



Un/Contained

Master of Fine Arts Thesis

By Jennifer O'Connell Reid

Ceramics at SUNY New Paltz

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Table of Contents

Introduction - Artist Statement	3
Floral Attraction - Perception Through Beauty	4
Metaphorical Containment and Constructive Ornament	6
Parts of a Whole - Object and Support	10
Methodology - Materials & Process	12
Conclusion	15
Bibliography	16
Acknowledgements & Show Card	17

Introduction - Artist Statement

I explore the ways in which the vessel grounds otherwise unfathomable abstractions of desire and intimacy. I work with typologies of the vessel form and histories of floral ornament, taking parts that are essential and distilling them in a dance between form, surface, and space. Decoration becomes physical form. Symbiotic connections manifest within the installation through color and material. Activated surfaces and light-admitting apertures function as entry points for the viewer to pause and reciprocally experience a relationship between the body, the pot, and the flower.

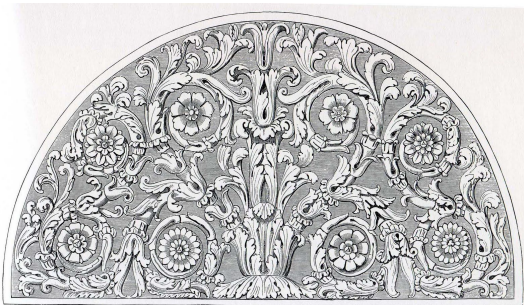
Floral Attraction - Perception through Beauty

"I don't think we can begin to understand beauty's gravitational pull without first understanding the flower, since it was the flower that first ushered the idea of beauty into the world the moment, long ago, when floral attraction emerged as an evolutionary strategy."

- Michael Pollan ¹

Floral attraction within the animal kingdom is, in most cases, a universal phenomena. Flowers are seductive entities. They are nature's alchemists: experts at transforming water, soil, and sunlight into an array of precious substances, and produce chemicals that both repel and attract other species². Flowers are clever, alluring, complex beings whose beauty has transfixed entire cultures and species. I aim to capture this peculiar sense of desire through the use of sensual materials, surfaces, and forms to lure the viewer into a place both familiar and unexpected. Each vessel functions as a crucible to reflect on the intoxicating beauty of the floral world.

The equation of flowers and beauty has existed and been understood for centuries by nearly all of the great civilizations of antiquity. The Egyptians not only buried the dead with blossoms of flowers for their journey to eternity and tied native flowers around the wooden posts of temples, but also carved temple columns with floral patterns such as the *palmette* motif – resembling features of the papyrus or lotus flower. The flower emerges from symmetrical spirals, holding metaphorical significance to death and rebirth and as an offering to the gods.³



Roman Ornament, fragment in white marble

The Greeks did not copy or attempt to imitate specific flowers, but rather observed nature close enough to understand its patterns and create their own. The decorative ornament of Greek vases characteristically feature various parts of a scroll that grow out of each other in a continuous line - a nearly perfect radiation of lines from the parent stem in proportional areas. Furthermore, the Romans overloaded ornament with foliation in the form of scrolls growing out of scrolls, encircling a flower or group of leaves.⁴ It is evident that in the most prolific periods of art all ornament was

preferably based upon idealising the forms of nature. I feel persuaded that there can be further study and romanticization of the botanical within the present moment and aim to arouse it from its slumber of the mass produced era through the making of my sculptures. I see my work as colloquialisms of my time and times past. With the material of clay I am able to connect past with present and add to the history of ceramics and floral decorative culture.

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My work revolves around the phenomenological experience of botanical enrapture. I explore how a vessel can command space like a flower reaching for the sun. Bright yellows and blues shine from the interior walls to seduce the viewer into looking closer, creating a vibration of energy between figure and object. The relationship is physical, like that of being captivated by the lucid color and form of a tulip and transcending to a place of ecstasy. In the installation, this experience becomes immersive and plays with our perception and visceral response to things of beauty through an offer of containment and open form.



Un/Contained, MFA Thesis installation view

What might our ancient attraction for flowers have to teach us about the deeper mysteries of beauty? Perhaps it is that flowers are inherently borne the absurd weight of our meaning-making because of their seductive, yet ephemeral beauty. Beauty is indeed difficult to define due to its subjective nature and as a category of experience

that is both private and inevitably socially inscribed. Beauty is the agency that causes visual pleasure in the beholder and, according to Kant, “has the power to cast a universalized light upon a phenomenon, reminding us that what is presented beautifully is an inherent part of human experience.”⁵ This provides insight as to why cultures across antiquity have created objects of beauty (or placed objects of beauty such as flowers) at grave sites or for use in burial rituals: to transform our emotion in times of loss and urge a renewed love for life. There exists a wondrous dialogue between the seductive quality of plants and humans that is paradigm-altering. Michael Pollan challenges traditional views about humans and nature in his book *The Botany of Desire*. He suggests that flowers are responsible for the existence of notions of beauty when floral attraction emerged as an evolutionary strategy long ago: the presence of flowers is a reliable predictor of future food, and therefore beauty plays an important role in natural selection.⁶ Pollan proposes that nature is not only “out there” it is also “in here.”

So what does the term “relationship to nature” mean today? In most cases, our relationship to nature has become inattentive and divided. With my sculptures, I seek to alter our perception of the natural as other. Through scale and ornament, my sculptures confront this issue and offer an alternative vision activated by motion and desire. Evidence of my hand is critical in my work and is used to entice the viewer (like a flower) to look closer and to perhaps question their own relationship to nature. I merge elements of the architecture of flowers with

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those of the human body to signify ideas of transformation and interdependence. The vessels grow into biomorphic forms that function to straddle the divide between what is within and what is without, and provide a visual, meditative experience much like walking through a garden.

Metaphorical Containment and Constructive Ornament

“A lotus carved in stone, forming a graceful termination to a column, or painted on the walls as an offering to their gods, was never such a one as might be plucked, but an architectural representation; in either case the best adapted for the purpose it had to fill, sufficiently resembling the type to call forth in the beholder the poetic idea which it was sought to supply.”

- Owen Jones⁷

“...the way a ceramic vessel can symbolically centre our place in the world, articulating the relationships between form and substance, absence and presence, history and instinct, the particular and the universal.”

- Glenn Adamson⁸



Monuments for Love, installation view

I explore the sculptural potential of the vessel in rhythm with the body to translate an experience of desire into a spatial sensation. Through research on typologies of the vessel form and histories of floral ornament, combined with empirical studies of the architecture of flowering plants, I create sculptural ceramic works that suggest a harmonious relationship between the body, the pot, and the garden. The garden is composed by the mobility of our bodies: through space, perspective, and arrangement, meaning and aesthetics unfold with the movements of the body. The body I allude to is the physical body, composed of cells, tissues and organ systems.

Through the shared element of iron in red clay and in our blood, the materiality of clay becomes an extension of flesh. With this iron-rich clay I construct vessels with multiple holes that are physical pathways for air to pass through much like the breath. The openings function as points of inhalation and exhalation, similar to the way artist Barbara Hepworth referred to the holes in her sculptures not as gaps, but as connections between different expressions of form.⁹ The holes are space occupied by air and light. Most of the

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vessels in my thesis exhibition are human-scale, allowing the spatial connection among forms to be between human and object. Space is as much a part of a the sculpture as its' mass. This is a liberating phenomena that gives sculpture a fourth dimension in which space is its' own form and has a physical connection with the invisible or intangible.



Peony Jar, Northern Song Dynasty, 10th c.

My interest lies in the examination of the function of the vessel – historically and currently – as a space to materialize metaphor based on its' phenomenology of roundness. I use the vessel as a sculptural form to discover its' metaphorical agency within a contemporary framework. As a form, it speaks to fundamental human experience through its physicality, its cyclical nature, and the fact that life itself begins in an enclosed vessel. Much of our identity and interpretation of the world is bound by the containers we encounter everyday: rooms, vehicles, cups, bowls, bodies, flowers. Hollow form holds symbolic value to the vessel of the body.

I look to ancient funerary urns not for their specific cultural meaning, but for their symbolic use for the body - acting as a stand in for human existence - and their recurrent use of floral ornament. Historical pots from the Sung Dynasty, Persian lusterware, and African

spool-shaped funerary urns, are a foundation for my works. The graceful, spool-shaped vessels of 19th century Ghana feature an elaborately flaring lip counterbalanced by a flattened, ornately decorated body. The people of this region honor the deceased with accumulations of pottery vessels at spots in cemeteries known as "places of pots" in which such displays serve as points of remembrance for the living and facilitate communication with the deceased in the afterlife.¹⁰ Spouted Urns from the Sung Dynasty served to secure eternal well-being of a family and were often placed in tombs or given as gifts to the elderly to secure eternal well-being of a family. Such urns were decorated with repeated, ascending pedals and adorned with a stem-like handle, transforming the vessel into a representation of a closed lotus flower. The Peony Jars from this time were covered with looped pedals much like a flower in bloom. Each of these examples reference the architecture of plants and the human body - although symbolically - within a vessel framework. The element of volume alongside floral decoration is essential to these



Wild Seed, installation view

works and adds content to my own work through reinterpretation. The floral decoration functions as marks of importance for the object while transforming it into an object of beauty. The ornate, beautiful surface then draws you in to look closer and contemplate; the object becomes a way of



Nicole Cherubini, Earth Pot #6, 2014

seeing what surrounds us. The openings between the floral ornament in my sculptures take the viewer beyond the sculpture itself into infinite space, physically connecting body to environment.

The act of making for me is as much a veneration on the tradition of sacred storage within ceramic history as it is a romantic exploration of form and surface. Clay is a global material that transcends boundaries, tells stories, and remembers the touch of a hand. Because of its plasticity, clay holds the memory of the pressure of each pinch, transforming the unformed into a formed moment that becomes fixed after firing. The pronounced records of touch in my pieces mark the critical importance of handmade objects in an increasingly virtual world, in an attempt to blur the boundaries between craft, fine art, décor and sculpture. I fashion the flora and humanity of my world into an object of beauty through volume, scale and ornament.

With attentiveness to the rich history of ceramics, I understand the conceptual value of clay as a material that holds the presence of its time through physical marks of the hand. I look to contemporary ceramicists, like Nicole Cherubini, whom also reflect on ceramic history as part of their content. I specifically draw influence from Cherubini's use of the pot, typically an amphora-like reinterpretation, as a sculptural form in which the physicality of the making process is considered a conceptual value. Decisions such as leaving areas unglazed and incorporating found materials deconstructs the pot's function. Cherubini's G-pot series from 2004-2008 were built in layers from top to bottom, glazed repeatedly with rich dripping hues, and often wreathed with furs, fake gold rings, and chains. Displayed atop plinths made from materials such as plywood, steel rod, Plexiglas, painted foam and pine, these atypical, surprising surface pleasures directly point to notions of excess and formalism and challenges our conceptions of modern sculpture. The accessories allow the pot to transcend notions of functionality into a dialogue about social class and status in contemporary society. As the years progressed, Cherubini realized that perhaps the adornment could exist in the process as active pinch marks and dripping glaze, rather than as an added element.

Questions come to mind such as: What is the function of the pot in contemporary society? What is a pot? What is a sculpture? Can the decorative be functional? Sculptural vessel making, for me, is a way of seeing and connecting past and present. I use the vessel form as a metaphorical starting point to engage the viewer in ideas about the ways in which humans relate to their environment. Many contemporary ceramic artists have discussed vessels as fundamental to human existence, linking their practice to the roots of humanity through the notion of containment. British sculptor Tony Cragg uses the vessel form as a means of



Laibe, Tony Gragg, 1991



Temple of Isis From Philae Egypt

expression that is both relevant to the contemporary world and holds historical significance through removing the possibility of function. In his piece *Liabe*, which is German for “loaves,” the forms are thrown on the wheel and then sliced like bread. The visible, obvious throwing lines on the vessels reference the history of pots being made this way for thousands of years, while the sliced quality holds metaphoric and cultural value to bread as vital to sustaining life.¹¹ The material is part of the content and the form. Vessels have an inside and outside, occupies and contains space, and defines emptiness as presence, which gives the form such significance.

In *Monuments for Love*, I wanted to explore the vessel on a large scale to give these concepts a grand presence and provide an experience that is both visual and physical. In this case, the catalyst for an emotional response is the relationship of verticality and scale to the viewer rather than its functionality. Working in a cyclical manner with coils and press molds, repetition functions as a

medium for movement from inside to outside. I explore decoration as part of the construction and therefore as the content of the piece. I reach back to history, specifically Egyptian ornament in which the ornament was not applied but constructed - the whole capital is the ornament, and to remove any portion of it would destroy it.¹² I am drawn to such places in history in which decoration is as important at the structure of the object. In a similar manner, I build with press molded flower forms so that the decoration is physically built into each piece. In surface and in form, the act and moment of making is preserved in the finished piece as both the decoration and the structure. In combination with the pressed red-clay flowers, I construct vessels and parts of vessels using dried flowers that have been dipped in porcelain slip. The flowers absorb the clay and then burn out in the kiln, acting as a memory frozen in material form. I aim to push the material of



Monuments for Love, detail

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clay, responding to its inherent qualities and allowing the adornment to be constructed rather than applied.

Parts of a Whole - Object and Support

*“A germ begins to burgeon here and there,
As nature welds her ring of ageless power,
Joining another cycle to the last,
Flinging the chain unto the end of time – The whole reflected in each separate part.”*

– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*

Each piece in my thesis exhibition explores the ways in which size, texture, color and weight can create tensions between form and surface. The aim for this play in materials is to cultivate symbiotic connections between object and support, where one references the other and become whole.

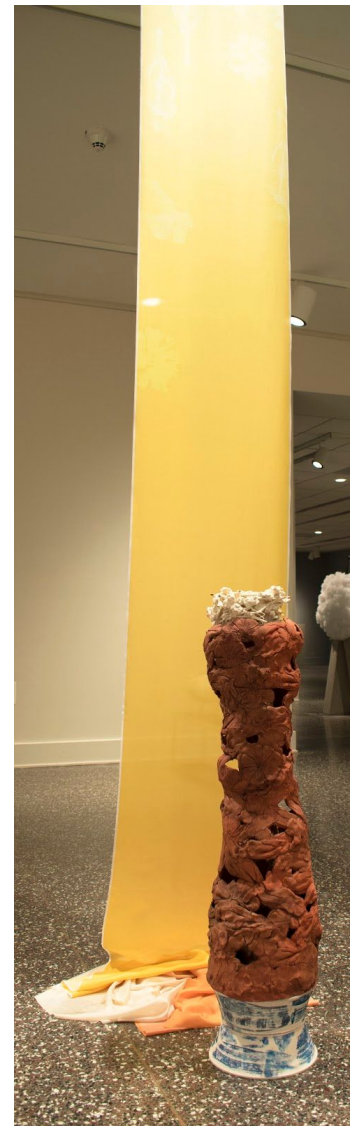
At times it feels that my medium is not the clay, but rather space itself. I look for ways I can bring line, both implied and actual, into the work. Noticing the gesture of a stem - the way it moves through space in a directional movement that reaches or bends - inspires the work to grow out from a base (of concrete, wood, or clay) with a similar purpose. The language of petals folding out from a stem read as punctuation marks, or finials, marking the top or end of the object. For this reason, I often crown each vessel with elaborate, blooming tops that imbue them with importance and a sense of play.

The notion of individualization is important to the work as I explore concepts of beauty and desire. German photographer, Karl Blossfeldt (1865-1932), individualized the plant into elegant objects



Photograph by Karl Blossfeldt

of beauty through his image making. The architecture of the plant was his main focus, as he transformed each plant into a regal object, with emphasis placed on its own unique gesture. As stated in *Art Forms in the Plant World*, “In order to extract these art forms from nature, Blossfeldt sometimes dissected specimens with the scalpel so radically that they are no longer botanically identifiable. At a later stage, he sometimes retouched undesirable



Dancing Light, installation view

features, removing them from a print.”¹³ His keen sense of composition and form provides the viewer with an empirical experience that is contemplative, harmonious and desirable. Each individual part has a strategic purpose in signifying a thing of beauty and completing the whole. When one enters a garden, a similar thing occurs in which the scene presents a chaotic bustle of floral color, scents, and sounds, that eventually gives way to our focus on individual flowers. Blossfeldt strategically constructs each botanical composition to draw attention to the architecture of each individual plant through cropping and balance: he positions the viewer exactly where he wants the focus to be within his framed compositions. In a similar way, explore the ways in which arrangement of pieces and color variation within an installation can draw a viewer closer to reciprocally experience each sculpture. The visual experience is composed by the mobility of our bodies, and therefore, becomes physical.

In Allen S. Weiss’ *Mirrors of Infinity: The French Formal Garden and 17th Century Metaphysics*, he discusses the French formal garden as a study in depth and incitement to motion. “Every object or place may be seen from an infinite number of points of view; each different point of view creates a different perspective on the object; every person may potentially occupy any given point of view, thus perceptually activating any desired perspectival presentation of the object or scene...for each object reveals itself to us little by little, over time and through motion.”¹⁴ Each sculpture in my thesis exhibition functions as a marker in space through which the viewer must walk around and experience from varying perspectives, therefore, how the work is installed and experienced is important. The work I make seeks to alter our perception of nature as Other. The installation of the work drives this point home.



King of Kings, Constantin Brancusi, 1938

Having a range in scale and color as well as breaking up the overall verticality of the majority of the pieces with a few horizontal elements, allows the eye to wander through the installation like they do in a garden: the way each individual flower is seen, distinct, yet blending magically into each other at once. Each piece is a part of a whole system, in which the viewer’s body becomes part of the choreography. I seek to create a sense of unity between body and environment.

Within the installation, materials are repeated and entangled. Wood, concrete and metal function as both supports and integrated structures that complete the whole. Sculptor Constantin Brancusi worked with parts to complete a whole with a language of stacking. His sculptures are very stable and use heavy materials such as concrete and wood, yet they

carve through space in a poetic way that reads as architecture, sculpture, and furniture all at once. Each part is essential to the whole. For this reason, I often build in parts that are then assembled together to complete a whole that arrives at a similar purpose; in which one part cannot exist without the other.

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14

I bring together elements of the built and domestic world with plant architecture to further emphasize the human and nature connection. Plants, people and architecture exist in a symbiotic relationship; each having their own role in the workings of a system of existence. The German writer, Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe, wrote extensively on botany, anatomy and color. Through the study of transformative stages of plant development, Goethe came up with his law of metamorphosis: nature produces one part through another, creating a variety of forms through the modification of a single organ.¹⁵ I am interested in the notion of things being parts of a whole, creating a unity of form in diverse structures. I merge materials from the built environment, such as wood, concrete and steel, and intimate materials like silk, wool, and nylon with the ceramic to highlight the notion of interdependence. Color is used as a visual marker in space to unify the installation. I intentionally repeat colors in various sculptures so that in the installation color allows your eye to complete the whole. These materials are familiar to the viewer and disrupts the overall floral decoration, provide a visual experience that speaks to sensuality and closeness through color, form and material.

Methodology - Materials & Process



Process shot, building inside the large bailey kiln

My process of making revolves around the experience of looking and the sensation of something coming into focus. I recall sensory experiences in nature through which empiricism is realized. Affinities to flowering plant forms and seed-pods emerge in both structure and adornment. I construct vessels from slabs made of pressed clay flowers. I draw with the clay, creating my own interpretations of the flowers that exist in my life, which I then make plaster press molds of. From these molds, I press clay into each flower variation until I have enough to begin building. I work in a cyclical manner, constructing vessels out of the pressed clay flowers. Choosing to leave space between the flowers invites the viewer to look inside the vessel and offer a glimpse into its cavernous core. Through this process, I create forms that fashion the flora, fauna and humanity of my world. I leave room for chance and mystery in the work, along with focused material research, in order to keep the process of making fluid and

perceptive. The works grow into complex thematic variations with an attempt to highlight the vessel as a physical contemplative object.

As a global material, clay transcends boundaries, tells stories, and remembers the touch of a hand. My process is dedicated to form, material and surface as a means of inquiry on both history and the present moment, and provides insight into how I see. Pinched, pressed, smooth and lustrous surfaces lure the viewer in to take a closer look and to reciprocally experience the botanical world. Activated surfaces and light-admitting apertures function as entry points for the viewer to contemplate such relationships. Intimate materials such as silk, wool, velvet and nylon are incorporated into the works for their physical association to the body and as tool of seduction. Size, texture and weight create tensions between form and material, cultivating symbiotic connections between object and support, where one references the other and



Drying out local clay for processing

become whole. The contrast of non-ceramic materials is an attempt to navigate the entanglement of histories, material and ecologies. My works are metaphors for the synergistic relationship between landscape and human being. The desire to gain deeper ecological connection to my materials has led me to harvest a portion of my clay body recipe locally, filling me with a deep understanding of the biography of the material. With hands grounded in earth, I feel connected to primitive energies and aligned with broader environmental directives. The harvested clay is mixed with paper pulp, grog, and other red clays to enhance its workability. Terra sigillatas are also mixed from this iron-rich clay source, producing lustrous surfaces in a range of earth tones: ochers, browns, greens, and reds. Processing and crafting my own medium inspires awareness, which drives my process of making to unfold organically with consciousness to the material.

Using the vessel as a sculptural form, I aim to push the material of clay, responding to its inherent qualities and allowing the adornment to be physically built into the piece rather than applied. My process is dedicated to form, material, and surface as a means of inquiry on both history and the present moment, and provides insight into how I see. In surface and in form, the act and moment of making is preserved in the finished piece. I dip dried flowers into porcelain slip and then construct forms with them. In the firing, the flowers burnout and a ghost-like shell of the flowers is left,

understanding of the biography of the material. With hands grounded in earth, I feel connected to primitive energies and aligned with broader environmental directives. The harvested clay is mixed with paper pulp, grog, and other red clays to enhance its workability. Terra sigillatas are also mixed from this iron-rich clay source, producing lustrous surfaces in a range of earth tones: ochers, browns, greens, and reds. Processing and crafting my own medium inspires awareness, which drives my process of making to unfold organically with consciousness to the material.

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Process shot, constructing with slipped flowers

acting as a memory frozen in material form. Coating them in a glossy clear glaze gives the surface a wet, oozing quality, as if the flowers are alive or perhaps melting, and transforming them into something visceral.

The work I make is seeded in an intuitive response to the materiality of clay. The plasticity of clay is the perfect vehicle for making connections between what is around us and what came before us. For me, the value lies in the process of making: discovery, chance, memory, and emotion are contained both metaphorically and physically through the touch of clay. In the studio I work in a progression, allowing each form to have a conversation with the other, giving rise to the next. Working this way references the process of metamorphosis in nature and permits space for a stream of unconscious thought and discovery to flow through the work.

The work physically sprouts and blooms around me. I work simultaneously on drawings and sculptures as both processes investigate silhouette and mass. The process begins outside, collecting, observing, photographing, and drawing curious objects that seduce. From these sources I sketch forms and then sculpt intuitively, working within the gap of conception and realization, seeming at first to be one thing, then becoming another. Working in a cyclical manner with press molds and coils, I seek rhythm through repetition of shape and line and through relationships of forms. Repetition functions as a medium for movement from inside to outside.

The mark of the hand is important to my work as a comment on the critical importance of handmade objects in an increasingly virtual world, in an attempt to blur the boundaries between craft, fine art, décor and sculpture. Activated surfaces and light-admitting apertures function as entry points for the viewer to contemplate the botanical world and its' profound and reciprocal relationship with us. Tensions exist between the surfaces, among the stacked parts of sculpture itself, and in an installation setting. Glaze is used in combination with the slips to achieve contrast in surface reflectivity and to



Wet Leaves Mirror the Sun, installation view

bring attention to certain areas of each piece. Cast concrete forms function as pedestals to provide yet another contrasting relationship of sharp, clean edges to the pinched surfaces of my sculptures. Tension also comes from within; from the air that fills in the void of the vessel, from the pressure of my hand that stretches and pinches the clay, as well as from the exterior forces without; the arrangement of the objects in a space. The finished works yield and recede in a rhythm that dances between being raw, refined, architectural, and organic.

Conclusion

In my studio practice, I am constantly searching for ways in which form and space interact and how decoration can function as physical form. I work with the vessel to explore concepts of desire and intimacy, deconstructing it into a sculptural form to discover its' metaphorical agency in an increasingly virtual world. I merge elements of the architecture of flowers with those of the human body to signify ideas of transformation and interdependence. The vessels grow into biomorphic forms that function to straddle the divide between what is within and what is without, or what is contained and what is not. Within the fabric of sculptural abstraction, I am interested in the tension and scale of objects in space, as well as the impact of perception and bodily movement of the spectator experiencing the art. As an installation, the works provide a visual experience that transforms space, captures our imaginations, and asks us to contemplate, as our physical existence in the space completes the whole.



Queen of Night, Installation view

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Show Card



Un/Contained

Masters of Fine Arts Thesis Exhibition
Jennifer O'Connell Reid

May 11 - 22, 2018 | 11am - 5pm

Opening Reception
May 11 | 5 - 7 pm

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
SUNY New Paltz
North Gallery
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New Paltz, NY 12561

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