

Stony Brook University



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Excavation

A Thesis Presented

by

Heather Marie Cruce

to

The Graduate School

in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Studio Art

Stony Brook University

May 2016

Stony Brook University
The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Thesis

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In this quest for these ceramic installations, my work has taken me on a lovingly, but labor-intensive journey of trial and error, failure and then ultimate success. I would like to discuss three installations that I consider to be visual solutions to the challenges I set in my art practice. I believe one of the challenges of making long-term installation works require a type of honesty and dedication within my self. For example, Drift required ten months of work from it's conception to exhibition. I was able to commit to such a work because of the type of grounding and foundation I set in my practice. This draws on being self-critical with the things I was most fearful about as an artist and person. I allowed and still allow myself to consciously live with these fears in order to better understand the physical gallery spaces I am creating for an audience. I had to accept my vulnerability. The type of dedication I set for myself is one that allows for growth and change. I experiment, play, and create objects always expanding my visual vocabulary and to examine my existing vocabulary.

The following works in this thesis are dedicated to the following people:

Drift, 2015 Shannan Gilbert, Maureen Brainard-Barnes, Melissa Barthelemy, Megan Waterman, Amber Lynn Costello, Jessica Taylor, John Doe, Baby Doe, Jane Doe No.3, Jane Doe No. 6, Jane Doe No. 7, unknown, unknown, unknown

Quarry, 2016 Kristen Smart

See Canyon Veil, 2016 Rachel Newhouse and Aundria Crawford

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Introduction

For the past three years, while an MFA student at Stony Brook University, I have pursued an intense study of sculptural work in the medium of ceramic. My goal was to create large-scale ceramic installations. These installations comprised of many ceramic pieces I meticulously sculpted and carved to reference the fragility, beauty and finite existence of the human body as it relates to earthly landscapes. My aim has been to imbue an exhibition space with a sense of reference and ambiguity, allowing the viewer of the large scaled installed work to experience the work independent of direction. I deliberately and painstakingly construct my sculptures to look as if they came from the earth, that is, wood that has been weathered, stone-like fossils that show debris and pigment, aged bone, visual evidence of their time on earth.

In this quest for these ceramic installations, my work has taken me on a lovingly, but labor-intensive journey of trial and error, failure and then ultimate success. I would like to discuss three installations that I consider to be visual solutions to the challenges I set in my art practice. I believe one of the challenges of making long-term installation works require a type of honesty and dedication within my self. For example, Drift required ten months of work from it's conception to exhibition. I was able to commit to such a work because of the type of grounding and foundation I set in my practice. This draws on being self-critical with the things I was most fearful about as an artist and person. I allowed and still allow myself to consciously live with these fears in order to better understand the physical gallery spaces I am creating for an audience. I had to accept my vulnerability. The type of dedication I set for myself is one that allows for growth and change.

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Outside of my personal studio time and practice I have actively participated in a larger art community. Setting forth a different type of dedication, I am committed to championing the ceramic arts and its importance in community and society. During my time at Stony Brook University I have had the opportunity to attend the 2014 International Sculpture Conference in New Orleans with a focus on sculpture, culture and community, the New York University's bi-annual conference on ceramic arts and the National Conference on Education in the Ceramic Arts, (NCECA) both in the spring of 2015 and most recently, The Clay Art Center Symposium on New York Ceramics titled *Clay at the Core: NY Art, Architecture and Design*, held in Port Chester New York spring of 2016. I have hosted and co-hosted ceramic making events at Stony Brook University to get clay into as many people's hands as possible.

On the subject of *Drift*
(Fig.1)

Drift- a mass of matter deposited together by or as if by wind or water.

It was Sunday, March 22nd 2015, the day before my solo exhibition would open. The Lawrence Alloway Gallery is located in the Melville Library at Stony Brook University. The library's interior courtyard sits outside of the gallery space. It is usually bustling, loud with people. Today, it is deserted. It seems that everyone was waiting until the very last possible moment before returning from spring break. I spent the entire spring break installing *Drift*. I stepped backwards out the gallery door reviewing what I had created. After a few steps, I stood in the long afternoon sun as it was streaming in the windows to my left. The light was warm and golden, blinding most my vision. I let out a relaxed breath only to hear a soft but surprised breath from behind me. I turned to a woman haloed in the light of gold. "This is your work? It is beautiful." She says a few more words on sculptural images of life and death and then, silence. "Thank you" she says before a slight choking of her throat and a tear in her eye take her voice, softly, away. I say thank you, more mouthing the words more than speaking them. *Drift* was ready for an audience.

I am a fisherman's daughter, born and raised on the California Coast. It is not an exaggeration to say that I spent every other day at the beach. It was my playground as a child, my escape as a teenager and my solace as a young adult. The summer before my first MFA solo exhibition I was exposed to the story of approximately seventeen female bodies that were discovered buried along New York, Long Island's, Gilgo Beach.

Authorities are not sure how many bodies were buried as they were deeply decomposed, found in severed parts and wrapped in black plastic. In addition the excavation and resources to conduct further possible unearthing were exhausted. These long buried body parts had started to be revealed by Hurricane Sandy in the fall of 2012. It was then I decided my upcoming solo exhibition the following spring would be in honor of these lost lives, and to be titled *Drift*. My challenge was to subvert images of violence into images of compassion and value. My goal, was to re-introduce humanity. In it's final solution, *Drift* ended up as a large scale ceramic and mixed media, multi-part wall installation. The installation was my largest, most challenging to date. Measuring ten feet high, twenty-four feet long and seven feet. deep. I designed, built and carved over fifty ceramic pieces. I carved the pieces a single line at a time, each line multiple times to create varying depth. They were fired and then stained with a copper carbonate wash. For the second firing I fired the kiln much hotter to achieve a yellowish age bone quality while the recessed areas with pooling of the wash achieved a wet, softened, eroded look of wood. (Fig. 2) I could not get the image of women's disassembled body parts eroding and weathering on the beach much like drift wood and so both the title and main aesthetic were discovered. I choose very particular body imagery to work with, including the inside hand with partial forearm and the legs from mid-thigh down to the point of the toe. I used imagery of the open cupped hand as a symbol of support and the legs as a form of physical agency. I took great time and persistence to touch the likeness of trompe l'oeil, body parts recreated as driftwood. My energy was met with success as viewers and passer-byers commented on my beautiful woodcarvings.

I did have some unexpected experiences while carving *Drift*. I knew I was taking on a heavy and dark subject matter. I had to be honest with myself and ask if my head and heart could do this? As I began the carving process a sensation of compassion washed over me. I held each piece as a precious individual and planned my mark making lovingly. I honored the small representations of life, the carving process became much like preparation and performance of a spiritual ritual. The body parts were partly created with ceramic castings from my own body. This decision was made as I felt my own body was the only one I had the right to exploit. In addition to discovering active compassion I had a most intimate experience several times when I picked up a piece of clay and started carving out the first lines I had a tickling sensation down the arch of my foot as well as the inside of my arm down to my palm. It was like what amputees describe as ghost limbs. It felt like the tickling vibration one's skin gets upon receiving the anticipated touch of a lover. I fell in love with *Drift* that night.

I will not dissect *Drift*. I created it as an experience to share. I will talk about some of its formal aspects. The Lawrence Alloway Gallery is a modest sized "white box", but I wanted the space to have the characteristics of both a place of memoriam and sacred reflection. *Drift* is partly inspired by the famous ossuary in the church, *Our Lady of Conception*, located in Rome, Italy. In this underground crypt the bones of over 4,000 friars are displayed in ironic decorative fashions of the baroque and rococo. The ossuary is a place for reverence, prayer and reflection. *Drift* uses symbolism much in the same vein as memento mori.

It is both a reflection of mortality while looking at the immortality of the soul's afterlife. The making of *Drift* was a powerful way for me to engage my energy in order to combat some of the helplessness I feel when it comes to the misogyny and violence of female bodies.

On the subject of *Quarry*

(Fig.3)

Quarry- a place, typically a large deep pit, from which stone or other materials are or have been extracted.

Quarry is my second large-scale wall installation comprised of ceramic and mixed media. Upon the first visit to my own completed exhibition the need to genuflect is practically triggered like an automatic reflex. The reverent and somber atmosphere I have created, slowed my steps to an intangible physical awareness that I am now in someone else's space. I walked toward the monumental artwork directly in front of me, my sense of sound and texture was activated with the feeling and noise and crunch of sand underneath my feet. I was an unexpected explorer just now taking responsibility for the experience.

A blood iron red back wall stretches approximately twenty-four feet across the space. It bears seven architectural elements. These seven elements are saturated with gold paint. The subtle lighting in the room is just enough to reflect several hotspots off the gold. It takes a moment for my eyes to adjust. As I move closer my sight figures out how to navigate between the reflective gold and the largely encompassing shadowy areas.

The seven gold architectural pieces are door like rectangles, each with a boxed triangular cover slanting down toward the viewer. The height is considered so that I must look up. Tipping my head back, not so far as toward the heavens but just far enough to acknowledge an existence greater than myself. The architecture has a sandy, stone-like texture and roughness that makes me want to believe that they have been

carved as seven solid pieces from a gold veined mountainous stone. The architecture created seven implied spaces or portals that protect the displayed sculptures much like the nature of a reliquary. These reliquaries are protecting two handmade artifacts each. One of the artifacts seems to be floating in space while the other is firmly placed on the ground. The floating artifacts are different in each reliquary some are small and others much larger. I have deliberately positioned the narrow, longest artifact in the center portal of the seven spaces. When I walk up to investigate the work further my attention is brought back to the sounds of my own steps as the crunching sound beneath my feet becomes more prevalent. I look down to see the sand has become more concentrated and that I am now leaving footprints in the sand. My presence has left finite marks in this place; I am a part of it. Returning to the slender floating artifact in the center, I am attracted to its fossil, bone-like quality that still emanates with the warmth of life. My eyes run up and down the artifact before I start to question its ability to float. It takes a moment to find the barely perceptible gold threads that suspend it perfectly in the center of the protective, triangular gold hood. Returning my gaze to examine more closely the slender artifact, I see the reference to a human leg and mentally declare it as so. It is beautiful, a petrified piece of human existence. It is warm in color with hues of cream, rust and blood. It is slightly textured like the gold reliquaries suggesting it was excavated from the same part of the earth. However, the artifact also contains larger, dime size debris embedded in the leg putting the artifact at a much younger age, displaying less years to break down and weather away. (Fig.4) All the floating artifacts expose the same fossil like aesthetic. My attention is pulled back and forth, caught between the decision to study the artifacts on the ground or to continue to study the other

six floating artifacts. I start to move down from the center. To the left of the slender extended leg, I take some time to realize I am looking at a right leg torn from a seated lotus position. All seven reliquaries contain the collective body parts to make up one woman save for her arms and abdomen. This space is a tomb.

The artifacts on the ground become markers of the dead. They are set center of the reliquary's width and directly downward of the tip of the triangular hood. This placement creates another layer of protection, preventing me from walking into the footprint of the architecture. These markers are cold and stone like, almost deplete of color. Only soft, shadowy, scratches that have the appearance of being bleached from age are left behind. They appear to be much older than the artifacts they protect. These markers are cairns. Perhaps they act as a burial monument or serve some unknown ceremonial purposes. I like to believe they are directions for the unseen traveler. They are balanced several high. One stone like object delicately placed on top of the other. Although the cairns measure no more than fourteen inches high, they create a distinct presence.

I step backward, back toward the entry of the installation. I find the bench about halfway there and sit. I am far enough back where I can take in the space in it's entirety. There behind the light, in the shadows the artist in me returns to my consciousness. It all comes back in waves, I am the curator, I am the caretaker, I am the creator responsible for this space. I am tired both physically and mentally, not just from the months of making essential endless kiln firings for the ceramic elements and the construction of mixed media components and the emotionally consistent tone needed to bring about the installation. I had excluded the hands and abdomen from the reliquaries as symbols.

Sitting there exhausted, I am glad I did. To give all that I did I needed to protect the hands as a symbol of my creative, physical agency and the abdomen as the part of the body that houses my soul.

On the subject of *See Canyon Veil*
(fig.5)

See Canyon is located:
N 40° Latitude
W -73° Longitude

Veil- something that covers or hides something else.

See Canyon Veil was my third large-scale ceramic installation work. Although I consider this piece my first conceptually, I needed to learn, experiment and build my vocabulary for the depth and sophistication, and focused hard work needed for this installation. My challenges were to move my work from the walls that supported the previous two pieces and create an anti-gravitational sculpture that appeared to float in the space in the Paul W. Zuccaire Gallery for my third year thesis work. Secondly, I had to master a very different clay body than my previous works. I chose to work with porcelain, which is a fragile, fickle and an unforgiving clay body. However, I did not have much “choice” as when I finally had the opportunity to experiment with porcelain, there was no looking back. It had the visual, tactile qualities I was looking for. I wanted to strip all color, paint and mixed media from my final work. Once fired, porcelain is dense and becomes the strongest of ceramics. The high-fired porcelain clay is light in color and soft in appearance with a natural burnished shimmer without the need for glaze.

My new and significant challenge was to move beyond the direct reference of the human body and to work in greater abstraction. I felt that abstraction was the place I was going to find a solution to communicating the balance of subtleties of my internal voice. I had a plan for the overall installation and then set out to make and fire, one hundred and fifty rectangular shaped, 8 x 10 inch, paper thin, handmade porcelain “tiles”.

Instinctively, I wanted the installed sculpture to read left to right starting with the front of the installation. The first piece floats at my eye level. Its size is reminiscent of an 8 x 10 inch portrait, yet it surprises most viewers is not made of paper. It is dense like stone but thin like the strongest of seashells. *See Canyon Veil* is comprised of these hand made porcelain tiles, suspended from the high gallery ceiling, at the center of my exhibition space, hanging in a dramatically, long, uniform, weightless membrane-like configuration. The first row hangs one tile, the next row two tiles, adding a tile each row till the rows hang five tiles long. The rows of five continue for many feet. I walk along the rows, counting my steps. I count twenty-five steps as I reach the end of the piece. It ends like it began with the last four rows minus a tile till again I am faced with a single tile floating at eye level facing me like an abstract portrait.

The many tiles as a whole share similarities, besides their size, they all are white, they all have my deliberate physical marks. The pieces are complete both as individual objects and together as a whole. There are a few degrees of whites from cool to warm. Their color and stone-like quality of the porcelain convey a feeling of examining fossils. Fossils that have been excavated, preciously cleaned up and then assembled in a fashion of a trained hypothesis. Much like one would view the skeletal remains of the dinosaurs, these assembled tiles offer an opportunity to let the imagination go back in time, and back in history.

The length of the installation that faces the light displays marks that I try to categorize in order to understand what I am experiencing. First I am pulled to the

shapes that look like the vertical lines of tree bark with rosy like knots that lightly swell out of the surface of the tile. Much like a tree, the lines shift when a knot occurs in its path. The knot and lines have a synchronicity much like a rock in a stream but more abstracted. The rock does not stop the stream but becomes a part of it's landscape. Each line is tediously carved with patience and compassion. Patience, as it would not be an exaggeration to say that close to 10,000 lines were carved. Compassion, as each line received full attention while it developed into being. The bark-like lines are not dug out like an impression nor are they additive like a growth. The lines are slightly torn away marks from it's own surface. The tears are carefully torn, creating a scalloping pattern as the material was delicately lifted and pulled away from it's surface.

Not all of the tiles have this same carving. I am particularly attracted to a tile that is much thicker. The idea of a fossil starts to become more believable. I start to see what reminds me of a trilobite, remnants of life long before humans conquered the earth. The spiral shape of the trilobite is cut at reaching the edge of the tile but it's pattern continues on to the tiles next to it. The continuation of the image causes me to take a few steps back, and then a few more to see the image in its entirety. The trilobite starts to change and grow. I now see a heart, a muscle pumping and causing flow. (Fig. 6) This flow makes me look at the composition of the floating tiles as one. From this distance the tiles become less decipherable. To focus on the entire piece I have to let go of the need to decipher and just be in the moment.

See Canyon Veil is placed floating in the middle of the space; I am curious, and drawn to the back of the work. The back purposely has no light source of its own. The tops of the tiles glow with a gold light that spills over from the front of the piece that is bathed in light. Besides the outline glow, these sides of the tiles are in shadow. My eyes have to refocus to make out traces of preserved remains of plants or other once living organisms. Some of these impressed marks bear a rust, blood like stains of injury long ago.

Conclusion

The last three years at Stony Brook University's MFA Studio program have been successful. I define this success as I started with several goals for my art practice. Firstly, I did not allow for boundaries. With each project, exhibition, opportunity, I found solutions to materialize my large-scale ceramic installations. I was also able to foster important conversations. The three installations presented in this thesis have generated seven artist talks in addition to the thirteen exhibitions I have participated in during my time at graduate school. I have created a foundation in my strength of visual artwork and work ethic that can only propel me further into the world of fine art.



Figure 1

Drift, 2015

ceramic, sand, paint

10' High x 24' Wide x 7' Deep (Feet)



Figure 2
Drift, detail 2015



Figure 3

Quarry, 2015

ceramic, wood, paint

12' High x 24' Wide x 4' Wide (Feet)



Figure 4
Quarry, detail



Figure 5
See Canyon Veil, 2016
porcelain
70" inches high x 25' feet wide x 1/4" inch deep



Figure 6
See Canyon Veil, detail

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