2006

Natural Selection

Jeffrey A. Vick

Virginia Commonwealth University

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NATURAL SELECTION

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

JEFFREY A. VICK

Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006
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Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, 2000

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Assistant Professor, Ceramic Department

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May 2006
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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank all those who made it possible to make it through the graduate experience unscathed. Thank you to all my committee members, Allan Rosenbaum, Lydia Thompson, Susan Iverson, and Bill Hammersley. Your insightful critiques and guidance were indispensable in my development throughout graduate school. Thank you Howard Risatti for always challenging my mind and Sonya Clark for your boundless source of energy and good conversation. Lastly, I would like to thank my family, whose constant support made it possible for me to be here and provided my with the background and sources for which my work sprung from. I would especially like to thank my wife, Jackie, who always has been and always will be by my side urging me forward. Your encouragement has sustained me.
My thesis work is about imagination. I use the collaborative efforts of the viewer’s mind and my sculptures, or specimens, to make associations of real life animals. I feel this engages the viewer and in turn invites them to inspect the work on closer level. This is my ultimate goal in the work, to take hold of the viewer’s curiosity and have them examine the work on a closer level.
Artist Statement

I remember when I was in grammar school and my mother, a biologist, would come to class for science day. She would show us a whole new world presented on a single glass slide, only visible through the powerful eye of the microscope. In the midst of creating my recent body of work the memories of those science days have come flooding back to me, filling and reenergizing me with the same sense of wonder and discovery.

The new work is a play on my amazement from the science days, and the energy and excitement that fills me when I stumble across something new and unfamiliar. In my studio I create new forms of life, new specimens to be studied and presented for all to view. I choose to use elements from many sources in nature for both aesthetic reasons and, for the possible functions of movement, defense, feeding, or any qualities necessary for life. Because I use elements from familiar sources it is easy to make quick associations, but as you spend time with them you realize they are not as familiar as you first thought. The reality of their existence is no longer solid and you begin to consider that they are fabricated and only live in fantasy.

Of course my creatures are not real, I fabricate them from porcelain. The pure, bone white of the unglazed clay evokes ideas of calcified life, organisms that have expired and, much like the ceramic process itself, transformed to a solid hard mass.
Influences

When I was first starting to make work relating to nature it was very helpful to research other artists working with similar subject matter. I wanted to explore their approach to materials and see how others had manipulated such an expansive source to make it their own.

I find Michael Sherrill's work to be interesting for a couple of reasons. I really enjoyed the playfulness of his compositions. The plants he references are still recognizable, but he has stylized them to suit his needs. It is freeing to see that he is able to make work that is meant to be viewed for what it is, beautiful shape and color. (Figures 1, 2)

Kiesuke Mizuno uses nature in an entirely different way. His work incorporates nature into a narrative. While this is an interesting aspect of his work, what really drew me to his sculpture was the realistic quality it possesses. The painstaking attention to detail is almost overwhelming. I find it interesting that just the detail of the pieces draws me in and because of this I started to contemplate how I could use detail in my work. (Figures 3, 4)

As my work progressed and I began to research microscopic plants and animals it was again beneficial to see how other artists had approached these organisms in their work.
Louise Hibbert’s wood turned vessels are at first sight beautiful and elegant. What I enjoy most about her pieces is that they are somewhat recognizable, but they are still unfamiliar. They are also very beautifully crafted, which really draws me into the work. I find it interesting that one can make small adjustments to nature to begin to make it their own, which is what she does in her work. (Figures 5, 6)

Lindsey Feuer’s work blew me away. At first, I was intimidated by her work, thinking that she had already made the work that I was envisioning in my mind. As I continued to research her work I realized that though our work is very similar, there are differences in our intentions for the work. According to her artist statement she wants people to see her sculptures "..." I knew that I did not want my sculptures to be "alive". What initially attracted me to her pieces is the delicate quality they possess. I also enjoy the monotone choice of color, which makes me focus on the work and not the glaze. Her work definitely inspired me and presented me with some interesting options of how to develop my own work. (Figures 7, 8)

I was first told of Ernst Heackel by one of the visiting artists. His book, Art Forms in Nature, has influenced many artists. He was a turn of the century Naturalist that did research on all kinds of plants and animals. In conjunction with his studies he was an avid drawer and made incredible sketches of the animals he studied. His drawings are now more known than his research. He made incredibly fine and detailed drawings of strange
creatures, but what is most interesting about his drawings to me is how perfect and symmetrical the animals are. (Figures 9, 10)

I began expanding my reference material to include books on plants, animals, and the coral reef. With these books I was able to find scientific images that were more unusual than what is seen on an everyday basis. I was able to find scanning electron microscope images and pictures of microscopic animals. Initially I was using these animals for their forms, but as I continued the body of work, I began to look at the anatomy of the organisms. Some of the books I referred to are Weeds (Figure 11), Microscopic Anatomy of Invertebrates (Figure 12), A Guide to the Coral Reefs of the Caribbean (Figure 13), and The Anatomy of Nature (Figure 14).
I came to graduate school with a strong background in wheel throwing. I knew that I wanted to make a change in my work, however I did not completely know what to expect from graduate school. I had a tough transition from the vessel to sculpture because I had never really concentrated on purely sculptural forms. I did not know how to approach the making of these objects or even the direction I wanted to go in. I felt really lost. After my first few attempts to get started it was suggested to me to work on small studies in clay, or maquettes. This was a great exercise to help me get comfortable making objects. I just let my mind go free to build forms so I would not invest a lot of time and energy in one piece and I could work through ideas quickly. I continued this exercise all semester, experimenting with compositions of multiple forms and the relationship created by their placement. I used these pieces to test low fire glazes to see what surfaces I could achieve. My first semester was spent with much experimentation, trying to figure out why I wanted to make sculpture and what they were going to represent, a question I still struggle with and I suppose I will continue to struggle with as long as I continue making art. I guess that I was not sure what questions I should have been asking myself at that time. What do I want my work to express? Up until this point, or around this point, I had been content to just let my work happen. I was not asking myself questions, where was the motivation for making ceramic sculpture coming from? Slowly I realized that there had to be something beyond an interesting form and the action of making. I had a place to start.
Semester two provided a larger challenge. I loved the actual process of forming the clay, but there was little intention behind the work other than formal considerations. I felt that I had been relying on my skill level with the material and offering little insight into another world through my art. I knew that I had to take some positive steps beyond experimentation, but I did not know what subject matter I wanted to explore. Obviously I wanted something that could sustain my interest, something that was exciting to me. I spent time looking inside myself for a concept to explore. I knew that making forms and reacting to them was no longer how I wanted to continue to develop my ideas.

To change this perception I wanted to find an object to reference. I thought this would solve the problem of ambiguity in the forms I was making and give the audience a connection to the work. I started listing things I enjoyed, and I realized that a lot of satisfaction in my life is directly related to the outdoors. At the same time, I was studying the maquettes of the previous semester. In them I considered the relationship of several objects together and how they reacted to each other. Colorful clay pieces were wrapped around other forms, hugging or holding them. More forms were being prodded and poked, and still hidden objects supported others. Many of them took on a phallic shape and this, along with the composition began to emanate a sexual connotation. I had not originally intended for this to happen, instead, I was reacting to the forms and arranging them to react with each other. I accepted that there was more than just formal content in them and I used the sexual references to help advance my work toward a new solution. I mulled over these ideas and had an epiphany; I came to the realization that I could reference flowers. A flower was the perfect first step, it contained the sexuality that had been apparent in the
maquettes and is a natural phenomenon that is easily recognizable. I immediately felt a calm come over me, it was rather startling when it happened. The tension dissipated. I started collecting images of flowers and their reproductive organs (stamen and pistil). I knew at the time that I did not want to make actual ceramic flowers, but that I would use them as a point of reference in my work. Artists like Michael Sherrill and Kiesuke Mizuno were great resources to show me how others had used the recognizable form of flowers to create interesting work. Each of these artists had started with a similar object and stylized it to meet their specific needs. I still was unsure where I wanted to go with the work, but I now had something to refer to and would no longer be making arbitrary forms. I ran with this theme, collecting many images to work from. To avoid reproducing flowers, I began to look at individual parts of the plant and rearranging the parts to suit my aesthetic needs. It was at this time that my wife’s research in biology began to benefit my work. She referred me to the magazines she was reading, for instance, The American Journal of Botany, to look at the scanning electron microscope images of plant parts. However, I still had to come to terms with the heart-stopping realization that the work had to have a meaning or rationale for being made other than formal qualities, or at least that notion was stuck in my mind. I began to fall into a self-made trap that there must be a narrative behind the work. There had to be something internal that was driving me to explore elements of the natural world that were abstracted through the filter in my mind and created in clay. The more this swirled around in my head, the more I believed it. How could I convince people that this work was important? Eventually I made a narrative that I thought would convince everyone of the worthiness of the work, and I began to believe
that this idea had come first and the work had sprung from it. The truth was that I made
the work because I enjoy manipulating objects in nature into strange beings (a truth I
would not come to realize until later in my studies). I recognized that the narrative was
made independently of the work and tagged onto it in an attempt to give it meaning. This
was a realization that helped me to move the work forward into what would become the
basis for my thesis exhibition.
I have always been interested in discovering new things. Like most kids in my neighborhood growing up, the summers were spent exploring the marsh by my house. This was one of the larger undeveloped areas where we could romp around and get dirty. We would make paths through the tall cattails and catch frogs and snakes. The occasional lucky child would capture the rare turtle, or even more precious, the salamander. I remember these times being exciting and invigorating. When I go camping and hiking I always tend to stop on the trail and investigate the flora around me. This inquisitive nature, wanting to discover, motivates my work.

My research has reawakened my curiosity about living organisms and the world around me. I started by simply observing what was interesting on a formal level, looking at images of plants from *The American Journal of Botany* that had been made alien because of the magnification of a scanning electron microscope. I was captivated that by changing how it was looked at, a seemingly common plant could be transformed into an object so unfamiliar. I dove deeper into the world of the microscopic and while looking in the book, *Microscopic Anatomy of Invertebrates*, I found that single-celled animals provided a host of forms to use as a base for my sculptures. However, I did not want to recreate protozoa, but rather I wanted to use it as a starting point to make a sculpture of a completely new creature. At the same time, I did not want the work to be so completely alien that it would be unrecognizable. As this struggle was raging in my mind, I continued...
to look for anything that could influence my work. I began looking at ocean life and referencing crustaceans and other creatures that move through the water. This got me thinking about motion, eating, and survival. Up until now I had been looking at images of plants, which are relatively stationary.

I still had not resolved the issue of what to do about giving the sculptures an exciting edge. A lot of soul searching and researching artists helped me to get over that obstacle. Realizing that not all answers can be found within, I continued to look for inspiration anywhere I could find it. A few artists who helped me to move forward in the right directions are: Louise Hibbert, Lindsey Feuer, and Ernst Haeckel.

I came to the solution I had been looking for when I began combining elements from the various reference materials that I had been researching. In doing this I was making sculptures that had recognizable features from many plants and animals but when combined they became unfamiliar. I embraced the challenge of making organisms that would simultaneously be both familiar and unfamiliar. With the first experiments I found that the forms did not appear to be natural, they could have been specimens from an unknown region. I wanted my creatures to blend into our world. I did not want them to be outcasts. What really made them change was when I began to think of them as true experiments in altering forms of life. My intention is to convince the viewer that my sculptures could be real specimens and only after closer inspection one will find the work is made of porcelain, not bone or some organic material. When in my studio, making my creatures, I act as a scientist attempting to blend different organisms for the pure satisfaction of having done so. This forced me to think about how each creature would
function in the world. They had to be able to move. How would they eat or catch their food? What would they eat? How would they protect themselves from predators? These questions helped me to resolve each organism. They would have the basic necessities of life.

I want anyone who sees my creatures to think that they could or do exist; this makes my work rely partially on the imagination of the viewer. These specimens are not real, that will be obvious when they are inspected. They are made of porcelain, they are not flesh, and they have no organs. That is what I enjoy about these pieces. It is very easy to forget that they are porcelain. The pieces prompt associations within the viewer that then contributes to the fallacy of the sculptures being real creatures. The presentation adds to the mystery and makes one think of a natural history museum. Did these creatures really exist? I have chosen to display the work in a way that makes it look like an artifact. I want to push the idea that the creatures are not only art pieces, but possibly scientific findings as well. If one believes that these are real specimens, then the pieces begin to come alive and engage ones curiosity. I think this is important because I am interested in creating a situation where there are many conclusions for viewers to come to.

My decisions with respect to surface treatments are made with formal concerns. While I really push the life-like quality the creatures possess, I still want them to be attractive as objects. I left the surface unglazed to expose the purity of the porcelain. This does two things, it references objects in nature that are dead such as a bleached bone or calcified coral reef, but it also exemplifies the clean, beautiful surface of the pieces as objects. It simplifies them so they are not hiding behind layers of glaze. Leaving the
surface raw also unveils the process of how they were made. I want people to be able to figure out, eventually, that these animals are in fact ceramic and that they were modeled by hand. This aspect of the work is important because I want people to see the workmanship that went into the pieces.
Technical Information

As both my work and what I needed the for the pieces evolved, I went through many glazes and tested clay bodies at all firing ranges to find the right materials. It was really important that I get exactly what I needed and not settle for anything less. I started out using a standard stoneware body, but firing at a low temperature with multiple glazes and stains. I would fire these pieces up to five or six times, adding a layer of glaze each time. At this time I was still experimenting, so every result was a new one. I used the combination of a Bead and Lichen glaze with Mason stains for color. Another surface treatment that I used up to my thesis show was to apply slip to the surface using a squeeze bottle, this works great for a spiky texture and glazes can break very nicely over the point of the spikes. Eventually I decided that I wanted a white clay body, and tried a low fire white. It worked fine, but was not as white as I needed when I eventually decided to leave the work unglazed. For this I used a porcelain clay body, but unfortunately I had severe cracking problems because I did not have time to age the clay and porcelain is fussy. I found the solution in a commercial body available at Campbell’s Clay Supply, and it has worked great.
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- Manganese Dioxide: 6%
- Copper Oxide: 5%
- Red Iron Oxide: 2%
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**Equal Parts Porcelain**

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Figures
I find it somewhat humorous that it took me so long to figure out what it is in my life that inspires my art making. I have found a very expansive source of inspiration in nature. I struggled for a while not knowing what to make or where to start. I began asking the much-dreaded questions: why am I doing this and how important is it to make art? Well, I found answers that have sustained me. I am doing it because I can't imagine not making art. I would be a very frustrated person if it were not for making art. It is, simply put, part of who I am and I know now that I cannot deny that, nor do I want to. As for how important it is, I hope that others can find joy from what I make, but it is important for my own sanity. My studio practice is to me exercise, therapy, relaxation, introspection, and learning to express a few of the emotions that run through me during the process of making art.

In my short two years of exploration, I have come to realize that my art is made from who I am and my experiences. I know that sounds like a rather obvious statement, but for me it was not. I had always been a little too concerned with others' opinions and influences and never really embraced what inspires me on an everyday basis. I finally accepted that certain aspects of nature bring joy to me and inspires my art. Referencing nature in my art was like a door opening up for me that had been closed for far too long. As I continued my exploration of imagery, I was reminded of memories from childhood. As a testament to how closed off I had been, I finally realized that my parents had a larger
influence on me than I was aware of. Most of the important people in my life deal very intimately with plants or animals or both, and this has apparently rubbed off on me. My mother is a biologist and I can remember going to her office and lab and being immersed in a foreign world of cages, test tubes, and specimens in jars. I was fascinated every time she would take me to work with her. My father is a landscape architect and one of my earlier memories is of "helping" him survey land on a new construction site. I remember "helping" him plant trees in our yard when we moved to our new house (I was four or five years old). Even though I grew up in the suburbs, it was my parents who taught me to love and respect and be inspired by nature. My wife and my brother have also inspired me and have been invaluable, specifically helping me with research and providing spectacular information and critiques of my creatures. My wife is a biologist and in her studies she continues to bring new and exciting information and inspiration (and encouragement) to me. My brother (also a landscape architect) has been an amazing correspondent, sending me books and great critiques through email. It seems as though it was pre-ordained for me to work with nature and until I removed the blinders I was unable to see it.
VITA

Jeffrey Alan Vick

**Biography**
Born on December 29, 1976.

**Education**
Master of Fine Art, Ceramics 2006  
Virginia Commonwealth University-Richmond, Virginia  
Undeclared Graduate, Ceramics 2002-2004  
Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville, Illinois  
Bachelor of Fine Art, Ceramics 2001  
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Illinois  
Bachelor of Fine Art, Painting 2000  
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, Illinois

**Exhibitions**
2006  
MFA Thesis Show  
Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA  
W/E Trade Exchange Exhibition  
East Gallery, Claremont, CA

2005  
Candidacy Show  
Plant Zero, Richmond, VA  
VCU Graduates at NCECA  
Pearl Gallery, Baltimore, MD

2004  
First Years  
FAB Gallery, Richmond, VA

2003  
Clay Cup IX  
SIUC Gallery, Carbondale, IL  
SIUE Graduate Juried Exhibition  
SIUE Gallery, Edwardsville, IL

2001  
Bubble Fresh
Olde Vic Gallery, Champaign, IL
Origins in Clay
   University of Texas at San Antonio, San Antonio, TX
Two Swell Guys
   Old House Gallery, Urbana, IL
2000
Painting BFA Show
   Sandwich Boy, Urbana, IL
The Big Thirteen Incher
   UIUC Link Gallery, Champaign, IL

Awards
Graduate Assistantship, VCU
2005
Pohlman Scholarships, SIUE
2002
Outstanding Senior in Ceramics, UIUC
2001
Tuition Waiver Recipient, UIUC
2000

Teaching Experience
Adjunct Professor, VCU-Ceramics
2004-present
VCUarts Summer Intensive Program
2005
Teaching Assistant, SIUE
2003

Related Experience
Co-built 860 cu. ft. wood burning anagama kiln
Co-designed and built 80 cu. ft. gas car kiln
Co-designed and built 96 cu. ft. wood burning cantenary arch kiln
Co-designed and built 65 cu. ft. hinged door gas kiln
Experienced with cone 10 reduction, salt, soda, wood, and low fire electric kilns
Experienced with Soldner and Bluebird mixers and formulation of all clay body types
Experienced in the formulation and mixing of glazes

Work Experience
SIUE
Art Store manager: responsible for ordering materials for all art classes
clay mixer: prepared clay for beginning level ceramic classes
Boneyard Pottery
studio potter, assisted with sales and general maintenance of shop
Studio Assistant-VCU, SIUE, UIUC
responsible for overall maintenance of studio
mixing clay and glazes, firing kilns, organizing clay and glaze materials

References
Allan Rosenbaum
Ceramics Department Head, VCU
Lydia Thompson
Assistant Professor, Ceramics, VCU
Ron Kovatch
Ceramics Department Head, UIUC
Paul Dresang
Ceramics Department Head, SIUE
Matt Wilt
Assistant Professor, Ceramics, SIUE
Slide List

1. *Abascenditus perscitus* V.
   Porcelain
   2006
   7 3/4 x 6 x 2 3/4
2. *Abascenditus spiculum* V.
   Porcelain
   2006
   12 1/2 x 4 1/4 x 4 1/4
3. *Abascenditus spiculum* V. (detail)
   Porcelain
   2006
4. *Abascenditus tamisium* V.
   Porcelain
   2006
   9 x 10 x 10
5. *Abascenditus tamisium* V. (detail)
   Porcelain
   2006
6. *Ambulo demergo* V.
   Porcelain
   2006
   9 1/2 x 3 3/4 x 3 3/4
7. *Infensus corripio* V.
   Porcelain
   2006
   14 1/2 x 7 3/4 x 5
8. *Infensus corripio* V. (detail)
   Porcelain
   2006
9. *Infensus lacero* V.
   Porcelain
   2006
   17 1/2 x 4 3/4 x 4 3/4
10. *Infensus percutio* V.
    Porcelain
    2006
    9 1/2 x 8 x 6
11. *Infensus percutio* V. (detail)
   Porcelain
   2006

12. *Mollis intumesco* V.
   Porcelain
   2006
   11 x 6 x 6

13. *Mollis intumesco* V. (detail)
   Porcelain
   2006

14. *Mollis ventilo* V.
   Porcelain
   2006
   10 3/4 x 6 x 4 3/4

15. *Summissus combibo* V.
   Porcelain
   2006
   16 1/4 x 6 3/4 x 3


