Materials and Meaning

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Materials and Meaning

Documentation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Artist Statement

Decisive moments and their fleeting experiences are born from an individual’s interaction within a defined physical space. It is here at the intersection of environment and context that my work in site-specific art begins. I endeavor to create an examination of socio-political and environmental issues through a manipulation of materials, thereby altering one’s private, communal, and cultural response to them.

My installations are comprised of slip casted multiples which reference the human form. I place these forms in galleries and specific exterior locations, and incorporate materials that are charged with societal discord, such as used motor oil and post-consumer detritus, in order to still the blur of contemporary life. This allows for a contemplative pause that pulls into focus the effect of pursuing our individual wants and desires against the consequences of these pursuits on the larger society and environment.


Materials and Meaning

Introduction

My decision to return to school for my master’s degree came after fifteen years of classroom experience that had left me feeling timeworn and inert. Like many mid-career professionals I had plateaued. In my search for a solution for this lull, I came to realize that enrollment in a master’s program could not only reinvigorate my classroom practice but also advance my career as an artist. While I had never stopped making art of my own, I longed for the invigorating dynamic of a group studio setting.

During my inquiry into regional universities, I quickly discovered that the majority of programs did not fit my specific requirements as an artist or a teacher. It was essential that I find a rigorous and challenging curriculum that would compel me to strengthen my artistic voice and classroom presence, while providing the opportunity to attend classes on a school teacher’s schedule. These elements lead me to the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). The chance to work with regionally based artists was the most important aspect of this program and solidified my decision to enroll. It was this contact with professional artist-instructors that provided me with the opportunity to master my craft, learn the business of art, and develop the discipline and work ethic needed to compete for exhibition space.

The basis of my work as a ceramic sculptor is derived from my passion for material, form, and function. I am intrigued by work that is contextualized by meaning and form, but also defines a sense of space in which the viewer interacts with the physicality of the work. It is within this tension that the true power and voice of sculpture connects with its audience. It is
here that my dedication to coursework and making art began.

**Aesthetics**

While I make art for personal reasons, I also want to create work that is timely and socially relevant. I also strive to make work that is both aesthetically pleasurable and functional. My goal as an artist is to raise the collective society up, whether it is a beautiful piece of functional pottery that stands alone and enhances our understanding and interaction with the world, or a sculptural installation that simplifies a complex issue important to the human community. Much of my work is grounded in decoding social, political, and environmental issues. My choice of materials heavily influences the overall meaning of my work. I want each piece to narrate an idea or communicate a message, and the meaning needs to be interwoven into the work. Materials, when used thoughtfully, can create a powerful layer of significance that magnifies the overall content of the work.

Clay is my jumping off point. One of my fascinations with clay is its approachability. It is pure in content and can be pulled from the earth and readily turned into something. Clay exists almost everywhere and is usually only a few feet below the surface of the ground. The abundance and low cost of clay has allowed it to have a huge impact throughout the history of mankind as a material for functional ware as well as aesthetic objects. The type of clay used, and the location from which it is sourced, is charged with meaning. For instance, porcelain carries the history of Asian dynasties and the colonialism of Europe and Great Britain. The method of building clay objects is also important. Slip cast multiples infer mass production, capitalism, and consumer waste, while hand building recalls the cultural development of primitive man and his earliest attempts with the material functionality.
Much of my current work is installed in site-specific locations. I try and locate my work in a space that has a direct correlation to its meaning because my work conveys a specific message. It is very important that the material fits and works within that specific environment. When working with materials, such as used motor oil which is laden with connotations of environment abuse and global warming, what better place to showcase its power over us than in an abandoned gas station. This is our link to the material and our inescapable attachment to it. As we pass by such a location, if abandoned or in use, it becomes part of the white noise of our lives. It is there in that space that we should become aware of our ecological footprint and our potential power to make change. Through such an installation, I strive to bring to the surface our damaging relationship with fossil fuels. I am interested in provoking a thought, directing an action, or opening a dialogue that is all too often overlooked.

My work is generated from interaction with my environment, either natural, manmade, or a mental construct. It is there that many of my ideas are sparked. I respond to different aspects of my environment in various ways but sometimes a penetrating element resonates with me. It could be a response of discord from a political injustice, an imbalance of power, or the deleterious effect of mass consumerism on our environment. Once an idea begins to form, I embark on research. At times, I dig for thematic information or statistical data, and other times, it is a search for the how-to of process. That collected information and data drives the visual or conceptual shell of the piece, and directs my choice of material. It is here that the link of material with meaning is formed.

While the majority of the planning, prep-work, and physical making happens in the studio, many of my sculptures and installations are not finished or resolved until on location. Each one of my installations is reactive to the space. I arrive on location with a direction and a
plan. Then, I will take a few moments to contemplate the breadth of the space. Even scale models cannot prepare me for how the space feels or how the light falls and creates shadows. Once I have had a chance to gauge the angles of the walls and the natural flow of the area, I begin the installation. I add or relocate intended layouts and arrangements based on the look and feel of my materials and their interaction with the location. When working with on-site natural media, such as water in a flowing river, preparation only goes so far. In a case like this, I have to reevaluate my plans in regards to the strength and direction of the water. At times, these unforeseen events or mercurial moments are where problem solving breathes life into my work.

While the majority of my sculptural works are based on the use of materials and their specific implications, I also realize my importance as a potter. My functional objects have the power to shape people’s interactions with the world around them. While I do create vessels for fine art venues, the majority of functional ware is designed and produced for everyday public use and consumption. Regardless of my drive to create sculpture and fine art, I still heed the call of a craftsman. Nothing comes close to the hand of a well-crafted object and the joy one feels in its use.

**Influences**

The installation work of Ann Hamilton (b. 1956) interminably altered the scope of my artistic vision, in regards to my ceramic work that is focused on form and function. Hamilton creates experiential environments that are a direct response to the site and its location. Her physically immersive spaces often utilize and source local materials to create topography of scent, sight, and sound. The meaning of each piece is in part locked into her choice of materials as their specific use can create a sense of place, and its relationship within a historical, cultural,
or even a geographical context. Hamilton’s work has altered the way I view the role of the
materials in my own work and my perception of the boundaries of traditional galleries and
museums.

Her piece, *Privation and Excess* (1989), was sited at the Capp Street Project in San
Francisco, California. This disjunctive 52’x133’ space was divided by six square columns and an
exterior garage door. Hamilton turned these architectural deficiencies into key elements of the
piece. She utilized the columns to define a gridded landscape for a field of stacked pennies
placed in honey. By opening the garage door, the sunlight created a frame inside which an actor
in a felt hat sat in a chair wringing his hands into a hat filled with honey, and stared across the
field of pennies. Located in a gated area at the end of the room were bleating sheep, three
automated mortars and pestles grinding pennies, and human and animal teeth.

Hamilton’s careful economy of materials in this installation empowered the audience by
channeling the voice of her work and generated a specific dialect. While the piece was spread
throughout the entire space, it contained only six main elements which were needed to carry her
message. With the simple palette of pennies, honey, sheep, teeth, a felt hat, and a solo actor in a
chair, Hamilton created a rich visual language that spoke volumes on the topics of the
exploitation of animals for trade as a vehicle for the accumulation of wealth.

Since entering the genre of installation art, I have been vigilant in my use of materials
and cognizant of their relationship to the site-specific environment. Hamilton’s influence has
impressed upon me the fact that every material chosen for a work of art carries with it its own
visual impact and its historical and cultural constructs. Therefore, the message itself can be
controlled by the existence of the material in the work. In effect, I have started to view my use
of materials and their relationship to the presentation site as the starting point of my work, thus
allowing the materials to frame the space and the work’s meaning. In addition, a viewer’s relationship with an object can be controlled and manipulated based upon where it was sourced; how and by whom it was created. Hamilton’s installations have been paramount to my understanding of the role of materials and their ability to create meaning. Installation art tantalizes not only the eyes and mind, but fully incorporates the senses of touch, smell, taste, and sound to create an experience whose message cannot be fully understood through any other media.

Contemporary ceramic and performance artist and MIS-IAR instructor, J.J. McCracken, has forever altered my understanding and approach to ceramics. During my undergraduate work, I was indoctrinated into a narrow minded methodology of traditional ceramics. To be successful and taken seriously in this craft, one produced finished products out of clay that were fired and finished with glaze or a surface treatment. Mastery of material was my end goal until I encountered her theories, methods, and works which marked a significant personal transition when I realized I could be more than just a maker of aesthetic objects. McCracken operated from the premise that an artist who produces work for public consumption must shepherd its message, otherwise individuals will create their own interpretations. Her process and attitude made me aware of the importance of material and its meaning but also to be open to using non-traditional materials, especially if they amplified the voice of your composition.

McCracken’s installation, Hunger (2010), assembled at the Clay Studio in Philadelphia, focused on the topic of urban food deserts and the inability of inner city people to access healthy, fresh, unprocessed food. The main floor of the gallery was transformed into arid space with dry sod on the floor and clay covering the walls. On one side of the space was a table piled high with a bounty of fruits and vegetables made of unfired slip cast clay. Visible on the upper level of the
gallery was a handsome indoor garden filled with a colorful variety of vegetables secured behind a chain link fence. Moving throughout the gallery, along with visitors, was a group of hungry, clay covered performers inundated by the enticing aroma of fresh baking bread. The only food available and accessible to the ravenous throng were the clay vegetables which they were forced to consume out of necessity. Even though this clay filled their stomachs it held no nutritional value and would ultimately be the source of their starvation.

The most aspiring aspect of this piece, and much of McCracken’s work, is the economy and individual voice of her materials. Absent was a superfluous use of media. Each object had its place, every material belonged, and all the items combined seamlessly to create a unified message. The smell of warm bread and the plentiful array of vegetables from the indoor garden alluded to the mass marketing of food to the American society. The chain link fence was symbolic of the struggle of urban people to access fresh food sources. Astonishingly, clay is commonly eaten in many Third World countries to stave off hunger. In a practice called geophagy, dried (unfired) clay swells in the stomach to create the sensation of satiety.

This project did not end with the completion of the performance. The locally sourced clay used in the piece was reclaimed and turned into plates for inner city children, who were given the opportunity to decorate them with images of fresh and nutritious food. These plates were then auctioned off, with 100% of the proceeds and the plants from the indoor vegetable garden, and donated to a local food pantry. McCracken’s influence changed the direction of my work and compelled me to redefine my role as artist and encompass social activism. This challenged me to make art that matters; not art that simply exists.

Lastly, the contemporary work and visual statements of British, insurgent street artist, Banksy, has been one of the most liberating and unexpected influences on my work. His rise
into the collective zeitgeist has hurled the art establishment gallery model out of the window. The path of getting one’s art seen and sold has traditionally been from artist studio to gallery and gallery to collector. Banksy’s work is created and placed on the street immediately in the view of the public. This shift in paradigms has created a whole new direction for me. I have always made art out of a passion to create, but the classic mode of the art establishment has always left me searching for validation from galleries and not from myself. I am now often creating work that goes directly from my hands into the urban environment. Eliminating the economic middle man fosters an honest and free artistic experience with anyone who walks by.

This strategy became apparent when I first saw Banksy’s *Murdered Phone Booth* (2006). The classic red British phone booth was dropped off on a street in the Soho district of London. It was crumpled and turned on its side with cut wires sticking out the bottom as if in the throes of death. There was a pick axe stuck in one of its sides and red paint trickled from the hole, just as blood seeps from a wound. For all of that time and effort in making this piece, this installation only lasted a few hours and possession of the piece was lost. Regardless of the intended meaning or the interpreted message, it was removed by government officials. I believed this work was a generous gift to the public at-large, celebrating the open and accessible nature of street art.

I always found it interesting how street artists created beautiful work with no expectation of payment and no concern for the longevity of their final piece. The lack of attachment and transient nature of street art is the concept that has had the most lasting effect on me. I quickly came to realize that creating work with raw, unfired clay fit within this ideology. I could create work and place it in specific locations for it to be viewed by others without the need of an agent or gallery. The pieces could be removed, destroyed, or left to erode back into the environment.

Since my first exposure to the idealistic nature of Banksy’s work, my own has become
centered on chance moments in time. Its impermanence allows it to be shared directly by only a few passersby, but photographing the experience provides another voice and documents the installation. This photographic record allows me an opportunity to display this work in a more traditional setting and provides an additional chance to shape and direct a viewer’s gaze.

**Sculpture**

I designed *Apex / Tipping Point* (Appendix, 1, 1a, and 1b) as a paradigm of our collective entrenched dependence on fossil fuels. Through repetitive use of mass-produced, slip cast, left feet and used motor oil, I hoped to symbolize the mistake we are making by embracing a blind dependence on oil. The installation is a reflection on the destructive power of America’s petroleum footprint. This piece was born out of a response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill of 2010. The clay feet symbolize the permanence of our action and are showcased piled and submerged within a pool of used motor oil. A group of feet cascade out of the reflecting pool and stretch outward across the cement; leaving behind oil stained footprints.

This installation was meant to be an awakening to the damage caused by our addiction to oil that is often obscured. Unbeknownst to most, the average US citizen consumes 2.3 gallons of refined oil products per day. The majority of Americans have little understanding of how deeply petroleum is rooted in our daily lives and yet its presence is everywhere. Many of the products we purchase are produced overseas and shipped across oceans and continents by oil guzzling machines to reach our willing hands. Our cars are powered by refined oil and we drive to stores on roads made with it. Everyday products are made from petroleum-based plastics, packaged in plastic, scanned by a plastic computer, and repackaged again in plastic. The synthetic material in our clothing comes from oil. As a nation, Americans consume nine million barrels of oil a day;
we quite simply wear it, eat it, and breathe it!

The next piece, *Dysfunction* (Appendix, 2), is an introspective discussion on the discordant dynamics of family life. This statement is framed by objects that usually act as the cornerstone of a family’s foundation, the coming together and the sharing of food, experiences, and daily interactions that develop around a dining room table. Often the mayhem caused by emotions and the confusion of individual perceptions shatter this illusion of comfort. The centerpiece of *Dysfunction* is a white antique dining room table set for four. A place setting is set for each character and contains a porcelain napkin, a ceramic spoon with a hole in it, and a stoneware bowl filled with blood. While blood reflects upon the diners’ physical connection, the dysfunctional spoons never allow the characters to enjoy the warmth of their familial bond. Two diners appear to have retreated in hast from the meal, with their spoons in the bowls, scrunched napkins on the table, and one napkin dropped on the floor. It is as if the illusion of pleasantries and pretense has been corrupted. A lightly muffled sound recording of multiple individuals, engaged in a heated exchange, plays in the background to focus the viewers’ attention on the discord generated by the invisible characters that represent every family.

*Valcour* (Appendix, 3) is an installation from a series called *Silicification*. Silicification is defined as one of the pre-mineralization stages in the process of petrifaction. This natural process creates a facsimile of the original specimen by replacing its organic matter with silica resulting in a stone fossil. Utilizing silica, the core component of porcelain clay, my work replicates this process by creating a petrified state in which to begin a discourse on the impact of human activity on the environment. *Valcour* brings into focus our fragmented relationship with the temporal life of trees and the pace of our modern existence. The fallen tree has been covered with porcelain slip, freezing and encapsulating its transient essence and timeless beauty. Once
the porcelain has dried, the tree is transformed into brilliant white sculpture that takes on the appearance of a prehistoric fossil symbolizing the loss of an essential natural resource. Our rapidly changing natural environment underscores a desperate need to adjust our gaze and reaffirm the importance of woodlands, and the impact their loss will have on the global ecosystem. Although Valcour accentuates the end stages of life, it affirms the self-sufficiency of the earth to regenerate itself over the expanse of time and within the continuous cycle of decay and renewal.

*Ruminate* (Appendix, 4, 4a, and 4b) documents a performance work based on my personal meditation on the search for a creative path forward. Surrounded by the overwhelming presence of strangers, and in the midst of the associated sensory chaos, I attempted to establish a private connection with my creative consciousness. This performance reflects my daily struggle to find and carve out a place of calm and quiet in which to create. To symbolically seal myself within my own imagination, I enveloped my head in a layer of wet porcelain, as seen in the detail (Appendix, 4). Inside this vulnerable place of self-inflicted confinement, there is a brief and fleeting chance for me to find my creative center before the clay begins to solidify and peel away. As the clay dries, allowing my eyes and ears to again experience sensations, the world outside slowly begins to merge with this improvised reality (Appendix, 4b).

My sculpture work is focused on my artistic response to social, political, and environmental issues and their relationships and connections to surrounding spaces. The meaning and purpose of my sculptures and installations are encoded not only in the overall visual structure but also within materials in which they are wrought; thereby, generating and shaping an open and free dialogue about a given topic that we as a collective group often overlook. My sculptures are meant to spur conversations and open questions, not to provide answers or
complete thoughts.

Ceramics

My urban installation, 14th and Corcoran Street, NW (Appendix, 5), intertwines street art and the Jungian psychology of shadow aspect. Buried deep in unconsciousness is a dark shadow of our personality that links us to our primal animal-self. Try as we may, every once in a while, our dark shadow aspect bursts forth. This installation is comprised of a wheel thrown ceramic fire hydrant and a shadow of a dog urinating on the hydrant. The dog’s activity represents an unconscious thread of civil disobedience inherent within one’s personality. Within the action of this installation, I intended to show that the individual constantly works towards suppressing the darker aspects of their personality in order to fulfill the subservient nature of societal roles and cultural mores. Repressed or not, one’s shadow is an integral part of the psyche. How the individual learns to deal with it speaks directly to who they are and where they metaphorically pee.

*Found Clay* (Appendix, 6) is a street art project that grew out of the idea of gifting hand-formed clay work, and tracking its movement across the urban landscape. As a maker of objects, it seems at times that I form a one-sided relationship with my work. Once my work leaves the studio my connection to it is broken. Through this ongoing series, I hope to create a link to my work in its new contextual space. I offer up, or gift, my work to the street and all those that pass by; it can be viewed, ignored, destroyed, or taken. My hope is that it is taken and a relationship is created with the discoverer. In keeping with the ephemeral nature of street art, my work is left raw and unfired. If left untouched, these clay objects will melt back into the surrounding landscape after a few heavy rains.
I view my ceramic work through different lenses. The first is that of a craftsman constantly working towards mastery of material, perfecting form and function. The second is that of an artist attempting to marry craftsmanship with meaning and message. In many cases, my physical relationship with clay as a material is structured around functional object making. This object making in itself, becomes a catalyst for idea development and a driving force in my sculptures.

**Conclusion**

My enrollment in VCU’s MIS-IAR Program began as a desire to reinvigorate my passion for art and teaching. This program helped me accomplish that, but also expanded my creative vision beyond the walls of the classroom. My experience eliminated the dilemma of artist doubt, of whether or not my work was exhibition ready. As an artist, my path through the program was career changing. I acquired a level of discipline that allowed me to pursue mastery of my craft. The opportunity facilitated a connection and engagement with instructors who are also professional artists. Developing this rapport allowed me to establish regional relationships and contacts leading to exhibition and studio space not previously available to me. Through my involvement in the MIS-IAR Program, I have established a strong artistic voice and distinct style in the local artist community and have become an emerging figure in the Metropolitan Washington, DC art scene.

My artistic presence and practice in the classroom is stronger and more determined than ever before in my career. My approach to teaching has been empowered by the fact that I am a working artist, not simply a dispenser of art knowledge. MIS-IAR helped me lift myself out of a pedagogical lull. It provided me the opportunity to position myself within a strong network of
artist educators who are also striving to shape the future of the Fine Arts Program in Fairfax County Public Schools. Involvement in this program has truly been the most singularly affirming experiences in my career as an artist and an educator.
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Education:

2014 Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, Virginia
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2009-present Art Teacher, William Halley Elementary School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax Station, Virginia

2003-2009 Art Teacher, Little Run Elementary School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, Virginia

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Exhibitions:

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2013 Workhouse Clay National 2013, Workhouse Art Center, Lorton, Virginia, Juror: Virginia Scotchie


2012 Workhouse Clay National 2012, Workhouse Art Center, Lorton, Virginia, Juror: Peter Held

2012 New Works, Workhouse Art Center, Lorton, Virginia, Juror: Amy Lust

2011 Artist Teacher Exhibition, Northern Virginia Community College, Annandale, Virginia Juror: Joanne Bauer
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