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School of the Arts  
Virginia Commonwealth University

This is to certify that the Thesis prepared by Ross Steven Caudill entitled MFA  
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Sculpture

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May 16, 2006

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ROSS CAUDILL SCULPTURE MFA 2006

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

by

ROSS STEVEN CAUDILL  
BFA Sculpture, Rhode Island School of Design, 2004

Director: AMY HAFT  
DEPARTMENT HEAD, SCULPTURE

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May 2006 Acknowledgement

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## **Abstract**

ROSS CAUDILL MFA SCULPTURE 2006

By

A THESIS submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MFA  
SCULPTURE at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2006

Major Director: AMY HAUFT  
DEPARTMENT CHAIR, SCULPTURE

This thesis overviews my experience during graduate school making tangible ‘object’ oriented sculpture. I have been working formally to compose space in a way that develops a narrative between parts. The work is also a bridge between the fields of painting and sculpture, in terms of drawing with form and both painted and ‘local’ material color. My palette has mostly consisted of bronze casting, steel fabrication, fiberglass and epoxy resin, paint, the found object, woodworking, and mold making. This work is also conceptually based in showing the hand worked qualities of the materials, the transfer of meaning through casting, and my emotional relationship with the various parts of the sculptures. The three major themes of the work are: divine love and the complex of the apocalypse, the complexities and psychology concerning the relationship between a man and a woman, and the intrigue, potential energy, and beauty of the systems mankind has

invented to harness the atom. The major artistic influences for this body of work have been: Jasper Johns, Marcel Duchamp, Constantine Brancusi, Alberto Giacometti, Reg Butler, Henry Moore, Lynn Chadwick, Kenneth Armitage, Jeff Koons, Terry Winters, William DeKooning, Richard Diebenkorn, David Smith and Charles Long. I retain a strong relationship with the movements of Dada, Surrealism, Futurism, and Assemblage, and am also currently involved in solidifying the Manifesto of Raubeaux with a small group of esteemed colleagues.

This document was created in Microsoft Word 2000, and Microsoft Office Mac 2004.

**Ross Caudill**  
**MFA Sculpture Thesis 2006**

This document aims to describe a body of work that was installed at the Anderson Gallery in Richmond, Virginia on May 5<sup>th</sup> of 2006. This grouping was comprised of three freestanding sculptures and one painting, on a wall. It seems most logical to take you through my cognitive and physical process of how the work came into being, in order to best understand its meanings. This project is very personal in regards to my beliefs concerning the state of the world and the state of my spirit. I have tried to be directed in a manner where my labor would be full of purpose and for the greater good, in terms of the message.

The first piece upon entering the room is titled, “The Plateaus Unfold and The White Lightens to a Glorious Burn.” Within the sculpture, all of the points that contact the floor are made of steel and are small in order to give the work a feeling of levitation or lack of gravity. This initial boost or lift puts the sculpture into more of a metaphorical symbolic realm since it is not as visually *footed* on the floor as we are with our own bodies. Within the larger portion of the overall form, or the main body, the six contact points each lead upward into a steel structure of supports that hold up the rest of the sculpture. These supports are constructed with triangulation and typical engineering guidelines in order to mimic structures that are built to hold weight, such as a bridge or trellis. From here the form rises into three levels of steel cylinders that step down in diameter as they go upwards. These pipes, or terraced landscape, represent the “plateaus” within the piece.

Perched precariously on the side of these barrels is a bronze casting called “The Cup of Trembling.”

The term “cup of trembling” comes from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Zachariah.

<sup>2</sup> "I am going to make Jerusalem a cup that sends all the surrounding peoples reeling (or trembling). Judah will be besieged as well as Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> On that day, when all the nations of the earth are gathered against her, I will make Jerusalem an immovable rock for all the nations. All who try to move it will injure themselves. <sup>4</sup> On that day I will strike every horse with panic and its rider with madness,"

Jerusalem can be interpreted as Israel in modern times. I am mostly concerned with the principal of this cup rather than it being attributed to Israel in particular. “The cup of trembling” is an impenetrable force that cannot be shaken. It represents a predestined event of magnitude that is looming over the future.

The bronze “cup” attached to the plateaus of the sculpture is latched on like a locus preparing to molt its outer skin and become refreshed. I see the plateaus as being the layers of society, industry, technology, government, trade and all the other systems that have developed and intertwined themselves with each other in this world. The unfolding of such layers is referring to the idea of a great dissolution and the creation of a utopian reality through divine reconstruction. In basic terms, I am talking about an apocalyptic event of catastrophic proportions.

The casting is made up of various elements that have symbolic meaning. This form was originally all sculpted in wax before the casting process began. Bronze was chosen because of the importance it lends to the form in terms of its memorial history and beauty,

its permanence, and the amount of labor and transition that occurs during the casting process.

The main cylinder of the cup is formed from the cardboard packaging materials which are manufactured to protect halogen light bulbs. Light is energy and life. The cup is responsible for metaphorically carrying this light to the next stage of its journey. There are plumes of crusty, earthy looking forms that come out of the bottom of the cup and touch the plateaus. They are modeled after images of underground atomic bomb test explosions. These jets of scorched earth stall in preparation for takeoff because they will fuel the cup.

The mutilated lambs piled on the cup represent the downfall of the original intentions of the Christian religion. They can be interpreted as the trinity, or multiples of Christ, or just as merely the disintegration of the purity of a lamb if the viewer prefers to not make a religious connotation. The wings on the back of the piece are meant to look angelic and also be the support for the small casting of the infant arm which is squished over one of the wingtips. This arm was cast wax from a plaster mold, at one point. The plaster mold had a truncated cone which acted as the pouring point for the wax to enter. I left this 'nub' attached to the arm to help illustrate the process, in order to remind the viewer at this point that this was a casting. By doing so this makes the arm section of the piece more of a symbol for what it is because it is not just being smoothly rendered into the composition. There is a lack of illusion in terms of connections here and there is also clues into the original being wax because my fingerprints can be seen where the material was pressed. This point of connection is left technically inane to emphasize that the cup is a carrier for the infant (or humanity) and they are not one organism. However they are

attached together at least for the transitional period, which would theoretically be from now until the great juncture.

On the floor near the 'cup of trembling' is a small stand with a ring that holds a large glass bell jar. The stand is gilded with fake silver leaf to make it baroque and harder to see and thus more ephemeral. The glass bell jar is positioned so that the bronze infant hand is just breaking through the veil into the space inside the glass. The hand is slightly polished to emphasize the beginning of its purification. This will take place within the space inside the glass which represents a utopia or a heavenly realm. It balances the darkness of the casting both aesthetically and conceptually within the composition while giving hope.

Above the steel 'plateaus' there is an old car jack which is mounted onto a thick iron pipe with steel handles. The pipe is coated with a crusty, dried cottage cheese looking, paper mache pulp in order to taunt its strength and density. It also contrasts the darkness of the steel handles with its whiteness. I left the old, worn, red paint on the jack, as I had found it. It was donated to me by a local machine shop that went out of business. I have assumed nostalgia while questioning its former life and knowing it has a history of working on many cars.

The top of the jack has been altered to hold the steel ring of a steering wheel that has had all of its cushioning stripped off. The wheel leads to an airbag section in the center which is typical black rubber fake leather. The rest of the steering column, including the wiring and the colorful plastic connectors attached to the wires, extends downwards and is loosely held in a bracket which is welded onto the side of the steel pipes or 'plateaus'

below. This part of the sculpture (the steering column) is left almost entirely in its found object state, dirty and raw. I am using the automobile reference as a zeitgeist and as a steering force involved in the shaping of world events surrounding the energy crisis and our dependence on oil.

The steering wheel has four, small, steel crutches welded onto it that hold onto a bulky terra cotta roof tile. This type of 'tile' goes on the corner of a roof ridge and has a very bulbous elongated point on top that leads down to ride the top ridge of the hypothetical roof. There are two other openings in the terra cotta that would lead down the other two ridges of the roof. It has a deep green glaze on the surface that is slightly translucent, and there is an area where some of the old grout is left behind from its former occupation. This grout looks like molding cauliflower and is coated in epoxy resin in some areas. The tile is glued to the crutches coming off of the wheel with resins and with fiberglass tape and Kevlar, for its golden-orange appeal and its strength. The steering wheel itself is coated and wrapped with fiberglass tape also. The fiberglass is left rather raw and hairy in places.

The roof tile has many conceptual functions within the piece. It can be easily read as a helmet-like form that comes down slightly along the center nose ridge line. From the frontal view there is an unavoidable phallic nature to the tile which has a relationship to the form of the sculpture "Torso of a Young Man" by Constantine Brancusi. (He will come up again later in the description of another part of the overall sculpture.) It can also be read as a green hilltop and thus give the piece more of a landscape reading as a whole, going along with the greenness of the larger plateaus below. However, in general, the figure seems to

come through the strongest because of the overall scale relationship being relative to a large person. I intend for this abstracted multidimensional “being” to be read as one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse that brings events of end times onto the stage of human history. I do not view this in a pessimistic or tragic light, but rather as a call for change and revolution. I have colored the steel with paint and attempted to compose the forms and materials of the main body in a way that I see pleasing and vigorous. I want for the heavy issues of the piece to be accessible to the viewer, but not too overwhelming, dead-ended, or morbid. As a whole, I want for the piece to be about hope and the beginning of a new cycle.

There is a whole other section of the sculpture that formally envelops, in a conceptual manner, the ideals that the other main portion of the form is striving towards metaphorically. This part physically attempts to represent the heavenly realm that symbolically exists within the bell jar. There is a heavy ‘shield’ separating the two parts, which is comprised of a stack of thick steel hexagonal rods that are welded together. This barrier separates the figurative aspect of the piece from the section that is of a more traditional modern abstract formalism in the metalworking area of the genre. I want the two areas to contrast each other and criticize each others intentionality and material truthfulness. The transition is heightened between the two parts by the treatment of the steel rod that loosely connects them. The grey primer on it is slowly sanded away to reveal the bare metal as it gets farther from the rest of the sculpture. This is when the steel first begins to really show itself to us without a patina or paint. After this point, the materials

begin to speak more clearly concerning their origins and the processes that brought them to form the way they did.

This portion, which the sculpture reaches out to touch, is comprised of a steel and iron, base-like form that has a bronze casting placed on top of its platform. The main section of the base began as an iron cast, table mounted, jigsaw body that was found at a local junkyard. The arm of the jigsaw that normally forms the letter 'c' was cut multiple times and welded with nickel so that it could be bent over itself backwards towards the steel connecting rod. Because of the brittle alloy of the iron and the multiple welds made to secure the alteration, there are two spines of fairly thick steel bar welded and ground to follow the contours of the arm above and below. The welds are left visible but partially ground and the spines are shaped to a level that brings the form believability while not polishing away all of the tooling marks on the surface. I want the steel to retain some of its rawness and for the welds to remind the viewer of their heat and connective quality. The working table part of the jigsaw is stacked with steel plates that are welded one on top of each other in descending size. This creates a thick, laminated pad of steel that is stepped down like a pyramid or the stairs leading up to a temple. The weight of the jigsaw body base is emphasized by chunky beams and plates of steel that create the footing underneath and ground the form gravitationally. However there are still four tiny bits of steel rod welded underneath the bulk, which appear to levitate the weight. I want for it to appear very heavy while not being *planted* visually on the same plane as the viewer.

On top of this platform is a bronze casting comprised of a towering stack of rectangular block forms. This form was originally wax cast from a rubber mold. The mold

was taken off of a linear stack of blocks of the product Sculpey, which is polymer clay that comes in many premixed colors and can be hardened in your home oven. There were four larger blocks of white on the bottom of the stack and 39 colored single blocks above.

When the original tower was built, care was taken to remove the plastic wrapper from each block so that the factory form of the product was unaltered. The rubber mold was sliced down both sides of the form in order to be able to remove the Sculpey original from inside and to enable the wax casting to be pulled out later. Therefore, as with most wax casting in rubber molds, the initial wax that came out of the mold had flashing lines that ran along the seams where the rubber had been cut. These are normally trimmed off and blended away to disguise the casting process. However, I left them and allowed them to become part of the bronze.

The 'Sculpey Tower' has many other clues that tell the narrative of the process chosen to transfer the form through two materials. Because of the width of the blocks it was necessary to make the bronze hollow in order to reduce the risk of the metal shrinking in on itself and pulling away from the surface of the form within the investment material due to too much heat energy. This requires for there to be what is called a core in the ceramic shell mold (which was used as the investment material). This core is supported by pins during the construction, burnout, and pouring of the metal into the mold. After the mold cools, the pins are removed and the holes remaining are spot welded with bronze filler rod. These spots can be seen on the casting along with a weld line in the middle which shows that the form was cast in two parts that were later joined. This was done due to the size limitations that the casting facility had and for ease of building the ceramic

shell. In addition to these clues in the bronze, the channels or 'gates' that allowed the metal to enter the form were left as nubs along both sides of the tower. These 'gates' relate to the 'pouring funnel' that was left attached to the infant arm on 'the cup of trembling.'

The tower is left in this manner because it stands in as more of a symbol of what it used to be, becoming a metaphor for transition. It is a spire of irony, since the raw form of Sculpey, a cheap, crafty, cartoon-like substance, is being memorialized in bronze. This begins to set up the system of material hierarchy and a bit of sarcasm within all the works in the gallery.

The form of this bronze casting is purposefully related to that of Constantine Brancusi's "Endless Column," which is also a repeated stack in a linear tower form. Brancusi was concerned with disguising any trace of the hand in the work. His castings were polished meticulously and obsessively until they were as flawless as humanly possible. He lived at a time when sculpture was becoming more minimal partially because the manufacturing techniques of industry could be used to do what the hand was incapable of perfecting. A flawless surface represented a purity of form. However, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, mass production of commercial goods has led us to being so accustomed to sleekness and flawless form that it has become the standard. Just look at the contours of recent automobile design and the minimal yet beautifully functional form of the iPod.

The Sculpey Tower challenges these notions of minimalism. It shows the labor and care that was given to it by human touch. It states that the handmade is becoming so novel and anomalous in this world of the readymade that it can carry more beauty in its intentional imperfections and process remnants than that of the object with the mirror

surface. Therefore, since this part of the sculpture represents the heavenly realm, it can be determined that imperfections and humanness are acceptable factors in what such a place would encompass and what would be required of someone venturing there. In this sense the tower is a beacon transmitting or acknowledging forgiveness for the human condition.

In comparison, the other works in the gallery are much more concerned with compositional beauty and the crossover between sculpture and painting. They also have symbolism and a narrative relationship between parts, but the subject matter is much more personal, being based on specific events and people in my life. The two sculptures, “The Ice Breaker Will Crush” and “A Lump in the Throat” are about the complexities of being and staying in love with someone. They have intentional anxiety and tension built into the forms. In the “Ice Breaker” there are an equal number of female and male gendered elements that are connecting tenuously in space. The piece has a strong relationship to Marcel Duchamp’s, “Large Glass,” with its suitors and bridesmaids. In my sculpture the females are represented as ebony and nickel plated brass bells from clarinets. The finials on the bells are fabricated from the plunger sections of brass trumpets. The male figures within the piece are represented by six bronze cast shuttlecocks which are painted red and white to mimic their original plastic counterparts. These have a conceptual similarity to Jasper Johns with his bronze cast, painted cans of Ballantine Ale. Overall, these two works are much more concerned with describing an emotional quality and a drama. They have to do with human love rather than divine love as in “The Plateaus....”

Finally, the painting titled, “Persuasion of a Fission Thought,” has to do with the atomic bond or love within an atom. In particular, I am discussing the properties of uranium and how we harness its instability in order to produce energy from it. The composition within the piece is drawn from fission nuclear reactor diagrams and models. It has a strong sense of music involved in its motion and lightheartedness from the pastel colors used. This painting is intended to be a fresh breath in the grouping of objects. It makes no judgments and has no political or emotional standpoint. It is merely concerned with the incomprehensible beauty and logical physics of the atom. It is a celebration of the fundamental matter that makes up everything we know to exist. I will continue on from this point to investigate our relationship to these atomic forces and the industrial facilities, reactors, and world altering implications of such technology. In particular, I aim to discuss systems under current development that have the potential to completely overthrow our current energy dependence on fossil fuels and change the world economy.

## VITA

Ross Caudill was born in Columbus, Indiana on September 23, 1980. He is a citizen of the United States of America. He received his Bachelor of Fine Arts Degree in Sculpture at The Rhode Island School of Design in the year 2004. He will begin teaching at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Sculpture Department, starting fall, 2006.