Oneirism

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

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Ceramics at SUNY New Paltz

May 2021
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Introduction - Exhibit Statement

Ceramic objects explore play, communication, and our relationships in the world. The work presents opportunities of interaction through enclosed spaces that incite moments of connection. Combining a visual dialogue of tubes, playground equipment, and gardens, abstract pieces are constructed in order to be completed through the interjection of the body. The work is not done until someone uses it, imbuing the objects with functionality. Scream, laugh, yell, whisper secrets to another; these objects present a fictional world that invites you to be curious and examine how you move through your surroundings.
Phenomenology and The Power of Objects

Phenomenology, according to Sokolowski, “is the study of human experience and of the ways things present themselves to us in and through such experience” (2). Phenomenology allows us to move beyond ourselves and investigate the ways in which the world presents itself to us and how we present ourselves to the world. This comprises of all that we perceive, such as objects, other life forms, and intangible phenomena, as well as, all that is beyond our capabilities of perception. In Introduction to Phenomenology Sokolowski outlines the major tenets of phenomenology stating, “every act of consciousness, every experience, is correlated with an object” (8) and goes on to say “the mind and the world are correlated with one another. Things appear to us, things are truly disclosed, and we, on our part, do display, both to ourselves and to others, the way things are” (12). This constant intake of perceptions creates the structures upon which we rely to navigate, physically and mentally, through this vast landscape of daily life. Objects help to ground us in our perception and remove us from the confines of our minds, unlocking the ability to have shared experiences, intimacy, and communication.

Objects alter, transform, and bring attention to the ways in which we interact (with each other and the world). Irwin, a member of the Light and Space Movement occurring in the 60’s, which was comprised of artists who altered environments and perception, discusses his thought process in Notes Toward a Conditional Art. Irwin states, “in building forms unique to perception we hope to allow the mechanisms of perception to be perceived—to each person the awakening to something which was always already there” (Irwin 4). While Irwin is not presenting objects in the tangible
sense, but rather light, he uses this in order to bring attention to perceiving. In effect, he constructs a situation, an environment, and through this experience an awakening occurs. Irwin is not presenting the audience with a profound novel experience, it is the pointing to the everyday or a thing we already know too well, that pushes this perception to the forefront. This instigation of these mechanisms presents an opportunity for profound communication and relations with one another and the world, a new appreciation can occur. Objects have the ability to facilitate the activation of these mechanisms.

**Sculpture, Reverie, and the Internal World**

In her essay *Five Propositions On Abstract Sculpture*, presented in *Revolution in the Making*, Jenni Sorkin discusses several post war female sculptors’ approaches for object making and demonstrates the power of objects and installation. In analyzing their methods she states, “but art is not just about telling a story. Through object making, an artist invites a viewer not necessarily into her inner, conceptual world, but into its consequences, and its material gestures” (141). Artists rely on the narrative, the past, and thoughts of the future to manifest ideations into forms, shapes, and situations. I would argue however, that at the depth of all our influences, is this inner world. This inner world, that is expressed through creative endeavors, is found in reverie. Reverie is a liberation from reality and gives us access to our mind-scape, which presents possibilities that extend beyond what is presented. Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Reverie* states, “a world takes form in our reverie, and this world is ours” (8). Through this inner world artists find their inspiration for forms, objects, and installations. The way we perceive the world is so intrinsically intertwined with these
created objects; as stated previously, every act of consciousness is related to an object. A reflectivity emerges, as inner worlds come forth, and the outcomes of these manifestations draw the viewers into their own. A constant push and pull of sensations and slippage occurs. We experience the awakening, as Irwin referred to it, of a sensation already within us, perhaps long forgotten. The physicality of the body roots us in these moments.

**The Body and the Completion of Form**

The body, your body, helps determine the way one interacts and experiences other life forms and objects. Abram, in *The Spell of the Sensuous*, states that, “the body is that mysterious and multifaceted phenomenon that seems always to accompany one’s awareness, and indeed to be the very locations of one’s awareness within the field of appearances” (37). My body is different from your body, or your friend’s body, and dictates to a certain extent the ways we navigate the world. It determines our limitations and boundaries. The mind and body are not separate, but instead in constant communication. As the body navigates the external world it gives sense and physicality to what is perceived. We can reach out and touch, taste, and smell. The way we hold ourselves can say more than language. A constant reflectivity occurs in our perceptions. Touch is the sense that so beautifully illustrates this point. “What’s unique about touch, when set against other senses, is its mutuality. While we can look without being looked back at, we can’t touch without being touched in return” (Crucianelli). While not all works may be touched, we yearn for it, especially when presented with textures and curves that delight the visual. Perhaps in our reveries we can imagine the caress of the object.
Sculptural artists have capitalized on our bodies ability to respond to objects by imbuing the work with qualities that confront our own physicality. For example, Sorkin discusses the work of Jessica Stockholder, “she is interested in the abstract nature of space and how the body experiences the interstitial: moments of entering and exiting, under and over, behind and between” (150). The way we navigate space is dictated not just by our body, but also, by the space itself and what inhabits the space. Again, the interplay between what is perceived, how we respond to it, and consequently how we react.


Franz Erhald Walther takes a more literal approach to intercepting the body and creating experiences that confront, confound, and point to the way to interact. The Hause Der Kunst review of his exhibition from 2020 describes how the works, “can be worn or entered. In this way, they challenge the viewer’s understanding of a traditional pictorial logic. The body becomes a medium in that it transforms life processes into
images” (hausederkunst). When objects are presented that demand we lean, reposition, or interact the body becomes implicated in the finishing of the works. The sculpture is completed through this activation from the body.

Architectural design is an example where bodies complete the work. A building without anyone to occupy it is unfinished. Noguchi is a sculptor who seamlessly blends notions of sculpture and architecture. He designed spaces that dictate the movement of the body, that are altered by bodies, and sculptural works that encourage interaction. Noguchi’s playscapes and large scale works move beyond utility and into a sense of discovery. His work often has a playful quality to it, conjuring an effective invitation that prompts a willingness in the viewer of touch and losing yourself in the presented space. Noguchi believed sculpture to be, “the perception of space, the continuum of our existence” (24). He though that the challenge of sculpture was not invention, but perception, and the potential within the day to day life. The work presented will not tell you how to feel, or how to react, but simply invite you to partake in an experience, if only you allow yourself to slip into the moment.

Franz Erhard Walther, Werksatz, 2008
The Imagery of Plants

For midterm critique, I presented a set of sculptures that were a combination of furniture components, animals, and flowers. After receiving feedback about them and *An ascending close* in its green stage (see page 13), I realized my affinity for making forms based on botanicals. I began researching flowers used in art history, which of course presented an overwhelming array of possibilities. I was then directed to *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch (1490-1500).

I was struck by the aspects of the painting where human bodies are concealed and seemingly swallowed by plant life. Spikes and thorns pierce larger forms throughout the entirety of the painting, creating this violent tension between the pleasures of the garden and lurking shadows. Strange fountains and animals have menacing undertones, the garden appears to be on the brink of destruction; it is a fragile paradise. This is obvious in the third panel as the horizon line brings you to a hellscape.

While the sculptures present in my body of work are not attempting to discuss the ultimate pitfalls of humanity, they do hold a tension that is drawn from the realities
of our relationships. The formal choices made are rooted in experiences of others, relationships turned sour or the potential of something new opening me back up.

**Methodology: Studio Practice and Forms**

My studio practice is active, physical, and reflective. The scale of my work, which is integral to the effectiveness of the pieces, demands a presence in the studio that is rigorous and at times forceful. Intuition is a large part; while I hold specific shapes and proportions in my head, often there is a need to adjust to the clay and the limitations it presents. The works are in response to themselves or previous iterations. They play on a variety of forms, mostly taken from gardens, but amplify or distort scale in order to present the desired situation. Inspiration for configuration comes from researching play-ground equipment or objects that are means for communication or bouncing sound. These visual references are geared towards objects that have a device-like quality to them, that function in specific ways, and have forms that reflect those purposes.

It is not my desire to replicate specific forms or configurations. Rather, my intent is to draw inspiration and reinterpret the forms to then reflect the potential experience or interaction. In speaking about sculpture Noguchi is able to encapsulate well my own feeling towards these objects. He states:

“I think I have that kind of feeling about sculpture, of wanting to be inside the sculpture. Thats when you’re really a part of it. The usefulness is integral…I think of sculpture as something to be completely experienced, not just looked at. You’re encased in it—a back-in-your-mother’-womb sort of thing. You’re an integral part of it. Your environment is your sculpture, your world. It’s *the* world, and the world then becomes a sculpture” (149).
Often in the process of building I am inside the work and it is important that others, to a certain extent, experience a similar intimacy. While one could argue that looking is an experience, I aim to evoke the visceral, to awaken a desire to touch.

**How Much to Leave - The Mark of the Hand**

The marks from the process of building are left untouched, unless a smoother surface is desired. Smoother surfaces have a different quality in the light, there is a sense of absorption, whereas the textures bounce and reflect light. The texture also creates a softness to the work, giving it a sense of fluidity that smooth surfaces can lack. Areas are smoothed or have added sharper texture to juxtapose the softness left from pinching and to imbue the work with a sense of tension. For example, in *Something is not quite right*, the top bulb was smoothed, although left rough from the grog pulling up to the surface, in order to create a backdrop for the small individual spikes. I felt that leaving the surface pinched would detract from the details of the spikes and the subtle curvature of the bulb form. Large areas that don’t have such intricacies are left pinched, remnants from the process of building. These marks are not added after the fact, they are the organic result of my building technique.

**Technical: Building**

Obtaining the desired results took me the majority of my time at New Paltz. Large cracks, explosions, and work being too precarious dominated my outcomes over the past two years. At times, this left me utterly dissatisfied, defeated, or feeling as if I would never achieve the outcomes I am after. However, after many discussions with Anat, researching other large scale ceramic sculptors, particularly Matt Wedel and Ruby Rose Neri, it dawned on me that my
form needed a bottom. Shrink slabs had not worked, I think I was making them too thin for what I was asking them to support. After researching techniques, I began creating bottoms for the piece and integrating spines up the work to help pull to form towards the center of itself.

The clay body was also modified to help with shrinkage and strength. The base is from Linda Arbuckle, I removed fluxing agents, added a fire clay, and increased the grog. For this body of work I increased the amount of grog, and variation of grog, present in the clay in order to achieve a consistency closer to moist sand.

The piece, *An ascending close*, is the only exception to how the work presented was constructed. The other three were all started the same way, a very thick slab that was compressed in every direction for an extended period of time. I would begin in the center, make my fingers rigid, and drag the clay out towards the edge, then repeat in the opposite direction. Then, a large coil was slipped and scored to create a small wall as a boundary that would allow me to begin construction upwards. Coils were rolled by hand and then placed on the inside and pinched together. This allowed the form to grow from the inside out, through equal and firm pinches, and working with wetter clay meant I did not need to slip and score every coil. However, when returning to the work after an extended period of time I would take special care to slip and score if the clay

Ruby Rose Neri, Process shot
had dried at all on its edges. After I reached roughly 8 inches in height, large supportive ribs were added to the inside of the base, firmly connecting the walls to the bottom slab. Large holes were also cut into the slab, to assist with drying and shrinkage. In the case of *I’ve been trying to meet you*, there is a hole on each end of the form, the other two only have one large central hole.

Before beginning each piece I consider, through sketches or reflection, the general shape the form must take. The central form is built up quite quickly so that alterations may occur if necessary. For instance, in *An ascending close* the stalk form was completed before the addition of each opening. I would construct roughly a foot of clay and once it had set up (dried slightly) I would cut openings that would serve as a starting point for each cup form. It was necessary to allow the clay to set up before the additions, if added too quickly the clay would begin to slump and deform. Not only was I adding external weight, but by perforating the main form, I was removing integral structure. Most additions throughout the work were added in this manner, building upon the main structure, then cutting away or perforating where necessary to add tubes or openings.
The Firings

All works were bisque fired in the large Bailey car kiln. Work was transferred while still leather hard in order to be able to repair if necessary. Several people helped me lift the work onto the lift-table, which was then jacked to a height that allowed us to slide the work into the kiln. Silica sand was sprinkled on the shelves, which acted as ball bearings to let the work more easily enter the kiln. Each sculpture was built on a sheet of drywall and remained on it throughout the moving and firing process. Once in the kiln the work was allowed to naturally dry, without being covered, for roughly 24 hours. Then, the pilots were turned on, with all peeps out and the damper open, to begin drying out the piece more evenly. The computer was set to soak at 150 for the first 48 hours, the pilots would turn themselves off and on to maintain this temperature. I did not want water to boil until I was certain the work was bone dry. The piece was checked on daily to note the progress of water evaporating. Once I was confident that the piece was appropriately dried the soak was turned up to 200 for 8 hours, this was usually over the course of the work day, the night before the firing the soak would be turned up to 220. Firings would begin roughly at 9am and last until roughly 12am, the soak function was utilized in order to not exceed a rate of fifty degrees per hour, until I reached quartz inversion. After I passed 1063 degrees Fahrenheit I ceased using the soak function and allowed the kiln to climb naturally. Burners were slowly, incrementally turned up to have a controlled rate even after quartz inversion until the achieved bisque temperature of cone 04 or 1945 degrees. Work was then left in the kiln for glazing, I wanted to reduce the chance of stress fractures or accidents, therefore I moved the work as little as possible during firings. Several coats of glaze were painted on the
pieces, pouring was not an option, as the consequential mess would have been too great. The work was not able to be placed in a basin and I felt the loss of glaze was not worth it. Therefore, I attempted to coat the surface with enough material to adequately cover the clay, as the bright orange from the Redart was bound to show through if left poorly covered. The glaze firing was a slow and controlled rate until I reached 1063, once I was past that crucial point burners were turned up more quickly than in the bisque firing. Considering I was firing a partially empty kiln at times, it was difficult to maintain an even temperature. Often the top cones were one or two ahead of the bottom cone pack. After I reached cone 2 (2088), if the kiln was particularly uneven, as was often the case, I would damper in slightly to try and hold heat inside in an effort to allow the bottom part of the kiln to catch up. I was careful to not reduce as I wanted to maintain an oxidized or neutral atmosphere. The kiln was left to cool for 24 hours before cracking to allow cooler air to enter. Work was then unloaded with the help of others onto the lift cart for transportation.

**Surface Treatment**

After testing several glazes, slips, and engobes I began using a barium carbonate based glaze with two percent lithium, and minspar as the primary flux. Three colors were chosen for the forms. I wanted color, but I also wanted to balance the form
and allow it to not be overpowered by glaze application. *An ascending close*, even during the construction, felt blue. A progression ending in closed forms, the potential of receiving cut off, and being inspired by grape hyacinths the color is representational of the source, as well as, the presence I desired the piece to carry. I wanted the color to have slight variations throughout, adding depth to the surface, and I knew I wanted distinction between the open and closed pods. The decision was made to have a more concentrated, vibrant blue on top to signify this closing.

*I've been trying to meet you* is the only multicolored sculpture present in the show. The decision was made to slightly bifurcate the sculpture by using color in order to emphasize the growths and the potential of their touch and opening. A light mauve color was selected for the base, while a vivid green was applied to the arch and its openings. The mauve is the base glaze with .5% manganese and the green is 8% Avocado mason stain, the tips and the interior of the cups have thinned glazed with chrome brushed on. The mauve was selected in relation to soil, sitting atop the red clay body it takes a brown hue, I did not want brown but an adjacent, something a bit softer in its presentation. The green was chosen as representation of potential, growth, sprouting, and new life. As many of the forms originate from a botanical origin green as
harnessed energy turned into growth and potential was the only choice that seemed fitting for this piece. The two closed tubes were constructed separately with a small space that only filled itself with a bit of glaze in the last firing. Finally, the arch is unified, but by the thinnest membrane and each end opens towards the sky, awaiting two whom are ready to speak.

_Something is not quite right_ and _Catching a glimpse_ were constructed concurrently, with similar silhouettes and motifs. Soft pinch marks left over from construction slowly morph into small openings, smooth surfaces, and a multitude of spikes. Continuing with pulling from gardens I began to consider defense mechanisms of plants. I desired shared contrasts within the pieces, a balance of revealing and concealing, with moments for surprise or intrigue. The largest forms in the series, they also carry the smallest details, some of which are tucked and only found through close examination.

_Catching a glimpse_ is a completely hollow piece, each hole connected to the next through a network of pathways. One can communicate through the piece and gently tap an opening to hear the vibrations travel throughout the form. There is a moment of excitement when the realization occurs that the piece holds an integral form of participation.
Something is not quite right, was constructed as a reflection, a conversation with Catching a glimpse. The interior of the latter becomes the exterior of the former, an inverse, a turning outward that is repelling, but frightfully intriguing.

Both sculptures were glazed in a similar manner, with the same barium base as the other two, but with a range of manganese from .5% to 10%. The shift in it is subtle, the darker hues float on the surface and nestle in the textures. As with the others, glaze was painted on in several layers, beginning with the lightest percentage and adding the darker glaze as the piece grows or where small openings and details are present.
Display

Originally I was not considering making bases for the objects, to a certain extent they serve as their own pedestals and I did not want to distract from them with the addition of materials. However, after seeing the work out of the kiln and considering the Dorsky floor, I realized it was necessary to elevate the pieces. I knew I did not want white squares, but rather something individual for each work that created a transition from floor to ceramic. Each piece was traced, capturing a shadow or outline. Two pieces of half inch thick MDF were jigsawed into the desired shape and laminated using wood glue. In order to elevate the platform, 2x4 was cut in order to fit the base while leaving a couple of inches to create an overhang and shadow. The 2x4 was then sanded on a disk sander to finish the edges and round out the ends. The MDF was treated in the same manner to soften the edges and to eliminate saw marks from the jigsaw. The 2x4 was then glued and clamped in place and then screws were inserted to secure the wood. The sculptures do not have any hard angles and I wanted to maintain that softness throughout the display, therefore all edges have a slight round over. Each base is painted according to the sculpture it supports with a flat interior eggshell paint that was selected for coverage and durability. The colors for the bases are muted in order to not distract from the pieces and help transition the color to the floor.

Conclusion

This body of work presented many avenues during its creation; their intuitive builds, and the constant destruction and growth that occurred within each piece showed me that I prefer a fluid studio practice. I will continue to make sculptures that picks at similar threads; however, I believe I have just scratched the surface of what I
would like to accomplish within this body of work. I find it thrilling that a stride in technical achievement has allowed me to present work that can stand on its own with little to no distractions. Aspects I want to move forward with are the combinations of small details found on larger forms, the concealing of forms inside of other forms, and the functional aspects of the pieces that incite play and interaction.
Recipes

Clay Recipe
Red Art  50  
Hawthorne Bond 32  
EPK 23  
OM4  19  
Nepheline Syenite 2  
Grog: fine, medium, coarse added until the consistency felt like wet sand

Glaze Recipe
Barium 30  
OM4  30  
Minspar 15  
Whiting 12  
Flint 11  
Lithium 2

Light Blue
Rutile 6  
Cobalt Carbonate .5

Dark Blue
Cobalt Carb 1  
Copper Oxide 1.5

Mauve
Manganese .5-10

Green
Avocado 8
Bibliography


Neri, Ruby Rose. Image taken from personal Instagram account.


Acknowledgments

First and foremost I would like to thank my mom, Kara Kelly, for her unconditional support. I wouldn’t have made it this far without her and I am eternally grateful. As well as, Kirk Wyckoff, for being the paternal support system I always needed, for discussing ideas with me, for believing in me.

A special thank you to my wonderful advisors Anat Shiftan, Bryan Czibesz, and Rebecca Longtin. For the countless times you gave me words of advice, encouragement, and helped push my studio practice and research in directions I may not have found otherwise.

Thank you to Michael Humphreys, for the endless technical support and studio assistance in matters of moving obscenely heavy objects.

To my studio husband, Yage Wang, without whom I may have lost my mind.

To my lovely cohort, Jiyu An, Hee Joo Yang, and Sarah-Anne Winchester, for the support and positivity during this insane year.

My other half, Avery Wells, for taking all my panicked phone calls.

Claire Smith, my family, my friend, you have always been there, thank you.

Paige O’Toole, for all the support, love, and friendship you have shown me.

Thank you, Amanda Ellinger, Emily Downes, Cynthia Walker, Erika Port, for your kind words during critiques and supportive studio demeanors.

And, to the Andrah Foundation, for financial support of my ceramic research during these two years.

Ultimately I am grateful to so many, it is hard to convey on this page, but all that I have met through these two years will stay in my heart. What trying times our community pushed through, how resilient you all showed yourselves to be, this experience was made complete through you. Thank you.