Natural Flow

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Natural Flow

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University

By

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Nature never ceases to amaze me with momentary observations of fluid energy: the purposeful curvature of a blue heron’s neck; the pattern of water as it sweeps across a rock sculpted by that very motion; the changing light and shadows created as wind blows through tall grasses. The spark of beauty in these moments lies in the energy that causes this constant change. To capture this energy, either potential or kinetic, and embody it through textures and flow of mass, is my essential goal as an artist.
Introduction

When I began my career as an elementary art teacher in 2000, I quickly realized how different my time schedule and energy levels were compared to my undergraduate days of late night ceramic studio marathons at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania. Time for making art did not present itself. Instead, I scrambled to prepare for the 500+ students who came into my visual arts classes every week. By 2002, it had been nearly two years since I created any significant art other than examples for my lessons. This disconnection from my passion saddened me. I recognized this as a crucial time, either to further myself as an artist or to become a non-practicing teacher of art. This was my frame of mind when I enrolled in a VCU/MIS ceramics course during the spring of 2002. I realized this program could function as my creative outlet. What a relief to reestablish this important aspect of my life. Taking classes every week with credible instructors as well as fellow art teachers proved invaluable, as was having a set time to devote purely to art production.

Ceramics and Sculpture

During my first VCU ceramics course, I confronted two problems with my work. How could I capitalize on my previous practice of combining multiple thrown parts, and what was a better way to meld form and surface treatment. First, I assembled a series of whimsical teapots, mostly containing wheel thrown, cone shaped parts altered and added in unconventional angles. All four pots included three legs, a spout, handle, and lid, with
each positioned at an off-balanced angle. This humorous, animate approach was naturally appealing. I viewed them as a successful continuation of constructing with multiple thrown parts as I had produced in college previously.

I thought raku glazes would be a risky but exciting surface treatment for this playful grouping. As a class, we decided to build and fire a raku kiln, as well as mix glazes, knowing time and space would be limited. In an effort to save time and resources, we did not test the glazes first. Three of the four teapots were unsalvageable based on glaze outcomes. I was reminded of an important lesson from my undergraduate ceramics studio days: test, or give complaining a rest. In that spirit, I chose to investigate dynamic surface treatments that were not limited in time or space.

The one piece from this course that made it into my Thesis Exhibition was Sand Story (figure 1), a slab wall hanging that included melted glass. Previous to glazing this piece I conducted several glaze experiments, and the glass and glaze pooling turned the recessed areas into the focal points of the piece. By discovering this surface treatment, I had a taste of success, and would experiment with other glazes in subsequent classes.

Most of the work displayed in “Natural Flow,” my thesis exhibition, was created during VCU sculpture courses. I completed 4 sculpture courses offered by the same instructor between the spring of 2004 and the summer of 2005. During this productive time my body of work both expanded and pulled together. It expanded in the realm of materials and their limits, and tightened in the way each sculpture relates to another as part of a group.

As per my Artist Statement, my sculptures are interpretations of the visual flow experienced in nature. These natural encounters are momentary, since organic forms go
through constant change. I learned to use not only clay, but also stone and copper as materials to give forms a lasting, solid presence, one that organic objects are often not afforded. Most pieces are stylized versions of their living counterparts, often incorporating aspects from several mental snapshots and sketches into one sculpture. These sculptures may resemble organic objects, but my hope is that these three-dimensional interpretations of nature also capture the living energy that gives fluid forms their appeal.

As part of my sculpture focus, I was able to continue pushing clay's limits. Clay remains the easiest medium with which to emulate nature, helped by its inherent plasticity. Making molds and reproducing tiles from an original machete enhanced my limited knowledge of mold making, while expanding my existing base of ceramics techniques. After using this method to make *Daydreaming Mirror* (figure 2), a tile framed mirror, I returned to altering and combining forms as I had previously.

One personal goal, aside from coursework, was to throw more than one hundred vases, all under two inches high. Seeing these small, white porcelain pots all together pleased me greatly. They reminded me of mushroom clusters or suction cup texture on sea animals. It was at this point that surface texture seemed possible from the addition of repetitive thrown parts to a large base. *Octopus Pot* and *Oceans Orange* (figures 3 and 4) were both created using this technique. These works have 70 and 48 small thrown additions respectively, their sheer numbers peaking viewer curiosity. These two works have many similarities, but were not constructed precisely the same way. *Octopus Pot* began as a bowl with sides that curve up 5 inches from the base, requiring that the multitude of small spouts be attached before firing. Fluidity requires eased transitions
that melt into each other, and this can be achieved with the least obstacles when clay is leather hard. The joining of so many parts was tedious, but it was enjoyable to watch the forms meld into something new.

*Oceans Orange* began as a plate with very little upward curvature. This allowed me to attach the additions during the glazing step, by glazing the plate and each pot separately, then setting the small additions on top to let the heat of the kiln do the bonding. Both methods had their advantages; by joining the parts first I ensured they would not move during firing, but then glazing was difficult. By joining with glaze I was able to fully glaze each small pot, the converse being that there was some shifting during firing. These were the two most successful sculptures I made using this multiple textural part technique, and this method’s possibilities are far from exhausted.

I began throwing much larger forms, some with whimsical thrown or pulled handles. These were not created as part of a series, nor did they have a proliferation of parts added to a base, like *Octopus Pot* and *Oceans Orange*. *Fiddlehead Ladle (figure 5)* is complete as one large thrown form with one thrown and pulled handle attachment. Similarly, *Flower Pots (figure 6)* began as one large thrown and altered bowl, with two wheel-thrown handles as additions. As a decorative rather than functional bowl, I chose not to trim the bottom, since it would not be picked up regularly. This decision proved problematic when the bottom blew out during firing. Since the outside form was intact, I was spurred to experiment.

A jester’s hat shaped piece that was under construction at the same time developed a crack on the bottom during bisque firing. Together, the two damaged pieces looked like a flower with a pronounced piston. Simply by placing one form inside the
other, both scars were completely disguised. Next I threw a third bowl to place under the emerging flower, this one invoking a flower’s steeple. Finally, to elevate the piece, I threw a 20-inch tall, slightly thin cylinder as a stem. The crowning elements are three forged copper stamens. The piece was dramatically better than it would have been before the two mishaps. Stacking is beneficial in that it allows the artist to let a sculpture evolve, and to give otherwise blemished pieces a new perspective, as well as a new life.

The most valuable additions to my technical skills came when stone was introduced. All of my sculptures require some planning, but planning for stone requires less specific premeditation, a quality that suits my personality. I enjoy “unlocking” the form, and find pleasure in the mystery of not always knowing how the form will evolve. Stone as a sculpting material is new to me; my first experience occurred during a VCU Sculpture class in the spring of 2004. With the encouragement of my instructor, I allowed the form to emerge from the white marble while chiseling. After two days of very physical work, I could see the organic form blossoming from within the small boulder. At this point, some simple pencil marks served as an adequate guide.

Since stone is not as predictable as clay, I did not have a clear vision of what the finished piece could look like. When one third of the mass cracked off along a weak vein, my breath burned hot and cheeks flamed knowing I could not scratch and slip the chunk back together, as with clay. However, I believe in flow not only as an attractive visual element, but also as a way of allowing ideas to shift into stronger ones. The end result of this singular effort produced two works: *Emerge (figure 7)*, and the broken chunk later evolved into *Glide (figure 8)*. These are two of the most fluid, rounded sculptures I have created out of any material. While stone proves challenging, it is
extremely well suited to creating bulbous, curving forms from solid masses— all of which compliment my interest in the flow of nature.

An extraordinary artist I came across through research for one sculpture class was Richard Erdman. His forms sweep and drift through space like swirls of wind-blown leaves, yet are miraculously carved from stone. They appear delicate though hewn from such a heavy material, cradling the space surrounding and within. Of all the aspects of his work that I admire, the gracefully enveloped negative space is most captivating. A huge step forward in my future work will come when I am able to take risks by knowingly removing more than half of the stone's mass, to better emphasize its most elemental structure.

Copper, like stone, is also a relatively new material to me, introduced during the same sculpture class. Copper and stone seem to be opposites in terms of working methods. Copper demands meticulous planning, down to making a study of the parts from paper first, then taping them where the copper will attach. After adjusting any misalignments, the paper templates are disassembled and traced on copper sheets. To cut curving shapes is awkward; the sheets lend themselves better to straight edges. Creating fluid forms out of flat material gave my sculptures a new twist. I needed to anneal (heat and quickly cool) the metal before working the sheets over steel stakes to achieve desired transitions. Curving strips around thin cylinders was a quick, effective way to add dimension when creating forms. *Copper Blossom (figure 9)* employs these forging techniques along with piercing, manipulating edges with pliers, and binding thin wires as textural elements. This copper sculpture sufficiently fits with my other organic inspired forms.
Another aspect of copper work is braising. Braising utilizes heat, a flux coated braising rod, and a steady hand to bond two pieces of copper quickly and permanently. The act of controlling this liquid metal is both fascinating and wearying to me, like slowly drawing with lava. Seeing this liquid metal move and bond fluidly, a property so few materials have, opened my eyes to the beauty of metal processes. I now have great respect for the inherent qualities of this material. Copper is more predictable than stone, but ironically is less suited to visually flowing forms than clay or stone.

Two-dimensional Art

Three-dimensional work always came intuitively to me. I prefer making objects one can touch and actually feel how it really feels, as opposed to working two-dimensionally. That’s not to say painters have not influenced my aesthetics. Nothing would please me more than to sculpt the way Georgia O’Keeffe paints. I would be happy to do anything artistic that carries the qualities that this master accomplished with seemingly effortless ease. Her luscious, alluring lines mark edges of purely organic shapes, displaying a mastery of smooth gradations. O’Keeffe has presented nature in a captivating way by graphically intensifying its many aspects.

After beginning my VCU experience with ceramics, I stepped out of my comfort zone to explore painting and printmaking for several classes. My first two-dimensional class was Landscape Painting. I began the course using acrylics, for reasons of transport practicality and familiarity. After a short time, I decided to switch to oils, finding its wet-on-wet capabilities more suitable for my desired style. My most effective pieces
showcase imaginary, somewhat sculptural sunsets in vibrant colors, reflecting O’Keeffe’s influence. The more abstract my paintings became, the more they pleased me (figure 10). These two-dimensional works do fit with my sculptures when it comes to subject matter and curvilinear lines, but they lack the impact of forms that visually shift with ease because of their multi-dimensionality. While the quality of flowing can be achieved on flat surfaces, I personally find it less engaging, due to the lack of three-dimensional shadow play inherent to physical forms.

Another VCU painting course emphasized multimedia by encouraging a hybrid of two-dimensional and three-dimensional work. This was an interesting crossover of mediums. The instructor introduced Japanese bindings: end-to-end bindings that can fold forwards or backwards, as a means for linking several “pages” of art. The work can then be viewed from all sides, and has the ability to stand. I constructed six works utilizing this technique, after composing several related multimedia paintings on foam core, and then binding them with leather using the Japanese binding technique (figure 11). While this is an innovative way to display flat work, this method would be much more dynamic used on a dramatically larger scale, perhaps 5 feet high by 20 feet long. Time spent on this work was valuable, and I plan to apply techniques learned to future projects.

Monotype printmaking and Torry-plate lithography were two very different types of printmaking courses I completed in the program. Monotype printmaking allowed for an unstructured, painterly style to be expressed in singular prints. By being able to build up and remove paint or ink from a Plexiglas surface, a wide range of detail could be achieved. My prints were mostly loose, with variegated colors and subtle lines (figure
12). Despite the necessary, focused attention on neatness during the printmaking process, I found these prints very relaxing to create.

The prints I produced in the Torry-plate lithography course contrasted strongly with my soft, gently gradated monotype prints. Torry-plate lithography gets its name from the Torry-plate: a thin metal plate with a light sensitive coating. Imagery must be drawn and carefully traced onto transparent vellum with marker. The vellum image is then placed atop the Torry-plate, after which it is exposed to a predetermined amount of light. The marker acts as a mask, and the unmasked areas harden, making the coating permanent. Immediately following this, a chemical solution is then gently rubbed over the surface to remove the masked, unhardened surfaces, creating a fine indent. To print, I rubbed intaglio ink into the crevices, and ran the plate through a press. This mode of printmaking uses only one color, a limitation that was somewhat disappointing. While the lines appear clear and bold, there is no room for indecision.

The instructor also introduced chin colle, which means “China paste”, as a way of adding color by gluing bits of paper to the printing paper simultaneously with printing the plate. I was most pleased with the prints that incorporated chin colle and looser drawing (*figure 13*), which can be difficult to maintain due to the rigorous processes that lead up to a final artwork. Monotypes and Torry-plate prints have many contrasting qualities in terms of working procedures and possible outcomes. Some of my prints are successful, but painting is a more direct way to achieve original, flowing compositions on two-dimensional surfaces.
Conclusion

Clay, stone, and copper will continue to be my materials of choice, and capturing a natural visual flow in three dimensions remains my goal. Working with these materials makes me appreciate the possibilities and respect the limitations associated with each. My affinity for organic forms also continues, and I plan to keep using this motif as a source of inspiration in future work. I do not view obtaining an MIS degree as an ending to my artistic journey; rather it is a mile marker along my path. Assembling my final exhibition, “Natural Flow,” was highly motivating for me on my artistic path. Working toward subsequent shows is also invaluable to me as I constantly evolve as an active, vital artist. Continuing coursework with VCU as well as other noncredit venues will help to keep my momentum going, but above all I must keep the resolution to be an artist every day. I am an artist in my seeing, thinking, and doing, not because it is my job, but because it is my truth.
Bibliography


Figure 1: *Sand Story* - Stoneware with glaze and glass (10"x22"x2") 2002

Figure 2: *Daydreaming Mirror* - Earthenware with glaze, mirrored oak (24"x24") 2004
Figure 3: *Octopus Pot* - Porcelain with glaze (12"x12"x4") 2005

Figure 4: *Oceans Orange* - Stoneware with glaze (14"x14"x2.5") 2005
Figure 5: *Fiddlehead Ladle*- Stoneware with glaze (14"x16"x11") 2005
Figure 6: *Flower Pots* - Stoneware with glaze, copper (44"x15"x11") 2005
Figure 7: Emerge- marble, soapstone (11"x7"x4.5") 2004
Figure 8: *Glide* marble, soapstone (11"x6"x4") 2004
Figure 9: Copper Blossom - copper (12"x17"x16") 2005
Figure 10: *Yellow Sky* - Oil on canvas (37"x31") 2003
Figure 11: *Connection*—Acrylic on canvas, with foam core, leather, mesh, and paper (14"x30") 2003
Figure 12: Sunrise Divide- Watercolor Monotype on paper (8"x6") 2002
Figure 13: *Personality Tea*· Torry-plate Lithograph with chin colle (8"x8.5") 2004
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2000-2002 Art Teacher, Guilford Elementary, Loudoun County Public Schools, Sterling, VA
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1999 *Whimsies of the Mind*, Art League Gallery, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, Edinboro, PA
1998 Student Exhibition, Bruce Gallery, Edinboro University of Pennsylvania