painted a calming green that would look great in a craft room; a more saturated grass green is colored on top in chalk.

Sitting on top of the entire structure is a ceramic sculpture glazed in a glossy ochre yellow. The form is two extruded pipes that are wrapped together with extruded ribbons. It looks like they are hugging each other, trying desperately not to fall off the sculpture as it rocks back and forth. The ceramic object itself rests on a slab of hot pink latex paint.

The entire structure rocking back and forth is anxiety-inducing. Watching the ceramic object sit on top of this structure as it teeters back and forth is thrilling in an uncomfortable way; I imagine it falling to the ground every time the structure below it moves. Whenever I catch myself caring too much for the well-being of a sculpture, I feel ridiculous and will often overcorrect. In this case, I shove the entire apparatus hard. I immediately regret what I have done and grab the piece to slow it down to a slight shimmy. I step away from the object in order to avoid doing that again. From afar, the slow rocking of the piece is satisfying and hypnotic.

The color palette of the entire sculpture looks like something my brother would wear on Easter Sunday, which is the preppiest and WASPIest holiday of them all. Last time I attended, he wore an outfit in a pastel color scheme, dork.

I walk around the piece and notice that the drywall is ripped off here and there and that there are random globs of material that have landed randomly on the lower half. The globs were not purposeful but incidental in the process of creating this work; it was made fast and sloppy, the way I like it. However, there is a clear mistake on one side. I used joint compound to patch a hole and attempted to hide it with Post-It notes of a similar pale-yellow color. I feel like I am referencing those material-heavy Michael Dean sculptures, but instead of writing "fuck" on them over and over again I write

“Happy Easter Dickhead” across the three sticky notes; one word per note. I can’t tell if this is lazy, stupid, or funny, but I laugh when I read it.

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Directly across from me is someone I spoke to sporadically on Hinge for a week. She got a fried chicken sandwich and pulled the pickles off; she is eating fries by the handful. Her mouth is covered in buffalo sauce as she unloads on me about her woes; she has been in therapy for seven years. I know I should say something, but every ounce of willpower is already devoted to keeping a half-smile plastered onto my face all night. I am impressed and overwhelmed by this grotesque display of vulnerability. This is what I have been waiting for, for what felt like an eternity.

We are sitting together in a deplorable modern bistro in Rye, New York. It looks decent enough when you don’t really look around. The lighting is dim, with a greenish tint. There are “candles” on the table, but they are fake. The dishes are square and look like they came from a Crate and Barrel outlet. I’m eating a blackened salmon bowl with soggy rice and rubbery spinach; I paid \$32 for it like a sucker. Our peppy, attentive waiter kept coming up to us, asking if we would like anything else. She stopped coming over after the third time and it was then impossible to get the check. So we just sat there and talked for three hours until we were the only ones in the restaurant. When the check came, she swatted my hand when I grabbed it and insisted on splitting it. She said, “Feminism is a hell of thing.” I think I’m in love. She can’t eat apples or pistachios and is also squeamish; I hate that. “Love” is hyperbolic; I am intrigued by her. We made out for a while in front of her car. When we stopped, I slipped and fell onto the hood of her car. I only saw her a few more times after that. It is hard to beat a first date like that.

I wrote this story onto a pedestal that I made of drywall fragments from that stinky installation. I am hoping to put a porcelain sculpture of a square tube being forced into a cylindrical one on top of it soon, but there is just too much text. I don’t know why I try to recount all of the absurd things that happen to me. I paint over everything except for “her mouth is covered in buffalo sauce” and am now stuck; I don’t think this was the right move.

There is an overwhelming sense of uncertainty in my process. No matter how many hours I spend in the studio, somehow, I still have no idea where I am going. I take delight in the only consistency in my practice, which takes the form of a question that I ask myself: why would anybody make something this way? My heavy-handed process is visible in all my work because I feel like I would be a liar if I didn’t share every aspect of making the work with the viewer. I like to get my hands dirty, enjoy breathing in noxious gas, and love making a mess.

I know in my bones I would be much more comfortable sitting in an office. I would have money to support a family. I would be able to live a normal, pleasant boring

life. My parents raised me to perform in society as a good boy, to be indoctrinated into corporate culture, to become an intricate cog at some company, to have my opinions curated to me via mainstream culture, and to live a passive life until I die.

It is disorienting to live and to have never paid attention. 2020 was a strange time to take my head out of the sand. At times, I thought that subconsciously I was trying to end things early with the ridiculous risks I would take in my personal time along with the complete removal of habits and consistency in my life, but I believe that I was trying to live vicariously through my sculptures, suspended on the verge of breaking, taking up space between the moments of up and down, the polarities of happy and sad.

