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A Voice from the Dust

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

by
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BFA, Brigham Young University, Provo Utah, 2009

Thesis Advisor: Shay Church, Ceramics, Craft / Material Studies

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
May, 2011

Acknowledgment

I would like to give my sincerest thanks to so many people who have influenced me for good. First, my wife Andrea who is my love and support. She is my greatest cheerleader. This experience would be impossible without her. I am grateful for the support of my parents, in laws included. You have been instrumental to my success. Thank you to Shay Church, my ceramics instructor, for letting me fail over and over. It's the way I learn best. To the other professors in the C/MS department, thank you for your challenging input. Finally, I would like to thank my close art friends. You are spread out across the country and I still feel close to you. Thank you for the chats on the phone and feedback from email. You have been a wealth of knowledge and support.

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Abstract

A VOICE FROM THE DUST

By Gian Pietro Pierotti, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011.

Major Director: Shay Church, Assistant Professor of Ceramics

We shall not starve. We shall not lack shelter. We shall have a hearth. Awake self reliance! Our art is for feeding, warmth, protection. Ceramics– our temporal salvation. Clay– our material life-force. Transformed by fire we arise with the skills of the ancients! No longer will we live in obscurity. To the deskilled, your fate is at hand! You have chosen alienation, distraction, banality, and sloth. Embrace your digital false Gods and die or be reborn to the natural physical world.

Now, together we complete our reason for being. We create a new world of kinship. A hope for the utopia not of rigid modernism but one of a new world, a rediscovery of the natural order.

Introduction

Those about to enter graduate school, see the opportunity in different ways. In my case and I saw an art school graduate experience as a way to transform the artist. In retrospect I see how I have changed. I would no longer use the term transformed but instead I would say I have evolved as an artist and a person.

It was a huge commitment to move from Utah across the country to Virginia. My wife and I left many dear friends and family. I turned down a big opportunity to make money coming to art school. My wife had to leave a good job as a teacher. Virginia gave no promises. We were stepping out into the unknown.

My grad school experience was a series of important events. What I will do here is give an account of the greatest hits. They are separate episodes that will tell the greater story of my two year of graduate study in ceramics at VCU. I feel the need to distill this grad school experience more for myself than for the three people who will read this.

The greatest hits are as follows: *I was a Modernist Sculptor*, *Auders Ruhwald Studio Visit*, *Boatlandia*, *Community and the Unknown*, *Record Player*, and *The Narrative of the Coming Armageddon*.

I was a Modernist Sculptor

During my introduction to ceramics I thumbed through *Ceramics Monthly* and observed the work being made within the clay community and noticed a common theme. What I saw was brown pots, crusty sea shells and round bulbous abstract forms.

Having grown up outside of the craft world I felt more familiar with a mechanized aesthetic. For example, in my adolescence, I



Abstraction in Porcelain 2009

practically worshiped the image of the Lamborghini

Countach on my bedroom wall. What I saw in the clay studio and in publications did not command the attention I gave this poster. In contrast, as I perused publications like *Sculpture* magazine and *Art Forum*, that old feeling of awe I felt for the Lamborghini came back. Instead of ditching ceramics and becoming a sculptor, I saw an opportunity. Ceramics could be more visually rich with me in it, big sounding statement, I know. I thought that craft could learn something from the greater art world. I fell right into a trap. Bruce Metcalf explains his annoyance with regard to the crafter as a wannabe artist.

“Craft teachers and craft students--the majority of whom are non-production craftspeople--have long envied the status enjoyed by modern art as well as its financial rewards. This wistful desire for loftier status has created confusion,

frustration, and guilt. The common strategy to achieve art's prestige has been to adopt the style of any recently certified art movement, from Abstract expressionism to performance art.”¹

I came across this article well into my final year of grad school. I realized Metcalf was talking about me. I was not considering ceramics and craft for its own merits. I wanted it to speak the language of whatever art movement was en vogue. My new quest then became, “How do I make craft relevant to a contemporary culture by using the tools already established by craft and its history?”

A Studio Visit from Anders Ruhwald

If you asked me who I would model my art career after I would have said Anders Ruhwald. He is a Danish artist that teaches ceramics at the Cranbrook Academy of Art. Most importantly, I found that his work strikes a precise balance between contemporary art and craft, more specifically ceramic craft. He has managed this



Marked by Anders Ruhwald 2009

by

considering design as part of his tools. In preparation for my meeting with Anders, I got to my studio early to prepare. I was there to tidy up. This giant ginger haired man walked into my studio with a large coffee. Anders and I sat down and spoke about Buckminster Fuller and modernism. In our conversation he mentioned Detroit and its modernist failures. He also cautioned me to not be sarcastic, “...it doesn't solve

anything.” I guess he sensed I was a sarcastic person. As he was leaving, the most important thing he said was, “You need to reconsider the use of the polygon, it might be fencing you in.” This advice annoyed me. After our meeting I went to hear his lecture. He spoke well about modernism and his commitment to clay. There was one object he showed that was

quite ironic. It was an

image of one of his

sculptures in the

background of a youth’s

Facebook profile picture.

Irony being the intellectual

twin of sarcasm, I felt

Anders was being

hypocritical. Relating to the



Grappling Hook by Gian Pierotti 2009

object in the background, he said he was trying to make the dumbest object he could think of. With righteous indignation as my motivation, I made the dumbest grappling hook I could think of.

His off hand comment was motivating. I continued this Anders style work and completed a four piece arsenal. I broke away from my obsession with the polygon. It was refreshing to make clay objects that looked like clay. Instead of creating abstract objects, I chose to diverge into making objects that pointed to meaning outside themselves. In the case of *Grappling Hook*, I brought to the object an implied use, a

tool for adventure. I had found my content. I was on a path away from quite meditative object to objects that imply content.

Boatlandia: adventure and discovery

The James River runs right through the city of Richmond. The first English settlers established Jamestown on the banks of the James River, this was “The New World.” There were possibilities of gold and other precious resources, which drove exploration. The mighty James River and the surrounding area became the frontier. The James River was the beginning symbol of the colonization of America. While there was an excited hopefulness from the new western settlers and explorers, the excitement was detrimental to the indigenous people in America.

The James River today continues to manifest a feeling of discovery. I wanted to explore the James River, its wildness and its secrets. I was not interested in conquering the river. My desire was to be a part of the river. To unlock the river I would need a boat. I was considering all this as I drove to New York to celebrate my first Thanksgiving on the East coast. As I drove, the sky ahead of me opened up like a tear and I saw a vision of a Terra Cotta boat. I whispered to myself, “You must build this boat” (events may have been exaggerated). After a wonderful time in New York, I got back to the studio and started planning for my boat expedition down the James River. The term *Adventure Ceramics* was coined. I had two great technical experts in Shay Church and Jason Hackett, both masters at making monumental objects in clay. They taught me the techniques discovered by Jun Kaneko.

In like manner I began building. As I built, my goal was to strike a balance between making the boat as light as possible and at the same time giving the object strength. The clay walls were designed to have a two inch thickness. At this thickness the



Boatlandia 2010

boat would still be very heavy but have the strength to hold my weight. My first boat cracked and was deemed too dangerous to try floating the river.

My second try was much improved. While the boat had some cracks, they were fixed with glue. Now I had my boat. There was still a question about its ability to stay afloat on the river. Boatlandia, named after the 1950's utopian community Fordlandia, weighed 600 lbs. I made a scale model and tested it in the sink. The model dropped like a stone, as did my hopes. In a panic I went to the water displacement formula. Mass over volume sub two minus volume sub one. In theory the math said my boat would float. In-fact the weight Boatlandia could carry was around 2500 lbs. I was well under this weight limit. This left me with two conflicting experiments. I was hopeful my boat would float but there was some doubt.

On a Saturday in April, my friends and I carefully brought Boatlandia to the banks of the James River. Spectators came to watch the success or failure of Boatlandia. As we eased the boat into the water it began to rise and float. "Boatlandia floats!" I cried out. There was excited applause from the spectators.

I bid the crowd farewell and began my discovery of the James River. I was accompanied by five other adventurers. The process of building a boat from clay was an important series of discoveries for me. Building the boat and getting it to the water was an adventure. The adventure continued down the river.

A voice from the dust: A manifesto

We shall not starve. We shall not lack shelter. We shall have a hearth. Awake self reliance! Our art is for feeding, warmth, protection. Ceramics– our temporal salvation. Clay– our material life-force. Transformed by fire we arise with the skills of the ancients! No longer will we live in obscurity. To the deskilled, your fate is at hand! You have chosen alienation, distraction, banality, and sloth. Embrace your digital false Gods and die or be reborn to the natural physical world.

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A New Utility Born from the Failure of Modernity

Our modern distribution system is based on oil. The gas run truck is the way food is delivered to grocery stores and restaurants. The grocery stores need food delivered every three days to keep up with normal consumption. What if the trucks don't run? How will we eat? How long will civilization hold? This is just one of the possible

scenarios where society might crumble. There are natural disasters, pandemics, economic collapse, famine, electrical grid failure, and even something called a pole shift where the polarity of the earth shifts, not to mention the possibility of a collision with another planet called Planet X or Nibiru.

As we ignore these possibilities by watching cute cat videos on the internet, there is a growing concern for the future. I have been caught up with the hysteria by some measure. As I watch youtube posts about government conspiracies, peak oil, and humanity's impending doom it leads me to

a sense of urgency. The study of art seems to be futile or impractical. Right now art enjoys the liberty of technology. It has become global. We encounter art and culture by way of the internet. It has become a philosophy, an academic exercise. We deal with versions of things. We cultivate a version of ourselves on Facebook. We are becoming removed from the physical.

As someone dedicated to making objects

in clay, I have found a fulfilling connection to the

physical world. This physicality matters now more than ever as access to the

perceptions of the world need to be uploaded or downloaded virtually. I see clay as an antidote to a disconnection to the physical or natural world. I see the greater category



Mobile Firing Unit 2011

of Craft to be a solution to Modernity's problems. This is because Craft and its history is tied to its medium, its utility and its locality. There is an inherent physicality to it. Making objects is physical work. Furthermore, Crafts' ties to utility and its concepts bring practicality to the conversation. Finally, Craft and its strong connections to locality gives identity and promotes community. Craft has been making strides for a new utility. It is the slow food movement, farmers markets, sustainable homes, urban gardens and local crafts people working and selling their wares. The new utility and its aesthetic is localized community. The farmer, the potter, the blacksmith and the weaver were important figures within communities before the industrial revolution. If our culture were suddenly thrust into a pre-industrial age due to some catastrophe, the crafts person would be the saviors of society.

This brings us to the focus of my final thesis project, the centerpiece being *Mobile Firing Unit*. I see this object as the perfect community builder. The M.F.U. Is a 600 pound, portable ceramic kiln with multiple uses. As the M.F.U. Travels around Richmond, it will gather people to it by giving food and warmth. This object will bake, grill, blanch, reheat, smoke, boil, and broil a cornucopia of food items. M.F.U. will warm your hands, dry your cloths, and provide fire to stare into when there is no T.V. If brought to a hot enough temperature it could be used as a forge for forming steel, not to mention the M.F.U. will act as a kiln for firing ceramic tools, cups, bowls, arrowheads, and bricks.

Utility is not just a antiquated idea relegated to design or engineering. Today ideas about utility fit well into a discussion about contemporary art and its concepts. For example, the Mobile Firing Unit is not just a utilitarian object. Because of its utility it has

strong conceptual art components as well. Louise Mazanti, a art historian, defends utility as a relevant goal in art.

“There is a reason to argue that craft can be seen as an avant-garde practice that offers interesting contribution to the discourse, by way of its relation to design.

Conceptually craft is related to art in the predominance of narrative and in the way the functionality is only potential. But at the same time the fact that the functional form is the formal point of departure, it points directly out of the art sphere and into life. The practice then can be said in fact to re-integrate the lost relation between art and life.”²

This is why craft is so well suited for art theories like Relational Aesthetics and Social Practice. Both ideas start to blur the lines between art and life. Relational Aesthetics give the artist new goals. The new goals of the artist move away from the fetishized object towards community and a new way of life. Gone are the pretend narratives and plans for utopia art has provided. Relational Aesthetics is highlighting the moments of real narratives and genuine moments of utopia. As art ventures back out into life and away from the sterile environment of the gallery/museum, it starts to mimic authentic experiences like craft. Fritz Haeg with his project *Animal Estates*, is making bird houses for birds whose natural habitat has been replaced by the Whitney Museum. I can't think of anything more provincial and crafty than building birdhouses. As a result of its location the birdhouse is now re-contextualized. Its utility is a home for birds. It does bring awareness to the environmental issue, but I find it more interesting that Haeg is trying to repopulate the Whitney Museum with indigenous birds.

A new utility focused on local communities and sustainable practices that mimic nature will emerge to fill in the gaps that Modernity could not fulfill. We will replace the billions of plastic cups with ceramic cups. Industrialized agriculture will falter as we grow our own food. Utopia will not be a big impossible dream. It will be a many small manageable moments.

Final thoughts

I look forward to the prospect of getting out into the community and experimenting with ideas about sustainability and community. I hope to engage in the community as a crafter and an artist. I came to VCU with a narrow view of what an artist is. My assumptions about art and craft have broadened. My skills as a ceramist have widened as well. But most importantly, if the world falls apart, me and my crafty friends will be prepared to rebuild a new society.

Gian Pietro Pierotti

Curriculum vitae

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Education

MFA	2011 Craft/Material Studies Virginia Commonwealth University
BFA	2009 Ceramics Brigham Young University

Professional Experience

2009 – 2010	Art Foundations Office Assistant, VCU, Richmond VA
2009	Art foundations Ceramics Teacher (<i>Instructor of Record</i>), VCU, Richmond VA
1998 – 2003	Screen Printer, Signature Promotions, Orem UT

Grants and Awards

2010	VCU Graduate Thesis Assistantship
2009	SCHEV scholarship, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond Virginia
2008	Jurors Choice Award BYU Student Show, Brigham Young University, Provo Utah
2008	Jurors Choice Award Vera Mayhew Hinkley Contest, Brigham Young University, Provo Utah
2008	Max Weber Grant, Brigham Young University, Provo Utah
2008	Visual Arts Talent Award, Brigham Young University, Provo Utah
2007	Visual Arts Talent Award, Brigham Young University, Provo Utah

Exhibition Record

2011	A Voice from the Dust, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, VA (Thesis Exhibition)
2011	Doomslangers, Utah Central Arts Center Ephraim, UT
2010	Doomslangers, Allegra LaViola Gallery, New York, NY
2010	Which Craft, VCU Candidacy Show, Richmond Virginia, (group)
2010	Amble, ADA Gallery, Richmond Virginia, (group)
2009	NCECA Regional Student Juried Exhibition, Tempe Center For The Arts, Tempe Arizona
2008	What Art Ought To Be, BFA Final Show, Sego Art Center, Provo Utah
2008	Murciélago, Central Utah Arts Center, Ephraim Utah (solo)
2008	Lamborghini, Sacs, and The Senior Captain of the Wilderness Brethren, Sego Arts Center, Provo Utah (group)
2007	337 Project, Salt Lake City Utah (group)
2005	Combine, Women's Art Center, Salt Lake City (collaboration)
2005	Semi-permanent Art and Design Conference, Book Publication, Sydney Australia (collaboration)
2005	Multimedia Performance Midwife Crisis, Club Velour, Provo Utah

Gallery Representation

ADA Gallery: Contemporary Art Richmond, Virginia
<http://www.adagallery.com/>

Technical Abilities

Ceramics:

- Hand building Large and small
- Wheel Throwing
- Clay and glaze mixing
- Atmospheric firing
- Plaster mold making and slip casting

Bibliography

¹ Metcalf, Bruce *Neocraft* p.6 (Halifax Nova Scotia, CA: The Press of Nova Scotia Art and Design) 2007

² Mazanti, Louise *Re-reading the functional: A new position for contemporary craft (or, is there a craft after tacit?)* www2.rgu.ac.uk/challengingcraft/challengingcraft/papers/louise Mazanti (Sept. 2010)