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The Dragons in your Dreams

Jacquelyn Walther
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THE DRAGONS IN YOUR DREAMS

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

By

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# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapters</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entelodonts</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inhibitions</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimacy</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appetite</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anatomy</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clouds</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluidity</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hand Modeling</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substrates</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Risk</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

Figure 1:
Entelodonts, video still from BBC’s Walking with Prehistoric Beasts .............................................. 1

Figure 2:
Dinosaur skeletons at the Natural History Museum in New York City, author’s photo .............. 4

Figure 3:
The Dragons in Your Dreams. Ceramic, 10’x5’x5’, 2012 ............................................................. 4

Figure 4:
Little Scrotum. Porcelain, 5”x7”x8”, 2011 .................................................................................. 6

Figure 5:
The Dragons in Your Dreams. Ceramic, 10’x5’x5’, 2012 ............................................................. 8

Figure 6:
The Ruminator: Ceramic, 15”x15”x14”, 2011 ......................................................................... 9

Figure 7:
Flipper Baby. Porcelain, 14”x9”x12”, 2010 ................................................................................. 12

Figure 8:
Fleshshell. Ceramic, 27”x24”x15”, 2011 .................................................................................... 13

Figure 9:
Illustration of pelvis with cartilage and primary tendons, from The Atlas of Anatomy and
Surgery, Page 108 .......................................................................................................................... 14

Figure 10:
The Dragons in Your Dreams. Ceramic, 10’x5’x5’, 2012 ............................................................. 16
Figure 11:
*Flipper Leg.* Ceramic, 54”x18”x8”, 2011 .............................................................. 18

Figure 12:
Process image: Building armature ........................................................................ 21

Figure 13:
Process image: A lower jawbone from *The Dragons in Your Dreams* drying on armature ... 21

Figure 14:
Partially Excavated Jaws and Skull on display at the Smithsonian Natural History Museum, Washington, DC, author’s photo ................................................................................. 22

Figure 15:
Process image: Pelvic girdle from *The Dragons in Your Dreams* in the kiln with support structure in place .................................................................................................................. 22

Figure 16:
*The Dragons in Your Dreams* (Detail). Ceramic, 10’x5’x5’, 2012 ........................................... 26
What if every craving that you ever felt stayed with you forever? Suppose facades couldn’t exist, and what should only be the deepest, densest core of a desire was formed into a mass, a body. Its will matching yours in its physical presence.

I make creatures that are embodiments of emotions. In this study I mainly focus on desires and inhibitions surrounding romance. I explore anatomical structures and how material make-up can directly reflect emotional character. In this exploration, the materiality of clay allows for a thorough manipulation of the composition of the creatures. In this I am also able to manipulate the material properties of clay to reflect states of existential discomfort, pushing the limits of material structure and stability. The final presentation of these creatures are as specimens of inhibitions, drawing in the viewer with empathy and repulsion as a fantastic other.
Enteladonts

My thesis work began with a scene from the BBC’s Walking with Prehistoric Beasts, in which mammals from prehistory are brought to life in a computer generated documentary. In the episode titled “Land of Giants”, two creatures called Entelodons (fig. 1) engage in a short scuffle, in which one clamps its mouth completely around the other’s snout. These mammals, over seven feet tall on all fours, and weighing in at half a ton, have become known for their aggressive behavior, earning the nickname “Hell Pig”. The beast lives up to this nickname in its appearance, having huge sharp teeth and a long ugly snout with gaping nostrils. The physical involvement of the two is primal and unmediated. Their individual want for the other to submit to defeat is the only concern in that moment of interaction. This hyper-awareness of one’s being in relation to the other’s is directly reflected in the physicality of their interaction.

Fig 1. Enteladonts
These creatures exhibit an uninhibited, one to one relation of mind to body. I connect this interworking of biology and psychology with that of falling in love. The aggressive nature of their appearance and interaction alludes to the power of all of the emotive trappings and pitfalls that come with the notion of romantic encounters. In the reality of human emotional and social constructs surrounding romance, there is still an indescribable, ethereal quality to love, a kind of quality that hits an existential nerve. This makes either extreme of being madly in love or rejected by another an event that questions the validity of feelings as well as how independent we can be.
Using the animal image as a vehicle to convey human emotions, I am attempting to reach and reveal the level of a raw, primal state of the man’s inner being. In using this imagery, I am acknowledging the human perspective of creation and the problems of the context of a living being becoming a specimen.

The human tendency to organize and catalog has been most evident and amplified in our perception of animals. The separation of human and animal rests heavily on the inability to communicate between species. As humanity’s ability to communicate grows, the separation becomes wider, placing the animal farther in the background and into an idea to be framed in the context of the human system. To make the animal an image is a way of acknowledging its existence, but at the same time is a filter for viewing, lacking physical reality.

Despite this human perspective and the constructs built to maintain it (domestication, etc), the life of the animal as it naturally exists in the world is pure and uninhibited. There seems to be an innate resolve to urges. As Georges Bataille has stated in *Theory of Religion*, “the animal is like water in water”, meaning it has an eternal immanence, belonging to the world in a way that is absolutely intimate, fully connected unquestioningly to nature in its purest form.¹ As Suzanne Guerlac discusses Bataille’s theory in *Bataille in Theory: Afterimages (Lascaux)*, the act of the human being creating an image of the animal acknowledges this innateness of the animal

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¹ Bataille 23
while at the same time confirming an awareness of humanity’s own separation from nature. The question of the extent of this separateness and the meaning it has for mankind could be read as a motivation for the fascination with animals that we either openly acknowledge and investigate, or are in denial about.

One of the perspectives from which we interpret animal existence is through the framing of them as specimens. The presentation of bones in museum displays of prehistoric animals conveys a sense of wonder and ferocity with large skeletons (fig. 2). Museum methods for displaying remains as specimens strive to recreate the bodies as seamlessly as possible, as if the primary reason for the existence of the remains are so they may displayed. To achieve this, secondary construction methods are used to fill in and prop up anatomies in a static, non-intrusive manner. This framing is again a human context, objectifying the animal as an idea for our intellectual and emotional consumption. The secondary construction

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2 Guerlac 10-11
methods are meant to blend in and disappear, not revealing or constructing a narrative of the human intervention or intention.

Specimen constructs in a museum setting illustrate a human comparison, the scale and the temporal remove makes these fossilized creatures a fantastic other. With my thesis work, *The Dragons in Your Dreams*, I use this display method and imagery as a cue for a sense of wonder and fantasy that is borne out of something from reality (fig. 3).
Inhibitions

Superficially to the viewer, the creatures I make serve as symbols to recognize and acknowledge human urges. These urges are inherently hard to define per individual, let alone be generalized, for the simple fact that the variables involved derive from both biology as well as psychical interpretations of external interactions. This difficulty in identifying exact causes for certain emotions that we have sets up the potential for a lack of control of these urges. Though the fear of this potential, based on any experience with it, may be enough to cause anxiety. To convey this, I seek to saturate the make-up of these creature’s formal and gestural qualities with indicators of desire for romantic intimacy, and at the same time imbue a sense of existential anxiety over these qualities being so exposed.

The idea that an intense emotion can be a motivating and evident factor of existence is borrowed from the tradition of monster making. In monster mythology, a being is imagined that is in someway an uncontrollable, unfathomable force, it is both the human urge and the anxiety or fear over that urge manifested in the flesh.

Fig 4. Little Scrotum
With my pieces, I use imagery and gestures that connote sexuality and anxiety, bringing to mind the idea of inhibition. By personifying this imagery to different degrees and characterizations, I am making it a separate entity (fig. 4). The leading nature of the unspecified narrative incites the viewer to attempt to get to the root of the story of the creature, promoting an empathetic relationship. Given the nature of inhibitions, a conflict also arises between empathy and repulsion.
Intimacy

_The Dragons in Your Dreams_ has an external interpretation of being about the interaction between two beings (fig. 5). The presence of two beings of the same make-up serve as a device to reflect the simultaneous occurrence of the internal conflict between desiring to be seduced and feeling consumed in an intimate encounter. Desire belongs to you, it is innate and makes up your psyche, but the object of that desire cannot be as intimately known. Our perceptions and feelings are ours, but in the external world everything is separate from us. Such involvement and exposure with another can lead to an insecurity about one’s own being, and how it can be perceived or manipulated.

Fig 5 _The Dragons in Your Dreams_, Profile, Gallery View
I manifest this insecurity in the creatures I make. They become complex portraits of inhibition and instinct, built specifically to embody the cycles of frustration and satisfaction that can compound into anxiety and confusion. This embodiment illustrates the idea that emotions can be intense enough to distort and confuse the body in the same way the heart and mind are effected when entangled in love.

One of my candidacy pieces, *The Ruminator* (fig. 6), is a structure containing approximately thirty tongues arranged in a spiral. The structure compounds into confusion as the tip of each tongue contorts to find its way back through the cluster to lick the base of the tongue that came before it.

The anxiety within the piece heightens as the raspy, scabby scales on the back of each tongue exude a repulsiveness to the viewer. Other pieces in this series, such as *Fleshshell* (fig. 8), also explore these concepts of anxiety and submission, empathy and repulsion.
Appetite

The Dragons in Your Dreams makes reference to this idea of an all-consuming romance, but more importantly it makes reference to the appetite for it. More generally it reflects an appetite for emotional fulfillment and the anxiety and ambivalence that arises from the extremes of disappointment and gratuitous indulgence. This appetite for fulfillment is often fueled by the conflicts of biological drives and cultural pressures.

The emotional anticipation is elation. You could say it is a tale as old as time: love stories, arresting passion, that all-encompassing something to live for. If and when it strikes you’ll be over the moon. Swept away by the tides of ecstasy and giving a full surrender of one’s being. With this total exposure and embrace, every part of your being will just turn to jelly!

The cultural pressure that I am tapping into has to do with the kitsch surrounding romance. Though the idea of being rescued by the handsome prince and living in a castle is quickly dismissed by most, the bright colors and beautiful sounds of it echo in everything from pop songs to romantic comedies to advertising strategies. And though this romance archetype disconnects with reality in most situations, its very nature of wishful thinking helps it to prevail in spite of so many cynical fronts.

In Appetites: Why Women Want, Caroline Knapp outlines the contemporary concerns women have over their bodies as an emotional manifestation of how the modern notion of freedom that women supposedly possess does not necessarily equal power in a firm sense of
identity. Problems of internal versus external identities abound in women, as the specter of old notions of propriety still haunt each choice a woman makes. Dependency on physically and emotionally fulfilling things, such as food and sex, can become a substitute for grounded self-esteem, especially when one is faced with the disconnects that run through social constructs over appearance and desirability. From eating disorders to sexual promiscuity, many women find ways to physically take control, and “fill the void”, often in self-destructive manners.\(^3\)

\(^3\) Knapp 35-47
Anatomy

To manifest material make-up of creatures, I make reference to anatomical structures. In referring to anatomy, I am interested in conveying similarities in form between different species as well as different specific parts.

For example, in *Flipper Baby* (fig. 7), the exterior of the vessel-like body is rendered with a texture that alludes to both the hard, brittle layers of a seashell and the downy softness of feathers.

The overall form of the body in certain pieces also make reference to multiple species, such as *Fleshshell* (fig. 8), which calls to mind the baldness of store-bought poultry in the skin-like color and smoothness, as well as in the rounded shape of the vessel form from which the smaller tubular chambers emanate. The overall shape also connotes a seashell that has multiple chambers, instead of just one.

My main focus at the beginning of graduate school was using specific body parts as symbols. A mouth could be any orifice in the body, while a tongue could translate as a tentacle, tail, flipper or genitalia. My early pieces that most strongly explore connotations of ambiguity and the intimate include *Little Scrotum* and *The Ruminator*. Though throughout the work I have made in the last two years, mouths, tongues, and their corresponding anatomical forms have
consistently informed the imagery in my work.

Over time, I became more interested in bones, as they are the basic structure that everything else is built upon. Bones reflect the most basic and raw form of bodily presence and existence. The formation of a bone’s shape is dependent on the corresponding cartilage, soft tissues, and function of the organs nearest to it (fig.9). Without these extra layers, the bones’ lack of function renders their specific shape irrelevant. In this now ambiguous shape, there is again room to start translating formal aspects and drawing similarities between body parts. In particular, the bones of the skull and jaw that the mouth is built upon are an area of focus.

*The Dragons in your Dreams* is an exploration of the shapes of these mouth bones. I deconstruct and combine imagery from other bones that orifices are built upon, such as a pelvis or an eye socket. Though an actual face is never realized, certain forms and shapes made into space suggest a mouth or eye sockets. These details are multiplied and placed in areas where they could be taken to be a nostril or ear canal. To supplement this, I also reference forms of bones surrounding cavities within the body, such as clavicles and shoulder bones that cage in the top of the torso. In this breaking down, building upon, and combination of parts, I seek to create the idea that the two mouths referenced in the piece are not just parts taken from a whole, but could be read as whole skeletal bodies in and of themselves.
Another manipulation of anatomy that I make is the idea of the bones growing and forming extremities that are reminiscent of the secondary tissues. These extremities reflect the same logic in their formation as the details of *Flipper Baby* mentioned above. For example, in *The Dragons in Your Dreams*, the ruffled ledge extending out from the lower jaw can be read as gills or gums, while the frills at the corners of the mouths can be read as flippers or wings.

The identity and function of parts of these creatures becomes liminal and subjective. The intricacies of the imagery in their make-up become subsumed by ambiguity and gestural contortion. In this they become images of an imagined *other*, a creature that has had its identifying marks distorted and nearly lost, but still evident enough for the imagination of the viewer to complete the picture, but still wonder over the exact history of its composition.
Clouds

When looking at clouds, their shapes can be interpreted as things such as animals or faces. These interpretations are the result of pulling images out of one’s personal visual library. The ambiguous shapes of clouds provide a vehicle with which to visualize and fantasize, a projection of our thoughts that is a harmless pastime.

The ethereal nature of clouds can be likened to that of dreams, both the variety of which happen when sleeping and the daydreams of a wakeful state. Often what remains of a dream is simply the feeling one has upon waking, be it fear from a nightmare or a quiet happiness from a joyous fantasy. The adventure that happens in the night is unexpected and uncontrolled, out of reach from one’s conscious mind, just as the clouds are out of reach to one’s fingertips. Recreating specific details in one’s mind is more often than not unfruitful, and the whole story itself is often spotty and disjointed. The memory of the dream becomes more and more fleeting as the day wears on.

Generating a daydream is however a more intentional activity. Our imaginations give us a new situation, where the feeling one wants is appropriated through private distortions of experiences and knowledge. This narrative is ours alone, to be shared only through the filters of sensory mediums such as vision and language, if we choose to share them at all. Unless put into some sort of readable format, daydreams more often than not forgotten by the individual, leaving behind only emotive traces that will eventually wear away in the face of reality.
In making a creature, I mark the intention of trying to capture a fantasy and the emotions with it. Specific aspects are caught, while the actual narrative remains removed, out of reach.

Fig 10. *The Dragons in Your Dreams* (Gallery View)
**Fluidity**

Many correlations can be drawn between how we feel emotionally and how it manifests physically. It becomes a very slippery territory to determine if biology or a learned set of attitudes is at origin for the make-up of one’s character and personality performance. More likely the two work hand in hand, and variables on either side of the equation become dependent and liminal.

The body of work that I have made in my graduate studies, illustrating creatures that directly reflect emotions in their physical make-up, has been an ongoing exercise in the limits of conveying a tangible narrative. This happens when figuration derived from nature becomes distorted to the point of being unrecognizable, but still intending to be a specific recognizable reference.

Drawing on forms from nature, and then distorting and rearranging their anatomies, is a method of creating grotesque creatures that has existed for millennia. Thinking about and reading up on grotesque imagery in books such as *Salome and Judas in the Cave of Sex: The Grotesque: Origins, Iconography, Techniques* by Ewa Kuryluk, I discovered the techniques employed in distorting and contorting the human and animal figures in order to create a monster. Techniques such as reconfiguration, elongation, multiplication, and other mutations of parts of
the body are used to restrict and empower the body to directly reflect the intent and ferocity of
the created being.\textsuperscript{4} \textit{Flipper Leg} (fig. 11) is an interpretation of the grotesque that illustrates an
inertia in the body. Imagining the weight of ones foot if it becomes a large flipper, straining and
pulling on the muscles of the leg until it becomes too thin to actually lift the flipper. From this I
considered the psychological ramifications of this transformation and how the method of creation
of this piece figures into the idea of its fantasy. The volume of the leg is rendered into space by a
thin slab of clay; however, the form remains open, revealing the two-dimensional skin of clay
that is it made up of. By making the form only a hollow shell, I reflected a feeling of emptiness
in the fantasy of empowerment that was perhaps only skin deep. This two dimensionality is
further emphasized by the relief of muscle drawn on the outside of the calf. This illustrated
muscle starts off as being reflective of the actual patterns of calf muscles inside of the leg,
however, the lines start to distort and swirl, reflecting an ongoing distortion that escapes realism.

\textsuperscript{4} Kuryluk 303-7
The abstraction in *Flipper Leg* led me to further investigate the limits of material illustration of forms from nature. With *The Dragons in Your Dreams* I decided to let the clay influence the manifestation of the piece to a greater degree. Making the parts for this work, the figurative nature of the bones, which were being conveyed, became much less apparent. With the hand modeling techniques described below, the intention behind the creation came into direct competition with the animality of the narrative, creating a meta-narrative of reality versus fantasy.
Hand Modeling

After *Flipper Leg*, I began to make the connection between bodily sensation and the movement of the clay in the manifest flesh of the creature. The approach I took to making the creatures more dynamic as a whole was to start with a lump of clay the approximate size I wanted the piece to be. From there I carved, pulled, and added to the clay. A dimensionality began to happen in the formation of the imagery. It started to feel like a fleshed out body, and not just a skin.

Every action of the hand employed in modeling *The Dragons in Your Dreams* is evident in the final product. This highlights the intentionality behind the work. As I have stated, the act of manifesting the creature comes from an emotional impetus, a sort of swimming in one’s emotions. The physical touch of moving clay at a hand scale aids in conveying the expressiveness. At the same time, moving masses of clay and then firing them to a stable, frozen state, fixes the moment of expression. The movement becomes a part of the image of the creature. In its dimensionality in space, the way the eye travels around the piece continues this movement. In walking around the piece, changes in perspective allow for additional recomposing, rising and falling, and layering of contours.
Substrates

Movable armatures have become an extremely important component in making my thesis work. Each part of the piece begins with a large coil of paper clay that is set upon the armature made of wet clay that is covered in plastic. The armature is initially made to provide a plane that changes in three dimensions to support the curves of the intended piece (fig. 12). As the paper clay is manipulated into the shape of the particular part, the armature can be moved, reduced in areas, and built up in others (fig. 13). This allows for immediacy in the formation of the parts, getting a full picture of the entire form, as opposed to traditional building methods of building from the bottom up, which lose the opportunity to reconfigure the entirety of the piece. Immediacy, potential, and the ability to change any part of the piece at anytime of the making are essential. This building method allows for manipulation that is organic, allowing all parts
of the piece to be changed in response to other components, restrained only by scale and the form I am referencing. These factors figure into the overall subjectivity and intentionality in an act of making that reflects the creature’s specific and unmediated nature.

An image that comes to mind when building pieces in this manner is that of a bone that is in the process of being excavated, but still partially embedded in the rock (fig. 14). The support structures needed to create the pieces stay with the piece until it is absolutely ready for display. As the clay changes states (wet to dry, unfired to fired), the materials used to cradle the forms change as well. After the piece has been built upon the clay armature and dries out, it is carefully put in the kiln on top of another substructure made of kiln bricks and stilts (fig. 15). After firing, the piece is kept on a bed of foam. It is from this last resting place that the piece becomes extracted, fully ready for display.
Hanging the piece inverts the support system from being supported underneath to being supported from above. With this, I feel that the cycle of pretend paleontology is complete and the bone fully becomes a specimen.
Risk

As I discussed above, it became just as important to me that my work be reflective of the intent with which monsters are created as the believability of the monster itself. This intent behind the work began by being nearly totally subsumed by the pristine manifestation of illusion in the work that I had been producing at the beginning of my graduate studies.

Looking back on pieces such as *Flipper Baby* and *Little Scrotum*, I realize there was a real concern with perfection to the point of the piece being a failure without it. The technical concerns were about pressure and consistency. To begin with, working with porcelain required full attention and concentration. If at any moment I left a wall too inconsistent, or pushed too hard on the material, that part or the entire body of the creature would crack and/or collapse. Adding detail to the creature after the construction of the form meant more risk from a slip of the hand, damaging the flesh of the creature beyond repair. Besides concerns over fabrication, the perfection of the illusion had to be complete. Logic of the way in which bone grew into muscle and the exact gesture those would make when contorted was essential to the illustrating the narrative.

A transition happened when I took a step outside of the narrative and realized that the creation process in itself was just as important to the work as the narrative of the end product. From here risk taking and complexity in construction competed with the narrative content of the work. *Ruminator* exemplifies this transition, as the task of working within the confines of the
vessel informed the amount of labor it took to individually build a tangle of clay tongues, let alone render in the details of their anatomy in relief.

With *The Dragons in Your Dreams*, the logic of rendering an illustration of contortions as they would happen in an organic body, as in the work mentioned above, gave way to contorting the actual structures of the body of the clay itself. With the aid of paper fibers added to the clay, I was able to pull, twist, and build the parts of the creature in extremely tenuous ways. Failure was constantly immanent and built into the material logic of the piece. In anticipation of the fibers being burned out during the firing of the piece, the fragility of the structure of the piece had to be compensated for, with elaborate constructions inside of the kiln to cradle the piece and prevent it from breaking apart during the shrinking and phases of material changes that happen in firing ceramic work. Planning and accounting for all of the movements within the intricacies of the pieces had a huge learning curve, and unexpected shifts in the forms did happen, giving the pieces on organic will of their own.

In hanging the piece, the structural integrity of the clay was being put to the ultimate test. In order for this to happen, more planning and engineering had to be implemented. In this the mortality of the piece was at stake in a very real way.

This final, finished, displayed existence has all of the trappings of resistance that was made by the material (Fig 16), from burnout residue of the organic material from the clay left on the surface, to cracks, to actual breakage that was compensated for immediately with means artificial to the piece. Finally, the cables used for suspension harnessed the weight of the ceramic
and fixed it into place. This underlying material layer reinforces the narrative of emotive existence turned into a specimen.

The act of laying claim to knowing the ways to specify and characterize beings, be they animals or ourselves (who happen to be animals) is often problematic and too subjective. Knowing ourselves and identifying our exact natures is murky territory, making the consideration of ways to specifying another as separate an act that is dependent on an unreliable perspective. The ways in which imagined stories and archetypes influence behaviors and perceptions of reality become more potent when we consider the looseness of the definition of what the core of our nature is. The act of trying to know, the intent behind the fabrication of a reality becomes almost sacred, while the actual contents and comparative value of those contents becomes fluid and hard to grasp. Constant shifts in perspective and interpretation through the eyes of unknowable others are mysteries to the individual person, making the reason of why we are hardwired to want to know as unreachable from our grounded points as clouds in the sky.
Bibliography


Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

2012       Master of Fine Art- Ceramics
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2008       Attended Studio Art Centers International- Florence, Italy

EXPERIENCE

Jobs and Commissions:
2012       -Instructor of Record, Beginning Ceramics, Summer Session, Virginia Commonwealth
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2010       -Assistant to sculptor Shay Church, Richmond, Virginia
2009   -Assistant to sculptor Akiko Jackson Richmond, Virginia
        -Assistant to clay artist Lydia Thompson Richmond, Virginia
2008       -Pottery commission for Couscous restaurant, Richmond, Virginia
2007       -Assistant to clay artist Mary Garber, Richmond, Virginia
2006   -Painting commission- Mechum River Farm, Albemarle, Virginia
2004       -Assistant to glass jewelry artist Deborah Aiken, Front Royal,Virginia

Activities:
2009       -Attended summer session at Haystack Mountain School of Crafts
2008       -Study abroad and travel in Italy and Europe
2006       -VCU Craft/ Material Studies student advisory task force member

EXHIBITIONS

2012       -The Dragons in Your Dreams, MFA Thesis Show, Virginia Commonwealth University,
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2011       -The Trappings of Venus’s Fly, Candidacy Show, Fine Arts Building, Virginia
            Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
2010       -Sleight of Hand, Gallery 5, Richmond, Virginia
        -Magnitude 7, Manifest Gallery, Cincinnati, Ohio
2009 - Craft/Material Studies Senior Show, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
2008 - Mannucci International Sculpture Prize Competition 2008, Arcevia, Italy
2007 - View 2007: Undergraduate Painting Exhibition, FAB Gallery, Richmond, Virginia
- Anderson Gallery Juried Undergraduate Student Exhibition, Richmond, Virginia

AWARDS

2011 - Graduate Technical Assistantship, Virginia Commonwealth University
2009 - Recipient of Haystack Mountain School of Crafts work study scholarship
- Windgate Fellowship 2009 nominee, Richmond, Virginia