2011

Feet Touching the Floor

Ashley Lyon
Virginia Commonwealth University

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FEET TOUCHING THE FLOOR

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

By

ASHLEY LYON
Bachelor of Fine Arts, University of Washington, 2006

Director: Kendall Buster
Associate Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Virginia Commonwealth University
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May 2011
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ABSTRACT

FEET TOUCHING THE FLOOR

By ASHLEY LYON, MFA in Sculpture

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2011

Major Director: Kendall Buster
Associate Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Abstract:

Realism, the uncanny, the figure, empathy, humanism, sculpture, feet, architecture, photography, oscillation, tin, installation, material, form, Herzog, projection, tactility, subject, haptics, sensibility, wax, portraits, space, embodied perception, rendering, duplication, thing, object, fragment, body, gaze, clay, god, man.
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Realism is not only an experiment in the reiteration of a hand, foot or head. Realism is to locate the sensation of being human. I regard humanism in art as a result of the psychological projection of a viewer upon images and objects in concert with the uncanny. My work explores the ways in which perception and projection engage realism. Sculptural and architectural space negotiates this projection, similar to how inflection and tone of voice negotiate the meaning of words.
ACCIDENT
Entering my studio one morning I found my nearly finished figure had toppled onto the floor. Its armature system had failed, the wet clay flattening along the face and one side. As I immediately set out to rebuild it, I suddenly realized that the casualty provided a more compelling opportunity. Cantilevering the misshapen figure off a plinth confronted the traditional relationship of figure to pedestal. Inviting the chance mishap or accident in my studio has often led me to stronger work. *Mine* (Fig 1) is the most poignant of these fortunate calamities. Remembering to react to the object in front of me rather than forcing a single idea into fruition has become invaluable to my process.

Seeking a scaled-down process of Herzogian plight\(^1\), my aleatory and responsive approach to sculpture imbeds my work with more visible struggle, depth, and life. The final form is dictated by invited chance and unplanned events during the making. In this way the objects that I render become unto themselves. They develop personalized histories by directly exposing their own coming into being.

*Tin Cry* (Fig 2) is such a harnessed accident; the flashing left from an improperly constructed mold metaphorically suggesting sound traveling through the instrument. Seeking to enhance this mishap through successive casts of the microphone in tin, I built a weakened mold, which intentionally burst and froze excess tin as elaborated flashing during the metal pour. This flashing was then modestly sculpted and left in place. The resulting mass of metal complicates and slows the read of the embedded object; the microphone is consumed and overridden, unable to contain the capacity of its resonant noise. Tin, a suggestively vocal metal, in reference to a tin cry\(^2\) or tin ear\(^3\), visually echoes the explosion of sound ushering forth from powerful lungs in a moment of ecstatic worship.

Functioning as a kind of narrator’s notes, scribbles in the margin and underlines that merge themselves into the content, these harnessed moments insist upon the subjectivity of perception. The form cannot be without these notes; it does not exist before them. Kant defines the noumenon as an inaccessible and unknowable reality or non-sensory origin, the unknowable thing-in-itself. In contrast, the phenomenon is our knowable, constructed reality, reliant on our perceptions and senses. Phenomena build tangibility and reality, allowing for language and communication\(^4\). My sculptures are a visual rendering of this phenomenal process; paralleling an idea or thing simultaneously with the construction of its reality. Embodied perception, the limit of my hand, and the insufficiency of language become embedded into my sculpture.

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1. In Les Blank’s documentary *Burden of Dreams*, Werner Herzog hauls a full-size steamboat up and over a mountain pass without the aid of modern machinery. This incredible feat is the solution to avoiding an impassable tributary in order to film his feature-length movie. The documentary records Herzog’s parallel struggle in which the impossibility of moving the boat is both a reality and simultaneously a metaphorical struggle for his fictional film.

2. Wikipedia, a tin cry is the sound heard when a bar of tin is bent, described as a “screaming” caused by crystals twinning in the metal.

3. Merriam Webster, a tin ear is the inability to distinguish pitch or an insensitive ear.

4. Hobbs, extrapolation of Formalism Revisited lecture notes.
PORTRAIT
Detail is awful close to portraiture. I do not intentionally set out to immortalize or preserve someone or something with a duplicated image as singular motivation. However, the meticulous specifics paramount to my work often cause it to cross over a line of ambiguity into an act of portraiture. Remaining an act or gesture of portraiture rather than resulting portrait, my figures and objects contain many things, people, perceptions, and feelings in one.

*Marian* (Fig 3) is simultaneously Marian Anderson, Marion Williams and my grandmother Lucille Marian Radke Fostvedt. *Grandmother’s Arm* (Fig 4) is a rendered merger from photographs of my grandmother’s hands, the memory of the bruised and sagging flesh of her arm, and my own forearm. *Amos* (Fig 5) is part likeness of Amos Cross Hall V, part my personal perception of him, and part specific traits common to middle-aged men within his profession, resulting in a sculpture likely unrecognizable to himself. Each figure, in this way, becomes a bit of a Frankenstein; part modeled from my own body, reference images, memory, and perception. Starting with the inspiration of one person or one memory, my rendering gets mangled up with a flood of visually relevant or conceptually cross-wired material. In completion, these sculptures allow for such breadth of sources that they are birthed into newness. No longer clinging faithfully to artistic muse, they instead possess originality and singularity in their amalgamated selves.

This portrait gesture is not limited to figuration; my sculpted objects share a similar evolutionary process in which a combination of specifics, first perceptions, original context, and suggestive meanings are teased out through their making. *Contralto* (Fig 6) is a recreation of a real door from the historical Wickham House. This sculptural work is a direct reference to the existing door bound into the original architecture of the home of John Wickham, historically a slave owner. He designed the walls of the home with a curvature to extend the daylight reflecting through the hallways in order to save on the cost of candlelight. The curve, height and details of the original door were measured and then copied into my own, however, the fault of my hands and lack of accuracy dictated by my building materials caused the door to stray from a rote duplication of the original. Remaking an object is in search of this moment; when my memory of the original becomes too muddied with my own invention or perception The sanding, patching, puttying, and repainting marks preserved in *Contralto* visibly demonstrate struggle. They result in a preserved re-repair; a sought replica converged with the impossibility of duplication.

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5Amos Cross Hall V currently resides in Aspen, Colorado. I developed a friendship with this individual circumstantially concerning his sale of negligible narcotics.

6The Wickham house is preserved as part of the Valentine Museum located in Richmond, Virginia.
REALISM
Although overflowing with recognizable elements, my sculptures should not be decoded using a strictly iconographic approach to their visual language. They are not explicitly about anything, instead, they suggest or contemplate realism. Reality exist somewhere between us and everything else, between ideas and objects, between matter and consciousness. Historically, realism encompassed the veristic, which attempted to faithfully duplicate the icon or image associated with the thing. The kind of realism I am interested in utilizes our pre-developed systems for interpreting the symbolic or iconographic but is completed by psychological projection. Projection into an object generates realism. The object or figure, as art, prompts this projection to be placed upon it by the viewer. The content of this projection is generated by culturally constructed assumptions, perceptions, and the psychological state of the viewer. Reality is given by the viewer viewing the object; reality is never in the object.

Projection allows a space for realism. Accurately duplicating an object or figure does not bring it closer to the real. Instead such objects can fall into the Uncanny Valley, in which rendering becomes too close to reality and in turn is repulsive or terrifying because it questions our certainty of reality too severely. This results in a reverse effect of believability in which a viewer blockades imagination because of repulsion. Instead, I hope to direct the apprehension of a work by use of the senses, giving room for the viewer’s consciousness of perception to become entwined in the form, and thus in its reality.

“Contemporary culture at large drifts toward a distancing, a kind of chilling desensualization and de-eroticization of the human relation to reality. Painting and Sculpture also seem to be losing their sensuality; instead of inviting a sensory intimacy, contemporary works of art frequently signal a distancing rejection of sensuous curiosity and pleasure. These works of art speak to the intellect and to the conceptualizing capacities instead of addressing the senses and the indiffereniated embodied responses. The ceaseless bombardments of unrelated imagery lead only to a gradual emptying of images of their emotional content. Images are converted into endless commodities, manufactured to postpone boredom; humans in turn are commodified, consuming themselves nonchalantly without having the courage or even the possibility of confronting their very existential reality. We are made to live in a fabricated dream world.”

These potent words of Juhani Pallasmaa emphasize the role of art as distinct in its engagement of the senses. Conception travels through our eyes to our mind through different processes than that which registers haptically. The human body is capable of understanding and sensing minute details through our skin, eyes, ears, and mouths as a result of the thousands of years of sensory evolution. We are spatially aware of vast detail through these sensory organs and more adept to interpret and intuit their input, this is often overlooked however in exchange for the easily communicable aspects of conceptualization. Conceptualization, in contrast to sensation, is quite young along our evolutionary timeline and offers less depth to aesthetic interpretations.

Pallasmaa, p. 34.
EMPATHY
Subject in my work does not lend itself to easy categorization. I am not seeking definitive answers, ultimate forms, or single objects embodying all the intricacies of an idea. Refusing the notion that a single meaning can be located within an object, I do not strive to make work that I would readily deem thematic (i.e. political, feminist, cultural, scientific, atheistic, or generic.) Not that my work lacks stance, rather, that it feels irrelevant for it to maintain a located one. Plucking subject from that which has profound empathetic resonance with me allows my work to expand through a field of content. Moments crystallize themselves in my memory with photographic precision, often followed by an extreme urge to make them:

By instinct, I know the hazy fog filter of each morning, the time it takes to burn off, the intensity of the sun if it does, the direction of the breeze if it doesn’t, how wet the sand must be to stick to my feet, and the temperature of the water by how it reflects the sky.

Swells come at the shore from an angle and so the coastline is never really a line, more of a spreading bloom that repeats itself every 30 ft. A few years ago I could stumble on the occasional large abalone, but I am certain to never find a conch shell or something fancy with orange spots or scalloped edges. At most, there are bleached mini clam halves without luster and brittle mussels with pearly patches and wickedly sharp black sides.

I came across a hunk of flayed flesh pulled up a few paces from the edge of the whitewater. Wet like seaweed, but dull grey with small brown hairs sticking sporadically out of it, it felt eerily human, as if from a large back. Sand sticks to the fatty inside as I flip it over with a stick. The gulls fight over these things and are mad at me for poking at it.

Garbage washes up with the seaweed, lots of bottle tops, bright turquoise or red-orange pops of color in the tangled green and brown, hiding the black slicks of tar that would stick to the pads of my childhood feet. My grandmother would rub them off with a paper towel drenched in lighter fluid. Despite imagining these loads of plastic, Styrofoam, oil and thick bamboo slowly floating around the upper rim of the pacific from China, past Alaska, and on down to my California beaches I never actually found anything with Chinese characters on it. The bamboo is decidedly local too.8

Rooting my impulse to create is a belief in gaining insight through the physical act of making. The “art” is located closer to my compulsion to render moments, an attempt to “re-see” or somehow “know” a thing through making. In vain effort to covet, consume, have, own, understand, or contemplate a moment, I internalize the objects and spit them back out through my hands. It is critical that they go “through” me, that their re-rendering is flawed and sculpted by my memory and perception of the original object or moment. In this way they are embedded with life.

8Since 2007, ten severed human feet have been discovered washed up on the beaches of British Columbia and Washington. Despite thorough investigations by local authorities and the FBI the owners and causes of the seven left and three right detached feet have yet been determined.
Revisiting the notions of empathy through detailed figuration, my visualizations are not conclusive or resolved but instead manifest multiple perceptions. The phenomena translated into physical form deserves more than one description or incarnation, their meaning is restlessly shifting. Giving form to the ineffable through visible objects, a high charge of emotionality provides relief from intentionality. Virtuosic handling of a material allows me to locate a specificity in which a viewer may align to the work empathetically. The empathetic response to figurative gesture or the materiality of my sculpted object sets up an opportunity for psychological projection. This projection, generating the reality of the objects, allows the viewer to be part of the presence of the sculpture. The figure is constantly shuttling from its reality and present-ness to its materially tethered object-ness.

Oscillating, the sculpture’s material presence denies the simultaneous impulse of comprehending such a thing as alive, giving these works their tension. I seek a viewer’s inability to definitively locate and place this “being.” Instead desiring an utterance of ineffable presence. Highlighting the mutability of materials and ideas makes visual argument for the subjectivity of interpretation and multiplicity of meaning by questioning our own absoluteness in understanding the world around us, our being-ness, and the construction of reality.
FEET TOUCHING THE FLOOR
I hesitate to call my work installation, in that each object, such as those in *Contralto* (Fig 7), can stand alone as sculptures; not requiring a rigid context to function aesthetically. However, best described as sculpture *specifically installed*, these works utilize the space around and between them, lighting, and existing architecture (Fig 8). I think a lot about tunnels, hallways, windows, doorways, caverns, corners, nooks, entrances, ceilings, walls, rooftops, stairways, and floors when installing my work.

I do not want my pieces to “levitate” or involve perceptual tricks. I think specifically about how the work will first be seen- either from the doorway of the room in which it is installed or its first impression on our vision as we round a corner or descend the stairs (Fig 9). In these beginning moments of perception, my sculptural figures or objects behave in space much in the way that real people or things would. If they are standing figures then their feet touch the floor, sitting ones rest on a chair capable of holding our own bodies, objects lean against the wall or stand in agreement with physics. Within the first microseconds of perceiving the objects in the room, a viewer sets up the pathways for an empathetic relationship. If, in this moment, the object is not perceived as potentially real or alive then there is a loss of the range in which this object may oscillate within a psychologically constructed reality and material actuality.

“One becomes body-conscious within an art situation with an emphasis on matter itself...so the focus of the art experience shifts from experiencing an object to experiencing oneself in relation to the object, environmentally. This is a self-conscious state; one becomes aware that one is not normally self-aware.”

Space negotiates perception, defining what remains in the periphery of our vision or that which is directly apprehended. Making clear where everything sits in relation to self, space seems proof that self is existent too. Self is located in uni-directional space. Space requires eye and body as measuring tool. Light, or lack of, directs our understanding of space, affirming our convictions or evoking our projections in the shadows and recessions. These projections give shape to truth as much as light does. These planes, lit and unlit navigate perceptual oscillations through the various forms of truths.

Architecture gives space order, organizing presence.

“I confront the city with my body; my legs measure the length of the arcade and the width of the square; my gaze unconsciously projects my body onto to façade of the cathedral, where it roams over the moldings and contours, sensing the size of the recesses and projections; my body weight meets the mass of the cathedral door, and my hand grasps the door pull as I enter the dark void behind. I experience myself in the city, and the city exists through my embodied experience. The city and my body supplement and define each other. I dwell in the city and the city dwells in me.”

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10 Potts, p. 219.
11 Pallasmaa, p. 40.
The objects and space are vehicles for the form of my work, taking place within the viewer’s projection. Setting up situations for this projection parallels my interest and artistic research in psychological perception. Encountering a figurative object from a distance, down a hallway or turning a corner, one first perceives a silhouette, stimulating the mind to perceive another being is actually present. This can happen even when something seemingly as essential as the head is missing. This moment is similar to the sensation that might occur when one is walking home in the night and suddenly perceives a crouching person in the corner of their eye, only to find upon closer inspection it is simply a fire hydrant. This moment of the uncanny, however fleeting, is essential to setting up a dynamic relationship within the work so that the viewer can project into it.
UNCANNY
Often working on several figures at once, body parts and fragments are strewn around my studio: a leg propped up against a wall, two feet placed in front of a chair like shoes, an arm on a table with the hand dangling limply off the edge. This chaos of parts stimulated my exploration of fragmentation and photography, in effort of engaging realism in a more convincing and complicated way than illustrating pathos. A whole figure striving to appear realistic can often feel like a dummy or mannequin; everything is described. The entire figure halts close looking, leading to a narrative or illustrative interpretation of the work. The sensation of realism is more effective in the gap, lack, or blur that a viewer’s projection must fill.

“Freud uses the German word unheimlich, literally translating to ‘unhomely’, stating that through linguistics and history this word now encompasses its opposite. It signifies the strange, weird, or creepy but simultaneously familiar or known. Often unusual or out of the ordinary the unheimlich is also ‘that which has gone before’ and so it is bound to repetition with a difference.”

“It may be true that the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it.”

“Coming to the natural limitations of our knowledge; when we are confronted with something that’s beyond our limits of acceptability, or that threatens to expose some repressed thing, then we have this feeling of the uncanny. So it’s not about getting in touch with something greater than ourselves. It’s about getting in touch with something we know and can’t accept - something outside the boundaries of what we are willing to accept about ourselves.”

Accompanying his exhibition The Uncanny Mike Kelley describes this phenomenon as that which is at the interface between life and death, or the animate and inanimate:

“Its about one’s interaction with an object, not just ones interaction with one’s self. The focus is on the object…still the object and the self tend to merge in this case. — since the sublime, as the uncanny, leads immediately to a contemplation of the death and decay of the body — why else would one want to make a mummy, or a statue, or any representation at all?”

12Punter, p. 88.
14Kelley, “From the Sublime to the Uncanny” p. 67.
15Ibid. p. 68.
Re-representation grips us with utmost immediacy and simultaneously reminds us that that which is represented is above all *not there*. In this way the uncanny is not a modern or postmodern phenomenon, it is instead a psychological experience. My work embraces this moment of the uncanny in the initial stance set up by the object’s plausible installation in viewing space, in the extreme precision of detail, and in the invitation of perception and psychology to enter a viewer’s apprehension of the work.

“Perhaps, like a good portrait painter, I shall succeed in catching more than one figure in such a way that, although you never knew its original, you will nonetheless think it lifelike, that you had indeed seen the person many times with your living eyes. Perhaps you will then come to believe, O reader, that there is nothing more marvelous or madder than real life, and that all the poet could do was to catch this as a dark reflection is caught in a dull mirror.”  

Eyes are the give away. For the same reason that when pulling up an eyelid by brow-flesh and peering into the pupil, a dead body is unmistakable from a comatose one. Live eyes look back; even if somehow disembodied, they still look back (Fig 11). Our gut, not our brain, tells us if the eye is gazing back to us. Much like the flicker of someone’s pupils upon your forehead as you talk to them lets you know that they are looking at something else on your face. Eyes are distinctly telling. The odd thing is, not all rendered eyes need necessarily to be colored, glassy, or all that realistic, often, it is enough for them to possess specific angle, a precise meet of gaze to one’s own.

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16 Hoffman, p 101.
FORM
My use of a material such as wax, in *Marian*, (Fig 3) suggests impermanence, transition, vulnerability, and doubles in reference to the color of skin and bronze casting for monuments. *Amos’s* (Fig 10) alabaster teeth and shoes could not be substituted for a trompe l’oeil of stone. It is critical that the viewer perceives the coldness and heaviness inherent in stone through their senses. These material shifts problematize the figure, breaking down their plausibility of alive-ness and creating tension between the projected realism and materiality. Perceiving material through the senses differs from the comprehension of what is imaged by the work. The material carries a content running parallel and expanding that which is imaged and rendered. Virtuosity is juxtaposed with a direct physicality of material; the visible seams, finger marks, or technical process residue is given equal visual weight to imagery. The mutability exposed through material is far from being temporary. My sculptures are emphatically physical despite echoing the instability embraced by their content.

Man has always sought to render himself in stone, wood, clay, metal, glass, pigment or with a simple stick tracing through sand. We image ourselves in search of explaining what it means “to be.” By striving to represent our own image we give permanence to our reality. Historically, artists shifted their rendering to distinguish a god from a man, resulting in situated content within forms. Contemporary depictions allow elasticity; rendered man can be fragmented, stretch, or distorted and thus infused with expression even when lacking a head or limbs.

For me, to make an image of man out of clay, relates to the historical impulse to render ourselves; asking the primal questions of what it means to be alive, to be real, to exist, and to think.

“He collected dust and kneaded it (…) and He breathed in it the spirit of life. They told him (Enosh): ‘How is it possible to do such a thing? Show it (to us) by the deed of (your) hands in its form and structure, (just) as He did.’ And they compelled him, so he took dust and kneaded it and made it into the likeness of man and its image, and afterward he breathed in it the spirit of life, in order to show them the deed of the Holy One, Blessed be He. Then Satan came to show (himself) (…) in this deed, and the statue turned alive. And a demon entered it and all the generation erred because of it and they made it an object of idolatrous worship. Then idolatry began to be designated by the name of God, and since then all those who sinned because of it (…) make statues in the image of man.” 17

Finishing a figure in clay, I feel nearest to sublimity when looking at the wet lumpy mass of dirt that became a fully upright rendered figure with a few days. This moment never fails to gratify and astound me. Wondering admiringly at the work of Elizabeth King, which possesses an *absolute* precision of rendering, I want to ask her about God 18. The possibility of coming so close to the exactness of man’s image begs the question: what is human?

17 Kelley, “From the Halls of Montezuma” p. 13
18 From discussion in 2008 with Doug Jeck, Associate Professor of Ceramics, University of Washington, inspiring my application to VCU Sculpture and Extended Media.
FIGURES REFERENCED
Figure 1

*Mine* 2006
60 x 60 x 19”
Ceramic, plinth, dry pigments, stains
Figure 2

*Tin Cry* 2011
40 x 12 x 3”
38 lbs of cast tin
Figure 3

*Marian* (detail) 2011
Casting wax, pigment
Figure 4

*Grandmother’s Arm* 2010
20 x 16 x 12”
Handrail, FGR plaster, gold leaf
Figure 5

*Amos* 2010  
56 x 30 x 32”  
Ceramic, plaster, epoxy clay, fabric, resin, cart, watercolor, graphite, alabaster
Figure 6

*Contralto* 2011
88 x 42 x 7”
Foam, joint compound, water putty, paint, pigment, polyurethane, epoxy resin
Figure 7

*Contralto* (Installation) 2011
Installation of sculpture in 7 x 6’ room of Anderson Gallery Mezzanine
Figure 8

*Marian* (Installation) 2011
Installation of sculpture on first floor of Anderson Gallery, near museum front desk
Figure 9

*Marian* (Stairwell view) 2011
Installed sculpture as viewed when descending staircase of Anderson Gallery
Figure 10

*Amos (detail) 2011*
Detail of alabaster teeth
Figure 11

Right Eye from a Statue
Greek, 500-100 B.C.
Marble, obsidian, glass, and copper
Image taken on visit to Getty Villa, April 1, 2011.
SOURCES


Hobbs, Robert. *Formalism Revisited*, lecture class notes (September 19, 2010).


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Figures 3 & 7 photography credit: Terry Brown.

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