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# Fundamental Units

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## **Fundamental Units**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters in Fine Arts, Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

Ryan Flores, Masters in Fine Arts, Sculpture + Extended Media at Virginia Commonwealth University. 2016

Director: Irvin Climaco Morazan  
Assistant Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, Virginia  
May, 2016

## **Abstract**

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By Ryan Flores, MFA

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Major Director: Irvin Climaco Morazan, Assistant Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Surface, Skin, Facade, Countenance, Resistance, Chinchorro Mummies, Touch, Mark Making, Residue, Intuition, Repression, Indigestion, Disassemble, Blighted, Components, Body as Containers, Levels of Hierarchy, Absorption, Plastination, Modernism and Containment, Vanitas, Disembodied, Embodiment, Fragmentation, Arches, Gothic, Typology, Stacking of Cultures, Slippage.

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## **Surface, Skin, Facade, Countenance, Resistance, Chinchorro Mummies**

When we encounter a body we are immediately drawn to its countenance. The face of a building presents a tone. The facade is a decoration that informs its inner atmosphere.

The skin is the entrance to and protector of the body; it is the barrier between the function beneath and the surface we understand through sight. Skin is the point of contact - it's where touch begins. Material pours over a form, but the fluid cannot seep inside. Instead it creates a new layer over the older skin.

Mortality is present. Our bodies are perishable. The Chinchorro people were from what is now Chile and Southern Peru and were the earliest known people to practice mummification. They preserved all the members of their society, not just the elite. Using mud, clay, and gypsum as a cover for the body for mummification, they masked death with a decorative layer. Through color and elaborate design, their dead were presented with a new form of skin.

The faces in the figures of "The Point of Mercy" on the facade of the Sagrada Familia are all sculpted from death masks of diseased Barcelonians. Whether the viewer knows it or not, the presence of death is still there, embedded in the form.

## **Touch, Mark Making, Residue, Intuition, Repression, Indigestion**

In creating forms, physical gesture takes priority over representation. Touch is a direct translation of the body. The body is a filter in the reproduction of representation,

insisting on its flaws, struggles, and inability to exist without human presence. The content is in the decisions that form the work. Intuition is the ability to understand something immediately without the need for conscious reasoning; it is a reaction to process. Intuition comes from the unconscious, and we cannot fully understand our ability to access it. Intuition is the access point, a gate to stored knowledge of the unconscious. It is a forced intervention of the body over the mind. Repression allows for undefinable moments that surface in our consciousness. These are elements of awareness buried in the mind by the body. These moments of awareness are interruptions that bubble up to the surface, the acidic taste before a drink of water. It's the body uncovering the fears and anxieties buried inside one's stomach. The effects of repression are not directly understood in the moment but inform how to understand the symptoms when they repeat. Their continuous resurfacing notifies the sufferer of the dysfunction that lies under the surface.

**Disassemble, Blighted, Components, Body as Containers, Levels of Hierarchy, Absorption, Plastination**

Buildings and bodies have life cycles. Deconstruction is the selective dismantling of structure to reuse and repurpose. It is a reverse form of construction. We take from past forms to create new forms and they become the present tense. It is not an act of demolition when or where history is erased but rather a growth that births a new structure. It is an introduction to a new body through something known, an extension to the past, a way to go forward and to retreat back. When things are broken down, their

totality is questioned. Form is lost, as is fixed meaning. Instead, past meaning morphs and becomes endlessly able to be broken apart and reformed. Mondino de Luzzi, a Bolognese anatomist from the early fourteenth century, was one of the first to perform dissections. He created a manual called the *Anathomia corporis humani* and his practices were guided by his belief in a tripartite division of the human body. This stipulated that there are three distinct containers: the animal member (composed of the skull and considered the superior ventricle), the thorax (the heart and lungs and middle ventricle which house the spiritual members) and the abdomen, which houses the liver and other visceral organs, referred to as the natural members. The body creates its own hierarchy through its placement of these containers from its highest to lowest points. There is balance between the head and thorax, which are in constant conversation. In his dissection of the body, de Luzzi broke it down in order to consider relationships between components rather than the whole.

Forms are porous. Through absorption fluid enters a material, infusing the original form. Color is infused in the form, thus the material quality changes. The process of infusion maintains the shape of the original body yet by altering the surface, a new barrier is created.

Water and fat are replaced by plastic. There are four steps in the standard process of plastination: fixation, dehydration, forced impregnation and a vacuum hardening. Formaldehyde becomes a barrier: it stops the decomposition of the tissues, and the organs can now be touched because they no longer decay. The organ is bathed in liquid polymer. It creates a vacuum, acetone vaporizes, the body leaves, the plastic

starts to seep in. It allows for no cover the skin is removed allowing you to adorn the layers beneath.

### **Disembodied, Embodiment, Fragmentation**

The Cathedral is made up of two right hands: fragments from two previous figures which Rodin had created. He drew connections to the Gothic structures and to his interest in the mystery of the inner space created inside the fingers crossing. The configuration parallels the structure of Gothic architecture. It is about looking at what is absent rather than what is present. To find the essence of the shape is to break down the form to its most basic qualities, to reduce it to line or pure color. The sensorial qualities of the body can infect the mind. The physical overpowers the mental.

### **Modernism and Containment, Vanitas**

Modernist architecture rejects the ornamental. It pushes for rationality and utility, for the simplification of shape and form, the simplification of the skin. When the skin of modernism is pulled back it reveals the structure, allowing the embellishments and intricacies of the skeleton to show through. The skin services the structure. Modernism embeds the ornamental aspects within the form.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Dutch and Flemish painters used vanitas to show the emptiness and worthlessness of worldliness. Paintings in this style display symbols of mortality along with objects of wealth, desire and luxury. Vanitas painters hid the pleasure of painting of such things behind moral justification. Similarly,

modernist architecture, issued its own dictates to justify its affinity for transparency and function. Instead of relying upon the kind of outward ornamentation vanitas painters seemingly decried, the intricacies of a building's interior become the embellishments, the starkest details potentially decorative.

### **Arches, Typology**

An arch is a compressed form, pure in its nature. Arches with a circular form are related to brick laying. As an ancient form of building, they employ a multitude rather than the singular. There is more freedom in the gothic arch, which can support any shape. Structures can be raised higher, their verticality overpowering their relation to the body. The vaulted shape allows for decorative aspects to be embedded in the structure, yet it still maintains a strong, lasting structure. The arches allowed for the structure to be opened up and for expansive light to show through; it opens up the body. Colonialism has a strong relationship to these structures. Gothic churches, with their arches, dot the maps of conquistadors and equally conquest-driven missionaries. For many conquered peoples, their new history was provided through religion. It functioned as an access point from both sides, for both the conqueror and conquered, a point of collision and fusion in many cultural histories.

### **Stacking of Culture, Slippage**

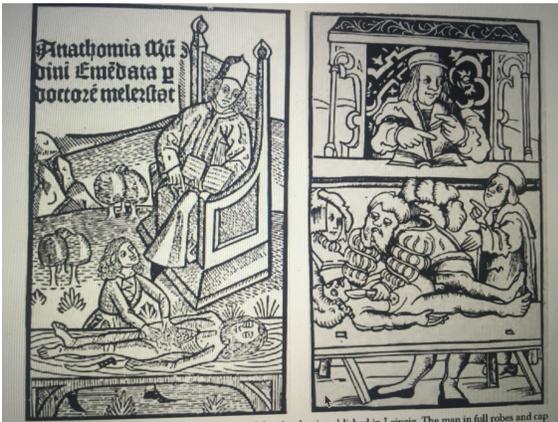
In the medieval ages, people did not see a great difference between themselves and their ancestors, as opposed to our current society that embraces individuality. Today, as

before, cultures continue to be layered on top of each other. Collections of individual eras become blended together. They become misplaced and misunderstood. Slippage is generated by occurrence. They are melted down, reformed, shattered to fill holes, structures are striped, and foundations are reused. The rising of stacks simulates the way they break down. There is a constant breaking of the frame or container, because living things simply outgrow their shells. When the Spanish destroyed the Aztec Empire, they built the Metropolitan Cathedral of Mexico City with stones from the destroyed temple of the Aztec god of war Huitzilopochtli. There was an uneven foundation from the beginning. History is a skewed perception, culture is stacked upon itself. Things are collected, stored for use and categorized according to value. Everything is reclaimed and redefined.

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