Intimate. Immensity.

by

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS

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Intimate. Immensity.

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We, the thesis committee for the above candidate for the Master of Fine Arts degree, hereby recommend acceptance of this thesis.

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Artist statement

Intimate touch. Sincere and vulnerable. Touch that reverberates beneath the skin, electrifying my flesh, permeating muscles and bones. These ceramic sculptures perform as a surrogate for my own physicality – not as a direct representation of the body, rather the feeling of being in my body: chest torn open, my insides twisting in muscular knots, pulled apart and rearranged; strong, calm, alive. Each gesture in clay speaks to the intimate senses of my body.

Risk is inherent to my process as I test the limits and potential of ceramic materials; mass and gravity cause the clay body to tear, contort, open, and expose that which is usually hidden and contained. I am led by intuitive logic; the "genius" I carry within me. The solidification of gestural movement translates a moment of intimate touch and gives form to the immensity of my internal geography; desire, tender love, sensual connection, preserved in space and time.

Enrapture (detail)

Abstract

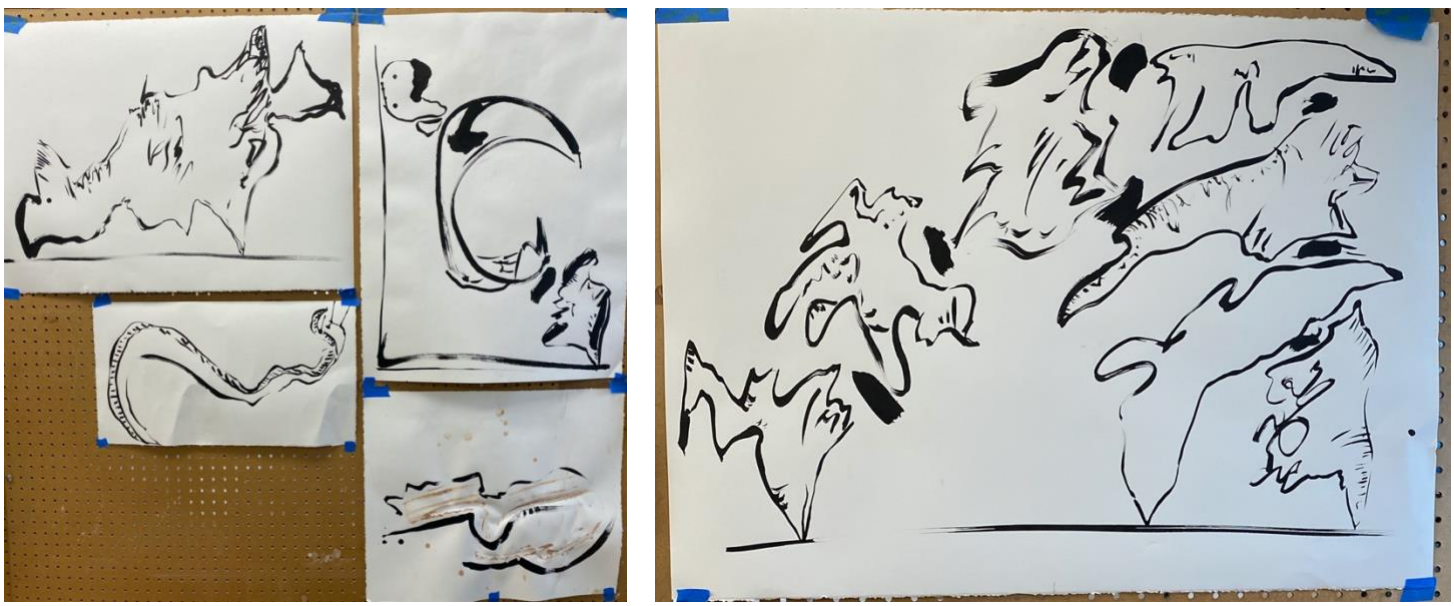
This paper outlines my studio research, material investigations, processes, and the development of finished artworks in my thesis exhibition – *Intimate. Immensity.* This research, and the subsequent collection of ceramic sculptures, is a study of materiality and the body: how material processes echo personal transformation and growth. I discuss material engagement as essential research methodology in my experimental studio practice and the critical role of curiosity and play to the development of my unique visual language.

Research: Background and Sources

In every limitation there is potential; in every mistake there is the possibility for discovery. The fallible nature of ceramic materials is part of what draws me to this practice and holds my curiosity. I work with risk and chase unexpected results.

Material engagement is the most important form of research for my studio practice. I actively explore my relationship with clay, glaze and steel, and the material embodiment of my physical and emotional life through experimental practice. This research process is a dialogue and collaboration between these materials and my body – a process of play and discovery.

Other material explorations such as drawing, collage, paper construction, and working with steel inform my research, allowing me to explore formal qualities such as line, form and space, as well as material dialogues. These materials have encouraged me to step outside of my comfort zone, challenge my making habits and open new ways of working.



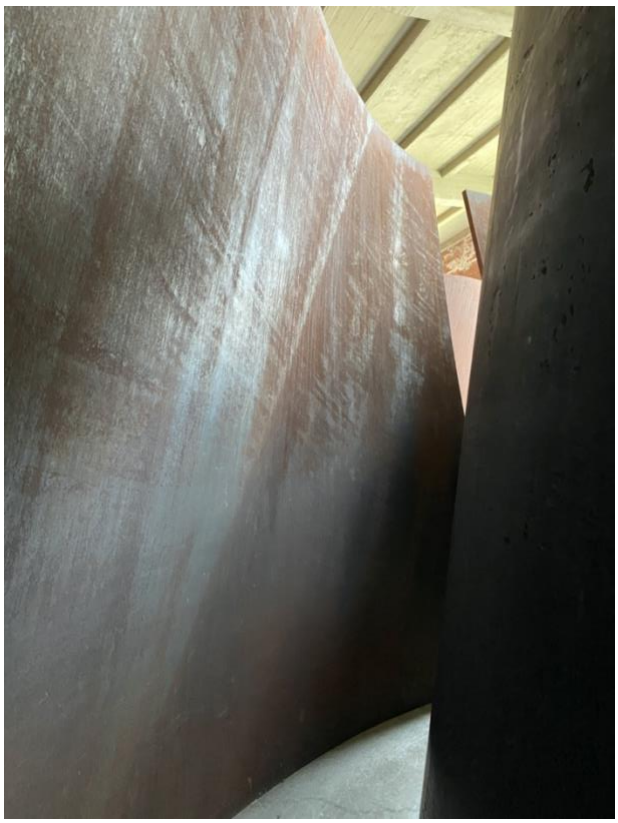
Experimental drawings, ink on paper, various sizes. 2023

Outside of the studio, a significant part of my research involves turning inwards to pay attention to thoughts, feelings and physical sensations that derive from my lived experience in the world. Walking and yoga are essential to this part of my research process. I feel most alive and attuned to my sense of self in spaces where I am alone with my thoughts: listening, feeling, reflecting and absorbing; learning to connect my body and mind; honing my attention for my inner life and my physical presence in the world.

Walking and yoga teach me to pay attention to the physicality and strength and of my body: I feel my feet on the ground, sense the weight of my body pressing down, my muscles working to hold me up and move me forward, bones and flesh, blood pumping, heart holding rhythm, lungs expanding and contracting, feeling crisp air in and out with each elongated breath. I find solitude and quiet, away from technology and the noise of the world, to breathe easier, think clearly, to make sense of things, unravel and slow down. I feel present in my body and in the world. I find calmness, purpose, clarity, turning inward to feel connected – to myself, to the earth, to the world around me. Walking and yoga help me to understand this experience of being alive, to sit with discomfort, and understand that there is no certainty, no correct answers, that I will never arrive or be finished, until the end.

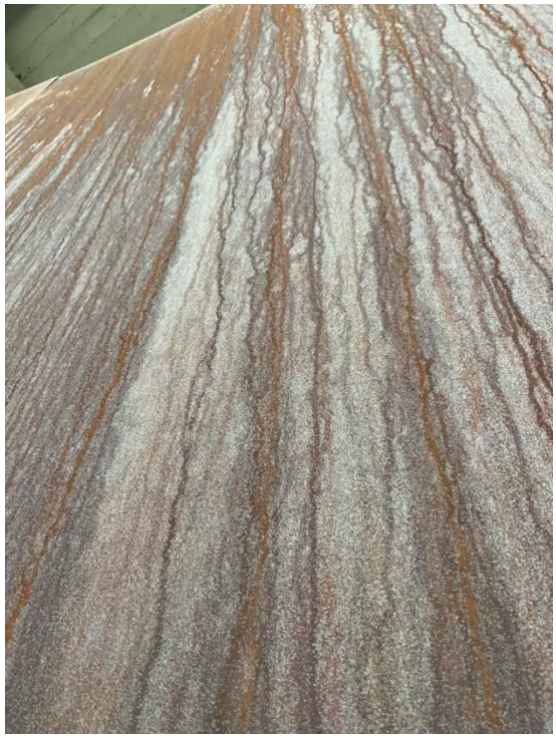
Visiting galleries and museums has been another important element of my research. Seeing Richard Serra's monumental steel structures and John Chamberlain's crumpled automotive sculptures at Dia Beacon significantly influenced the development of my abstract forms and my interest in the material presence of steel. The experience of standing inside the steel shell of Serra's *Torqued Ellipse* was a pivotal moment in thinking about materiality as subject matter and the physical engagement between materials and the viewer.

John Chamberlain, *Luftschloss* (1979)
Image taken at Dia Beacon, January 2023



Richard Serra, *Torqued Ellipse* (1996)
Image taken at Dia Beacon, January 2023

'*Writings, Interviews'* by Richard Serra became a crucial reading that was formative to my thinking and studio practice. Speaking about his approach to materials and process, he said: "The significance of the work is in its effort, not in its intentions. And that effort is a state of mind, an activity, an interaction with the world."[1]. This reinforced for me the importance of being authentically and deeply engaged in my process, trusting that the work will evolve as a result of my efforts. Serra's *Verb List 1967-68* was pinned on the wall of my studio as a daily reminder that action is the basis of creating my work, that materials are a tool, that process is a space for curiosity, and that the purpose of making art is to ask questions in pursuit of the unknown.



Richard Serra, *Torqued Ellipse* (1996) – surface detail

"Human genius lies in the geography of the body and its conversation with the world"[2]. David Whyte's poem '*Genius'* provided an important conceptual foothold to my studio practice at a time when my work was evolving in unexpected ways. His ideas instilled in me the belief in my innate knowledge – the wisdom I carry within my body. "Genius" is a deeper sense of knowing that we each possess, beyond conscious thought: I feel it as knots in my stomach, fluttering beneath my skin, tingling within my flesh, a swelling heart. Body, spirit, and identity converge with the "inherited flows" from ancestors, memories, stories, language, landscapes, and the breadth of our emotional experiences. The richness of our lives stems from the genius that resides within the body, with the understanding of self within the world. *Genius* became a central focus during the process of making this work, teaching me to listen to my inner knowing, to find power and strength in that knowing, and to engage honestly in a deeper conversation with myself about this present moment and the possibilities for my future.

The range of research methods that I utilise – material explorations, physical activity, reading, visiting museums and galleries – all feed into my studio practice in different ways. I think of it as channels of information that enter and exit my consciousness. Some forms of research invite new information in – such as walking and reading – other forms of research –

[1] Serra, R.*Writings, Interviews.* p. 15
[2] Whyte, D. "*Genius"* in *Consolations.* p.78

such as material experiments and writing – allow information and new ideas to be released. This becomes a cyclical process whereby I need to alternate between absorbing and releasing information in order to drive the work forward.

There is vitality to this method of research that directly feeds into the methodology of my studio practice. Being in my body, feeling my physical presence and the breadth of emotional experience is where my work comes from. This is cultivated through physical activity, being in the world, engaging with art and ideas, connecting with others. This is where I learn to breathe. This is the oxygen that sustains my creative practice. With this energising inhale, I can then trust my intuition – or as David Whyte might say: the innate "genius" within my body – to begin a conversation between myself and my materials. Through these various research methods, I am able to work iteratively to test ideas and get a better understanding of the processes and the structural elements I want to work with.

Process: Materials and Studio Practice

My making process is grounded in action; a careful negotiation, a back-and-forth of agency and expression; feeling and gesture embodied in clay. I am creating a visual language from a material vocabulary, one that conveys physicality, movement, visual tension, and spaciousness. As I work physically with clay and glaze - push, pull, cut, tear, carve, twist and fold - I want to exploit its physical qualities, to find the potential and limitations of the material, and imprint the action of my body. This process embraces the forces working with and against me and the element of risk inherent in ceramic processes.

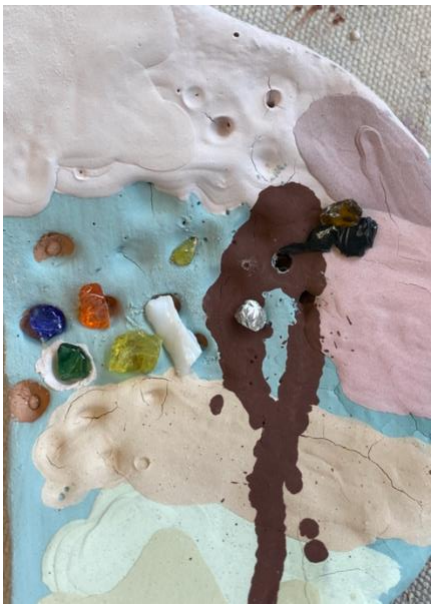
This body of work is made with a coarse porcelaneous stoneware that provides the structural integrity and textural qualities I am looking for. Hardy, demanding and generous, this clay body offers movement and surface qualities that serve my process and aesthetic intentions. The toothy quality of this clay makes it grip and bind like Velcro, so slip is rarely required for joining, and it is highly refractory and durable, which makes it well-suited for large sculptural forms and high-temperature atmospheric firing.

Material & process: detail of clay forms

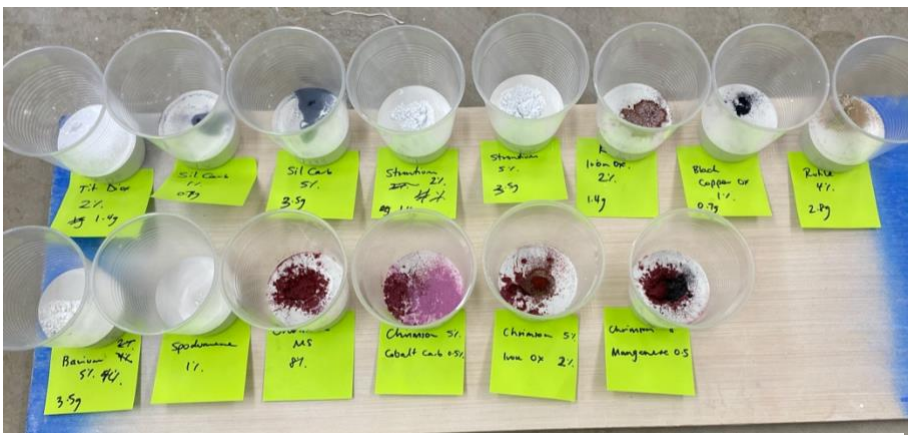
At the core of my studio practice is play, material curiosity, spontaneity, and relentless experimentation – these are essential to discovery, not just in the development of forms but also the resolution of surfaces and the final presentation. Clay is a responsive and generous material that allows me to work quickly and iteratively. It offers immediacy, intimacy, sensitivity, resistance, a sense of touch that is connected and personal. Working with clay is like drawing in three-dimensional space – ideas can be visualised, tested and expanded upon rapidly. It encourages risk and leaves room for chance – this is significant in my research process, ensuring that I am constantly pursuing unexpected outcomes. Clay fosters curiosity for the unknown and often presents uncertainty for the possibilities that lay ahead. This is an expansive experimental zone that I am excited to work in.

Making process: sculptures built directly in the kiln, propped with wadding, bisque scraps, newspaper and kiln props, sand underneath to minimise breaks from shrinkage.

I approach material testing in unconventional ways, led by curiosity and asking "what if…?" rather than following a logical system bound by the conventional rules of ceramics. Glaze experimentation is an area of endless fascination for me. I started from three base glazes and dozens of colorants to test hundreds of glaze combinations and surface qualities, each round of testing becoming more experimental than the last. Multiple layers of glaze are brushed, dipped and dribbled onto semi-circular test tiles, with the addition of thick trails of slip, washes made with salt, soda and borax, and melted glass beads over the glazes. Over several months, I used the information to further develop techniques and refine the palette I wanted to work with, until eventually applying these to sculptural forms, where I discovered further unexpected results.



Glaze test tiles



Adding colorants to base glaze

My glazing process is wildly experimental following an intuitive logic, drawing on the information gathered from extensive experimentation. I brush and pour excessive, indulgent layers of viscous glaze, letting it run, blend, pool and drip off the edges. I use very thick slip, both under and over glazes to intentionally create crazed, peeled skin-like textures and areas of matte surfaces that break from the overall glossiness. Finally, each piece is coated with borax wash before firing to cone 6-7 in a reduction atmosphere to achieve luscious high-gloss surfaces with rivulets and heavy drips of molten glaze captured in motion. I then continue to fire the work over and over again, as many as eight firings, layering additional glaze each time to enliven the surfaces. This process is in pursuit of the unexpected; every firing is a new opportunity for discovery.

Glazed sculpture, ready for firing

My experimental approach is influenced by a group of contemporary artists whose studio practice is driven by wildly experimental processes, material obsession and child-like curiosity. For Arlene Shechet, Liz Larner, John Gill, Annabeth Rosen, Renata Cassiano, Aneta Regal, play is central to their work. Shechet moves clay quickly and vigorously then fires repeatedly, sometimes pushing the work to breaking point, aiming to develop depth of color and complex surface qualities[3]. Rosen uses "the studio and the kiln as laboratories where she (can) push the material and process up to and beyond its limits"[4].

Perhaps the most influential to the direction taken in my own process is the ceramic work of Liz Larner, who uses weight and gravity to exploit the material limits of clay and presents richly layered glaze surfaces discovered through relentless experimentation. Larner's sculptures bridge abstraction and material investigation, exploring the role of time and transformation in her processes, where "mistakes and unexpected material happenstance are integral to the sculptural outcomes"[5].

Liz Larner, *vi (caesura),* 2013. Ceramic, epoxy, and pigment.
Image source: Regen Projects

The process of making my work is led by an intuitive sense of touch and an embodied sense of presence. I trust my materials and my process. My body is, by necessity, fully engaged in the making process. I relish the highly physical and rigorous nature of this work: from mixing 400 pounds of clay, to rolling large, heavy slabs, then lifting and shaping these into forms. I often score or paddle the surface of the slabs using a repetitive motion to create a rhythmic pattern of parallel lines. I carve, cut, tear and fold the clay slabs, sometimes using a small selection of tools but mostly working with my hands, forearms, elbows, shoulders, making intuitive decisions in response to how the form is evolving. I intentionally stretch, strain and tear the clay to achieve rugged textures and split open the surface to expose the interior. I work quickly, energetically, my entire physicality is engaged in the making process.

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[3] *Art21: Arlene Shechet in "Secrets"*. 2014
[4] Cassell Oliver V. *Annabeth Rosen: Fired, Broken, Gathered, Heaped.* p17.
[5] Butler, C. "*Something about That Smile"*, Liz Larner: *Don't put it back like it was,* p.14

The decision to work from thick slabs came from working with construction paper and simple line drawings. When I was a child, I would draw by trailing a pencil or marker around a sheet of paper in one continuous line, filling the space with loops and irregular shapes where the line would intersect itself. In my studio practice today, I try to work from my inner child, with the same ease and lack of concern for a certain outcome. Line drawings on colored paper open a world of possibilities. By cutting along and around the scrawled lines, then curling and folding the paper I could transform the flat plane into three-dimensional space.

Paper sculptures made from line drawings line drawings on 8.5"x11" construction paper.

Richard Serra's ideas about formal elements, material considerations, and his understanding of space and mass significantly influenced my process. In an interview published in Das Kunstwerk in 1978, he said:

> *To draw a line is to have an idea. A drawn line is the basis of construction. To draw is to innovate in multiplicity. The line gives to the work an inexplicable definition. It defines and redefines structure. ... the cut as line informs the material, the structure and the process.*[6]

[6] Serra, R. *Writings, Interviews.* p. 28

Line is the essential underlying element in my work: from the initial drawing process and paper constructions, to manipulating clay slabs, through to the steel structures that support the work. Working from clay slabs is an extension of working with paper: lines become cuts become folds in three-dimensional space.

The process of working with steel engages a different logic to my processes with clay and glaze but adheres to the use of line as the essential formal element. Presentation methods used by Arlene Shechet and Annabeth Rosen inspired the decision to create steel trusses as a method to create space under the work, to give it upward lift against the pull of weight and gravity. Working with steel offered a new challenge in terms of technical skill and material language, one that I approached as another opportunity for discovery. The choice to make use of recycled steel gave me parameters that I was excited to work with: a pile of rusty puzzle pieces is another space for play, with the task of figuring out how these parts could come together with functional and aesthetic aims to quietly complement my ceramic sculptures.

Annabeth Rosen, *Roil,* 2015
Fired ceramic, baling wire, steel base
Image source: P.P.O.W. Gallery

Intimate bodies, rest
2024. Stoneware, glaze, epoxy, steel stand. 48x27x10 in
Presented in my thesis exhibition, *Intimate. Immensity.*

Evidence of process can be seen in every element of my work, revealing artistic method as well as material transformation. The heavily textured forms reveal the marks left by my hands, elbows, shoulders, the impressions of tools, as well as cracks and openings where the clay has strained and split during drying and firing. On the surface, trails and brush marks from glaze application are clear to see, as well as the pooling and suspended drips of molten glass. The steel trusses are dotted with small, hardened mounds, the residue left from welding the joints, whilst their rusted surfaces reveal the ongoing process of material change.

***Open** (detail)*

***Desire** (detail)*

Intimate bodies, rest (detail)

Vital Body (detail)

Discussion of work

Intimate. Immensity. is an investigation of materiality and body through the language of abstraction. Developed throughout a pivotal time for me personally, this collection documents a significant period of discovery and growth coinciding with the beginning of my relationship with my partner. This work is deeply personal. The forms of these sculptures and the feelings embedded within them is a direct response to this major change in my life; a shift that I have felt viscerally, that has altered me fundamentally, to my core. Their vitality in movement and colour, their bodily mass and presence reflects the vitality and physicality in their making; a process which was physically and emotionally demanding.

The phrase "Intimate Immensity" is borrowed from Gaston Bachelard's The Poetics of Space, where he wrote:

> *Immensity is within ourselves. It is attached to a sort of expansion of being that life curbs and caution arrests, but which starts again when we are alone. As soon we become motionless, we are elsewhere; we are dreaming in a world that is immense. Indeed, immensity is the movement of motionless man. It is one of the dynamic characteristics of quiet daydreaming.*[7]

The title of my thesis exhibition, *Intimate. Immensity.* references the relationship between the external and internal experiences of my body. Intimate is the sensations of my physical, exterior body, known only to me: the experience of touch, of skin against skin, my physical presence in the world. Immensity is my sense of interior geography, the expanse of intangible space that opens from the heart. It's the sense of being completely myself, fully alive in the emotional and spiritual senses of my body.

Intimate touch is central to both the process and the subject matter of this work. The immediacy and precision of mark-making in clay mirrors the energy and power of physical touch and the action of my body. When I'm making, I'm thinking about how my body moves – how my muscles work, flesh and joints and bones all connected, using my weight as a force, feeling the dynamics of movement – push, pull, gentle, firm, reach, fold. My body is a source of strength and a space of extreme vulnerability. Making this work felt strong, open, vulnerable, honest; the process mirroring the internal sensations of my body as I navigate this

[7] Bachelard, Gaston. "Intimate Immensity." *The Poetics of Space*. P.184

new relationship and this change in my life. This is the work I needed to make. This is the honest conversation I needed to have with myself.

The physicality of my making process and the material language of clay are not the content of the work, as I previously thought – rather, they are a vehicle for expressing my internal sense of self. These sculptures are a record of my body. They show my body in movement, every gesture and mark held in material form. The logic of their making is captured in the aesthetics of the work: dynamic, muscular forms that are ripped, twisted, pressed, gauged – evidence of the presence and feeling of my body in that moment.

Hold, held (detail)

My thesis exhibition, titled *Intimate. Immensity.,* includes nine ceramic sculptures presented on steel trusses, each piece balancing precariously on fine points. The selected works are the culmination of my material and conceptual research, each piece offering something unique in form, gesture, surface or technique. The works are arranged in a circular formation, inviting the viewer into the internal space and to walk around the outer parameter to experience the entire three-dimensionality of each piece.

The sculptures vary in scale, from 1' to 4' in height, offering moments of intimacy and moments of overwhelm. The larger scale works are commensurate to the viewer's torso and are displayed 42" off the ground. The materiality and bodily quality of the works meet the viewer's eye-level and – thinking about the effect of Richard Serra's immersive forms – forge a direct physical relationship with the viewer, to draw them in to the surfaces, invite them to look closely inside and underneath the works, and to fully understand their physical presence.

'Intimate. Immensity.' Exhibition view

I designed the three long steel trusses as an A-frame proportionate to the lower half of my body: the shape is traced directly from my feet to my waist, as if standing in an open stance. The steel components provide structure and order for the work, both literally and symbolically. The choice to use firm, geometric lines to make tall, rigid structures is intended as a reciprocal element to the wildness of the ceramic sculptures, a dialogue of materials and forms.

'Intimate. Immensity.' Exhibition view

'Intimate. Immensity.' Exhibition view

These sculptures share a unified palette of warm tones, dominated by various deep shades of red. This is a direct reference to the internal body: flesh, internal organs, symbolic of life, vitality, flourishing. The richness of colors offers complexity and depth, a point of curiosity and contemplation. The vibrance of this work speaks to a sense of aliveness, to capture movement not just in the forms but also in their surfaces.

The materiality of the work speaks to the materiality of my body as mass, volume, flesh suspended against gravity. Clay, glaze and steel offer me the language to visually articulate the feeling of my internal transformation, the intensity of emotion felt viscerally throughout my body. The material qualities of the work give voice to things I do not have words for.

'Intimate. Immensity.' Exhibition view

'Intimate. Immensity.' Exhibition view

Intimate bodies, rest. 2024. Stoneware, slip, glaze, epoxy, steel stand. 40"x27"x10"

Enrapture . 2024. Stoneware, slip, glaze, majolica, glass, steel pin, steel stand. 23x20x13 in

Awaken. 2024. Stoneware, slip, glaze, glass, steel. 19x14x15 in

Breathe. 2024. Stoneware, slip, glaze, glass, steel pin, steel stand. 18x31x9 in

Desire. 2024. Stoneware, slip, glaze, glass, epoxy, steel pin. 22x27x11 in

Open . 2024. Stoneware, slip, glaze, glass, epoxy, steel pin. 23x27x13 in

Hold, held. 2024. Stoneware, slip, glaze, glass, steel stand. 46x30x26 in

Tenderness. 2024. Stoneware, slip, glaze, glass, steel. 23x14x8 in

Vital Body. 2024. Stoneware, slip, glaze, glass, steel pin. 27x30x10 in

Technical information:

Cone 6-10 sculptural stoneware clay body	
Helmer kaolin	22.5
EPK	10.5
Grolleg	19.9
OM4	5.1
Silica	7.7
Custer	14.1
G200/Minspar	9
Pyrax	6.4
Sand & grog	5

Turner Beauty base (cone 6-10)	
Neph Sy	37.5
Dolomite	27.5
Spodumene	25
Tin Oxide	7.5
Whiting	2.5
	100
Veegum	1.0%
CMC Gum	1.0%
Colourants: rutile (5%), cobalt + dark red (0.5%, 2%), mason stains (2-5%): deep crimson, lavender, vanadium, tangerine, chartreuse, shell pink	

Arbuckle Majolica (cone 04-03)	
Frit 3124	66
F4 Feldspar	17
EPK	11
Neph Sy	6
Tin oxide	5
Zircopax	10
Bentonite	1
CMC	1
Colourants	2:3 stain: frit 3124

Cynthia Bringles wet-dry-bisque slip	
EPK	20
Ball clay	25
Neph Sy	25
Flint	30
	100
Gerstley Borate	5.0%
Bentonite	2.0%
White: zircopax	10.0%

Selsor Red (cone 6 reduction)	
Neph Sy	56.3
Silica	20.8
Whiting	10.4
Gerstley Borate	12.5
Tin oxide	1.5
Copper oxide	0.8
Bentonite	1.5
Veegum	0.5
CMC Gum	0.5
Colorants: titanium dioxide (2%), silicon carbide (1%, 5%), strontium (4%), red iron oxide (2%), black copper oxide (1%), rutile (4%), barium (4%), spodumene (1%), crimson mason stain (8%), crimson + cobalt (5%, 0.5%), crimson + iron oxide (5%, 2%), crimson + manganese (8%, 0.5%)	

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