Growth and Deterioration

Brooke A. Hine
Virginia Commonwealth University

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GROWTH AND DETERIORATION

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

By

Brooke Allison Hine

Director: Allan Rosenbaum
Professor, Ceramic Department

Virginia Commonwealth University

Richmond, Virginia

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Acknowledgement

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The act of art making involves an innate spirituality that enables me to address the cycles of life and death. Since childhood, the natural world has provided me with solace from the complexities of daily life. My work is inspired by the physical world; the negative space created by naked branches in winter, the path traced by insects in a hollow log, or fossils found in the ground.

I use natural imagery in symbolic ways. My previous work referenced deep water to symbolize the unconscious, and schools of fish to represent human social organization. My recent work has used bones in a similar fashion treating them as metaphors for various social aggregations-- rather than the simply tragic metaphor they usually embody. I employ large quantities of fragments that when combined, work to create a
mass of objects. This coherent whole is a reflection of a societal whole, and each piece is both uniquely individual and an indescribable part of the assemblage.

The hands-on quality of working with clay is important to me. Through the manipulation of materials I convert emotion and memory into tactile form. My hands serve as the conduits that transform my raw emotions into concrete metaphors. Formal elements are also critical to the realization of my vision. Light and shadow define space while enhancing the subtler details. These features invite the viewer for a closer inspection and eliminate a predictable experience. The bone-like objects I use reference fossils and the strata of the life cycle that is stagnant. Using these units I create repetitions of curvilinear forms to evoke life energy, which suggest a strong dichotomy of life and death.
Abstract

I use porcelain clay because it allows me to focus on the subtle color shifts between white, beige, and gray. The forms I make in clay are associated with tangled roots, naked tree branches, hollow logs, and bones. I reveal this with a dense mass of curvilinear hollow forms that stack into a rhythmic linkage. They twist and turn, relying on gravity to dictate their structure within the installation. The ends of some are closed while others remain open to expose their interior. The tearing and perforations on the surface of each piece are employed to emphasize deterioration. In opposition to the tearing and perforations, I also add concave lines to the surface creating a flowing moving force. The surface is both visually active and smooth, allowing the eye to roam and focus on specific areas. I'm also working with the accumulation of pieces to communicate growth. The individual pieces rest on one another, growing into an interlocking structure. The pedestal is a formal presentation that is specific to the space. For this installation, I wanted to make the work monumental by elevating an accumulation of pieces. When walking around the artwork, there's an opening in the platform for one person to walk in and be surrounded by the two sides of the piece. The work is above eye level and surrounds the viewer at both sides. I want people to view the mass from the outside, but to also have an experience from the inside.
Influences

While in graduate school, researching contemporary artists has expanded my spectrum of artistic considerations. Annabeth Rosen, a ceramic sculptor who resides in California, makes work that contains organic shapes. These pieces suggest seedpods, flowers, and plant stalks that are an explosion of tightly connected parts. In my work, I champion the hand made while she mechanically extrudes her forms, focusing her attention instead on the glazed surface. She assembles individual parts, compacting space by applying a thickness of white slip to cover the clay. Rosen’s work is highly technical with skillfully developed glazing techniques. The exterior of the work is achieved by soaking pieces into water, allowing the soluble salts to rise to the surface.

I am also interested in the ceramic work of Scott Chamberlain. His work captures my interest with the mix of visual pleasures with an erotic, reinvigorated understanding of beauty. Beauty captivates the mind and body, and his work has a seductive quality that can make the viewer feel vulnerable. Chamberlain’s sculptures suggest something the viewers may recognize, but do not lend themselves to any particular interpretation. This surface mimics skin, while the forms smooth curves are receptive and open. Each individual form is imperfect and irregular as any living thing.

Sadashi Inuzuka and Jennifer Lapham are two artists who were featured in Cooled Matter: New Sculpture (1999) an exhibition during the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts. Their work demonstrates a refusal to remain inside the
boundaries of traditional ceramics. They create a temporal awareness through the experience of installation art. Inuzuka’s sculptures act as metaphors for the natural world and our relationship to it. An entire space is filled with organic objects that are presented in a grid-like arrangement, commenting on how human beings try to control nature. His circular patterns outline a microscopic view of what bacteria may look like with details throughout the whole piece. By recreating an environment using both raw clay and fired clay, he shows viewers different ways to manipulate the material. After he pours slip onto the floor, water evaporates causing the clay to form a crackle pattern. Sadashi Inuzuka is a great example of a clay artist who pushes installation by filling an entire space. I admire his momentum of making. I also respect his consciousness of the medium and how he allows himself to be completely absorbed with the material.

Lapham’s work called Nest (1996) consisted of a dense mass of tangled bisque-ware tubes. She piled these over a chair, and had them functioning as a surrogate or sign for the body. The large mass of pieces that are placed in circulating positions over populates the space where a person may sit, creating an association of human presence. Presence and Absence (1996) used the same ceramic forms, stacking them horizontally against the wall. I'm engaged in the stacking of pieces to form a massive form, which demonstrates the physicality of installation work. It is also significant that the life span of the installation has an identity that lasts throughout the exhibition, appropriately changing in every situation.

In contemporary ceramics, the concept of accumulation, the pile, the stack, and
the mound have been explored within the last 50 years. Mary Jo Bole made *Nipped buds* in 1993 with a pile of glove shapes. The mittens become substitutes for the body, bringing our attention to the short-lived lives of many children. She maintains a lifelong fascination with cemeteries. Bole quotes, "The pile is the symbol of the unifying will, where each element is pressed next to the other in a relation of gregarious yet total dependence." The massing of units has brought together the filled and the voided, the negative and the positive, the outside and the inside, and the hard and the soft.

Outside of ceramics, contemporary sculptor Tara Donovan deals with the physicality of a single "every day" material. Through obsessive accumulation, she builds infinitely expansive landscapes. What I enjoy most about Donovan’s installations is her ability to assemble units that expand and compress into the space of a gallery. When I visited *Resonance* (2003) in New York City, the piece was enormous and different at every angle. For her exhibitions, it is necessary to work with a large group of people. The aspect of working with clay in the studio permits me to be involved with the process of making. It's necessary to work independently, having the hands on in every step of the process.

Ever since I started to work with clay, I have admired the Abstract Expressionist, Peter Voulkos. His extraordinary capacity to handle clay pushed ceramics away from functional, utilitarian work, and he twisted the vessel radically into asymmetrical forms. They convey creative power and man's strength, but with a lack of tenderness. He seemed to function in an area where male and female forces were out of balance and
were trapped in a fight to the death. The Stack(1965) forms seem as if they are a climactic statement of existential anxiety, which is an expression of the aggressive urge to live and a recognition of the inevitability of death (the individuals most fundamental emotional conflict). In the end, his work leaves the viewer with the natural material of clay, creatively alive with its own pain.

I admire these artists for their creative interests to physically manipulate material, and their refusal to remain inside the boundaries of traditional ceramics. They strengthen installations by pushing scale, making the viewer feel undersized by the environment. Historically, they extend sculpture as a distinct and separate form of three-dimensional expression.
b. Scott Chamberlain, untitled, ceramic, glaze, 2001
e. Mary Jo Bole, *Nipped Buds*, ceramic, 1993
3a. Peter Voulkos, untitled, date unknown
3a. Peter Voulkos, *Stack*, ceramic, 1965
The pieces that compose this installation are abstractions of bones. I have simplified their natural complexity by creating objects of similar size, weight and shape. The "c" shape is a form that naturally hooks and loops together. By abstracting all of my "bones" into this form I have created an installation that will, in a sense, naturally assemble itself. Even though exact replication of this installation would be impossible, the general composition will always be the same. The building process has an innate characteristic to bundle together when forming into a massive structure that is unmappable.

However unmappable the visual presence of my work may be, it stems from a very structured tradition of how human beings bury and pay homage to the dead. A complex relationship exists between graveyards and the psyche. Even though gravestones carry the identification of the grave's occupant, the effect of the epitaph is a reduction of the person, and could never capture the complete presence of the individual. The expansive grids, systematic location of trees, uniformity in gravestone material, height and lettering all contribute to the understanding that a graveyard is a massive object created by systematically abstracting the material of individuals. I want the viewer to identify the massive form with life-energy (growth), and the individual bones with the image of death (deterioration). Massacio's fresco in the Santa Maria Novella in
Florence, Italy states, "I was once what you are, and what I am you will become". This quote expresses the inevitability of death, and relays to the person reading it that they will become one of these abstracted graves. The power of a cemetery rests in this understanding that the abstracted graves "are" individuals. Without this knowledge the psychological potency of the experience would be lost. This common understanding of the power of graveyards is something I reference, hoping all viewers recognize that I have hand made every piece differently to form the whole. All of the pieces are unique individuals, providing a clear connection to the intimate experience of our every day lives.

"Experience occurs continuously, because the interaction of live creature and environing conditions is involved in the very process of living. Under conditions of resistance and conflict, aspects and elements of the self and the world that are implicated in this interaction qualify experience with emotions and ideas so that conscious intent emerges." *Art as Experience* by John Dewey, 1934

The creation of and temporary assemblage of these works are the "experience" that Dewey speaks of and they are congruent examples of my "conscious intent". As human beings, our emotions are a rich and complex aspect of our natural being. They trigger our reaction to different conflicts throughout our lifetime. From the loss of life in death to the exhilaration of life in love, emotional involvement is crucial to the
absorption and resolution of the experience. In attempting to constrain emotional energy, feelings become trapped in the body. When these feelings slip into the unconscious they can come to surface through dreams, anxieties, neuroses, depression, or physical illness that causes more emotional stress to a person. The process of making allows me to work through emotions, which helps me to release any tensions that occur through my every day life. However, to gain a thorough understanding of life we must not only examine emotion but rational thought as well.

Thoughts can be expressed verbally or through visual images. Thoughts and emotions are inseparably bound up together. Thoughts construct reality for us, where as feelings are our personal experience of reality. When working I physically communicate with the clay by connecting thoughts and feelings that linger within me. In The Art of Changing, Glen Park writes, "The society we live in has become out of balance because of its emphasis upon a certain set of values, including the upgrading of intellect and physical strength, and the downgrading of emotion and intuition. The nuclear bomb is a gigantic symbol for this, created by a highly sophisticated intellect to manifest the ultimate in physical strength." The nuclear bomb is more than a weapon; it is a symbol of massive trauma and monumental destruction. All people are familiar with the icons of mass destruction and intimidated by the power they yield, yet they tend to overlook the devastating effects of intimate violence that can be wrought in our daily interactions with one another. To comment on the attention and fear focused on large-scale destruction, and the neglect of daily human injustice, I strive to create work that is monumental in
appearance, but intimate in actuality.

In this information-based world, life has become quite complex. Abstraction starts with the real world and alters, reduces, subtracts, and isolates some aspect of it. I want to present intuitive abstraction as something recognizable that still allows the viewer to think and feel, ponder and sense, and accept and question.

Graduate Experience and Progress

I moved to Richmond, Virginia in 2001 and was accepted as a special student in the ceramics program at Virginia Commonwealth University in the spring of that year. When first coming to VCU, I continued to make the two-part molds I had worked with while at a bronze foundry in Petersburg, Michigan. The molds that I made were in various sizes and were produced in two hemispheres, which when joined made a perfect sphere. The largest was 48" and the smallest only 3". My working process involved pressing wet clay into the surfaces of the plaster to form a sphere. I would take the orb out of the mold, and the clay would be leather hard. The negative aspect of the process, as a consequence of the construction, was not being able to carve the surfaces. My glazing technique consisted of working with neutral, reduction glazes and oxide washes. The stains were sponged into the surface details, making them more prominent, and the matte glaze I used worked to create contrast between the dark and light areas.

In my first year of graduate school, I started to understand that the sphere molds
were perhaps too controlling. I was making coils that were to be placed into a contained object, and I was comfortable with the process. I wanted to share my research on Jungian psychology, and recognized the difficulties of making esoteric sculptures abstract in form. This idea in the work utilized large-scale representational wall pieces from abstract fragments. I chose psychological terms for titles to raise curiosity. In the book, *Man and his Symbols*, Carl Jung explains, “It is easy to understand why dreamers tend to ignore or deny the message of their dreams. Consciousness naturally resists anything unconscious and unknown.” *Misoneism* (2003) is a piece I made focusing on this concept. It is a ceramic sculpture of circulating fish on the wall that symbolizes the idea of Jungian fear. The deep water is a metaphor for the shadow side—implying the negative characteristics of the self or the fears of an individual, making one afraid and uncomfortable. The social organization of a school of fish creates the strength through numbers. Under water, schools of fish spiral together to protect themselves from being killed, and eaten.

In the technical realm, I changed to a low-fire, earthenware clay body with this new work. It was a more immediate process because the firing reached 1830° F within a 12-hour time frame period. I experimented with blues and greens for the reason that the work would become more alive to represent plant life and the world under water.

Besides the fired work, *Synectikos* (2003) was an installation piece that mobilized both sides of the brain. The right side dealt with the body in an unconscious dream state, and the left was concerned with consciously watching the body change through time. For
two months, I photographed the growth and decomposition of the figure. I plaster cast the surface of my body and made a plaster cast of my head. I then constructed a steel frame in which the wet clay was placed, and waited a week for the clay to dry. At the opening night of the show, I poured 20 gallons of water into the steel frame. Viewers could listen to the crackles and pops when the water coincided with the material. This was a process that viewers usually never directly experience. The clay image broke apart, cracked, and grew a layer of fungus on the surface, consequently becoming a form of a landscape. When it was completely saturated, the clay was recycled.

*Synectikos*(2003) was completely different from all of my previous work, and it was transitional for me as I realized that abstract parts were more intuitive in the making. I enjoyed making the fragments, and I found that I could have a strong effect on the viewer without being representational.

These initial investigations have brought me to my new body of work focusing on growth and deterioration. The spheres that were once whole are now broken apart from their shells. I want to continue with this process of making, with the aim of building a large mass of individual parts and make a coherent whole. This leap forward in the work allows my mind to be engaged intuitively, and to make parts through the free play of my imagination.
"As rock broke up into sand, and sand disintegrated into clay or dirt, or mud, the live surface of the globe came into being. How organic life began no one knows, but it sprang most directly from mud, and is most dependent on mud for its continued existence. The miracle of life and growth involves air, water, and earth, all activated by heat, and of these the tangible element of earth is most closely bound up with the life of man.”  

*A Book of Pottery* by Henry Varnum Poor, 1958

The hand is the starting point for my work and it continues to be central to my activity until the form is completed. The raw physical involvement of my own body in the realization of my components sets up a natural rhythm that manifests itself in my forms.

This newest body of work was made with 1200 pounds of porcelain clay. I used four recipes to develop subtle shades of white. When OM-4 ball clay was added, the gray became more prominent. The glassy surface results from the fluxing of the silica at high temperature. I ended up producing around 350 pieces. I didn't calculate a specific amount of clay cut to make the forms. I only took what my body is capable of handling. Usually this was around 5 to 10 pounds per piece. I repetitively wedged a 25-pound bag of clay until it became homogenous, and then I rounded off the edges. I was concerned with air bubbles, as I liked working with the imperfections that were revealed when I
opened them up. Once this was done, I hand stretched the clay across a canvas by throwing it down to the left and to the right of my table. The next step was to push a round wooden dowel through the clay, and stretch it once again. After I took the dowel out of the cylindrical form, I would pick it up at both ends and form it into an approximation of the letter “c”. Sometimes I opened the edges and tore the clay off. The stage right before "leather hard" was the perfect time for me to press my fingers deep down onto the clay surface. I stretch, tear, puncture, and smooth out sections to create pleasant curves rather than just hard, straight edges or points. If it is still too hard, I used a carving tool and water to soften the surface. The one time I depended on a tool was when I selectively puncture the surface around the torn holes. The smaller spiral forms were made in the same way, but they were not hollowed out. Porcelain is temperamental, therefore the forms needed to dry slowly. When placed on a plastic surface for arrangement, they could contract, and avoid cracking in half. After they dried, I put them into a gas kiln for an oxidation firing.

I fired the gas kiln four times, each time stacking the forms into three layers. In order to have an even firing, I made sure that I didn't pack them too tightly. I started by slowly bringing them up to bisque temperature (1832° F). When the water is completely out of the pieces at 300°, I don't have to worry about the work exploding. Once I reached quartz inversion (at 1200°) could increase the temperature on a steeper curve (to 2700°). Reaching cone eleven can take up to 48 hours. In the end the strength and durability of the work is determined by the degree of vitrification.
Porcelain Clay Body:

1. 25% Potash Feldspar
2. 25% Silica
3. 25% Kaolin-EPK
4. 25% Ball-OM-4

1. 25% Potash Feldspar
2. 25% Silica
3. 50% Kaolin-EPK

1. 50% Kaolin-Tile #6
2. 25% Potash Feldspar
3. 25% Silica

1. 25% Grolleg
2. 25% Potash Feldspar
3. 25% Silica
4. 15% Kaolin-EPK
5. 15% Ball-OM-4
Bibliography


Vita

Bibliography: Born in Sylvania, Ohio on August 26, 1977, United States Citizen

Education:
2004 Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
2000 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Siena Heights University, Adrian, Michigan

Additional Education:
2003 The Olde-Garde Ceramic Symposium, Virginia Commonwealth University, Don Bendel, Jim Leedy, and Don Reitz (workshop)
2002 David McDonald, Virginia Commonwealth University (workshop)
2001 Special Student, Virginia Commonwealth University, spring semester
2000 Art of Italy, Florence and Venice, Three-week studio session, Siena Heights University Jennifer Lepham, Matthew Towers, and Todd Waistrom, Siena Heights University (workshop)

Teaching Experience:
2003 Adjunct Faculty, Virginia Commonwealth University, Introductory Wheel-throwing 242 Studio Assistant, Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina Teacher Assistant, Virginia Commonwealth University, Wheel-throwing
2002 Teacher Assistant, Virginia Commonwealth University, Hand-building

Professional Experience:
2004 Exhibition Administrator/Coordinator, Ray Kass, Curator, Virginia Commonwealth University Vice President, Graduate Artists Association, Virginia Commonwealth University
2003 Vice President, Graduate Artists Association, Virginia Commonwealth University Artist-in-Residence Assistant, Ole’ Morten Rokvam, Anagama Firing, Virginia Commonwealth University Studio Technician, Virginia Commonwealth University Postcard Designer, Polkadot Art-Candidacy, Virginia Commonwealth University Exhibition Coordinator, juried by Don Bendel, Jim Leedy, and Don Reitz, Virginia Commonwealth University
2002 Volunteer, Three Miles Gallery, Richmond, Virginia Postcard Designer, First Year-Graduate, Virginia Commonwealth University Contemporary Crafts Society, member, Virginia Commonwealth University
2001 Trademark Insignia Designer, Music Festival, Richmond, Virginia Lost-Wax Bronze Casting, Daedalus Art Foundry, Petersburg, Michigan
2000 Lost-Wax Bronze Casting, Daedalus Art Foundry Art League, Coordinator, Children’s Art Workshop, Siena Heights University
Student Representative, Empty Bowls Benefit, Siena Heights University

**Guest Lecture and Demonstration:**
2004 NCECA Conference, Indianapolis, Indiana (slide lecture)
2003 Penland School of Crafts, Penland, North Carolina, Studio Assistant Presentation (slide lecture)
1999 Blissfield Middle School, Blissfield, Michigan (demonstration)
1998 Blissfield Middle School (demonstration)
Morenci High School, Morenci, Michigan (slide lecture)

**Commission:**
2004 Catholic Church of Epiphany, Chesterfield, VA

**Exhibitions:**
2004 *Thesis Exhibition*, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
*Student Exhibition*, VCU, Anderson Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
*Ray Kass(Kassaro1e)- Curated Exhibition*, Artworks, Richmond, Virginia
2003 *Food for Thought*, Glen Allen Cultural Art Center, Glen Allen, Virginia
*Polkadot Art- Graduate Candidacy Exhibition*, Polkadot Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
*Fab-Gallery*, Virginia Commonwealth University, Juried by Don Bendel, Jim Leedy, and Don Reitz.
Multi-Media Show, Shockoe Bottom Arts Center, Richmond, Virginia, Juried by Kirsten Gray, Juror's Choice
Multi-Media Show, Shockoe Bottom Arts Center, Richmond, Virginia. Juried by Shelly Adams
2002 *First Year- Graduate Exhibition*, Bradford Gallery, Virginia Commonwealth University, Juried by David McDonald
*Unconscious Centers*, One-person Exhibition, Ipanema, Richmond, Virginia
2000 *Connections*, One-person Exhibition, Klemm Gallery, Siena Heights University, Adrian, Michigan
*First Time Around*, Creole Gallery, Lansing, Michigan, Juror's Choice

**Awards:**
2004 Virginia Commonwealth University, Student Government, Travel Grant
2003 Virginia Commonwealth University, School of the Arts, Graduate Studies Grant
Penland School of Crafts, Studio Assistant for Marc Leuthold, Scholarship
2001 Virginia Commonwealth University, School of the Arts, Graduate Studies Grant
2000 Siena Heights University, Volleyball Scholarship
1995
References:
Howard Risatti (804) 828-1750
Allan Rosenbaum (804) 649-8180
Jack Wax (804) 828-1477
Slide List

5. *Growth/ Deterioration*, porcelain, size variable, 2004