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Vestiges

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

by

Jonathan Gemmell

Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education, Shepherd University, Shepherdstown, WV, 2004

Virginia Commonwealth University
Richmond, Virginia
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Artist Statement

The evidence of nature's power of reclamation is something that is both symbolically and aesthetically captivating to me. I am intrigued when I see the visual effects of deterioration on manufactured items and the natural environment. From that deterioration, I have adopted a unique aesthetic through which I explore both manmade and natural remnants of the industrial age.

My ceramic forms resemble antiquated machine parts and represent relics of the industrial machine. Photographically, I capture the simple beauty found in landscapes altered by man. My representation of the imagery is austere, the muted color stains and textured surfaces are symbolic representations of their deterioration.

I work with a variety of hand building techniques to create my sculptures. After firing, I treat the surfaces with oxides and patinas to give the final artworks a deteriorated exterior appearance. I use a similar aesthetic when altering my photographic images. Through digital processing, I build a varied surface of textures and stains to give each image an archaic appearance.

Vestiges

Early Influences

Growing up in the northern Blue Ridge Mountains of Maryland played an important role in the development of my art. Some of my early memories as a child are playing in the woods, fields, and around the ruins of old homesteads. When I grew older, I witnessed a transformation in that familiar landscape. As the suburban sprawl inched its way westward, from the major metropolitan cities on the East Coast, those fields and woods were soon paved over to build subdivisions and shopping centers. During this reconstruction, there was a total disregard for the land that was once there. While much of this land had already been reshaped by human activity, for hundreds of years, there was a disturbing element in this wave of transformation. There was no attempt to integrate these structures into the already existing landscape. Rather than working in harmony with the land and assimilating into the surrounding landscape, it was as though the land was just an obstacle to be bulldozed over.

There was a harmony in the use of the land, which is apparent in the countryside that was shaped by the early American Scottish and German settlers, that I found enchanting. As a child, I remember sitting down and hearing stories from my grandparents while looking at old photographs. These stories, which conveyed a respect for nature and a simple life, captivated my imagination. The old shoebox filled with photographs would be brought down out of the attic. As I held these fading images in my hands, the legendary characters in these family stories would be brought to life.

These early experiences have worked their way into the development of my art. These stories instilled in me a deep respect for nature and the importance of using it wisely. As I watched the landscape around me change with the suburban sprawl, I came to realize the transience of the landscape that had remained relatively unchanged for hundreds of years. I began photographing this landscape about fifteen years ago but it was not until recently that I started directly drawing on my early fascination with the old family photographs. I began to digitally replicate the aged look of those images in the modern landscape photographs that I take today.

In addition to the landscape, the old ruins and relics that were strewn around the area became the inspiration for my sculptural work. The vestiges of machinery that I came across as a child playing were mysterious to me. The slow deterioration of these items, as they were heavily used then left neglected in the elements, provided them with a surface that was evidence of their history. Like these old relics, my sculptural work is mechanical in its form but the natural deteriorated surface of the work gives it a modest earthy appearance. My photographs and sculptures are representing the last moments in the existence of these objects before they fade into history. This transformative period just before the items as well as the memories fade away is what I find most compelling. Through this work, I hope to bring the viewer to contemplate their own mortality. This existential state of mind simultaneously carries with it an acceptance and a quiet and tender sadness of impermanence that I romanticize in my work.

After teaching middle school art in Northern Virginia for five years, I entered the Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art (MIS-IAR) Program at Virginia Commonwealth University. As a teacher, I struggled with juggling my job responsibilities with

family responsibilities while still trying to find time to create my art. My time for art was depleted and I went a few years without creating any large scale work. I saw the MIS-IAR Program as an opportunity for me to learn some new techniques and explore some of the conceptual ideas that had been brewing in me.

Artistically, I enjoy the process much more than the final product. I find that I become preoccupied with certain ideas, images, and materials and I am driven to explore the possibilities of those ideas and materials. My process is one of discovery. I find that as I explore, work, and reflect on what I have already completed, I come to realizations about my work as well as myself. I often discover that I am unconsciously working out ideas that I was not originally intending on exploring.

I allow my artistic process to unfold naturally. I usually start with a loose idea of what I want. I take that concept to my sketchbook and begin working out the design on paper. Then, I move to the studio and work through my composition with the medium. I do not hold to my original sketch but remain open to altering this original design as I work through the final piece. This method of working gives me just the right amount of structure while leaving me enough freedom to allow the work to evolve, even in the final stages.

Philosophical Influences

Initially, upon entering the program, I was investigating a visual aesthetic which I found fascinating. I worked with copper and steel to create small oxidized ornamental pieces. I was exploring a similar aesthetic with my camera, photographing close-ups of the deteriorated surfaces of old barns, warehouses, rocks, and lichen. As I produced more work, I began drawing connections between the sculptures and photographs I was creating. I started thinking

about what attracted me to this imagery. As I explored these concepts further, it soon became clear to me that through this work I was subconsciously working through some ideas that I had been exploring in other areas of my life.

Over the past decade I have been studying Eastern thought, particularly Buddhism from Northern India and the Himalayas. One idea that I have incorporated into my work is the concept of impermanence. According to Leonard Koren, design consultant and author of numerous books on Japanese culture and design, impermanence is the idea that “[a]ll things, including the universe itself, are in a constant, never-ending state of becoming or dissolving” (Koren, 49). On the surface, this idea seemed quite obvious but I realized that impermanence played an important role in what I was doing artistically. My work is also about the visual evidence of objects at the borders of nothingness. “And nothingness itself...is alive with possibility. In meta- physics terms, [impermanence] suggests that the universe is in constant motion toward or away from potential” (Koren, 45).

As I continued to investigate these ideas, I came across the Japanese aesthetic of Wabi-sabi. Wabi-sabi is a traditional Japanese aesthetic that places importance on imperfections and impermanence. Although the traditional Wabi-sabi pottery was not of particular interest to me, I felt that conceptually the philosophy was directly related to what I was doing with my art. According to Crispin Sartwell, philosophy professor at Dickinson College, *wabi* translates as “poverty”, a state that is hard, humble, and bare. *Sabi* translates as “loneliness” or “solitude”. *Sabi* is a kind of meditative depression or quiet desolation that can be sweet. (Sartwell, 113-114) Similar to this Japanese aesthetic, my art is dealing with evidence of a people and time that was also hard and humble. This body of work that I have created is a meditation on the inhabitants of

this area and the loss of the old way of life. Visually, these objects are very simple, rough, and imperfect yet they carry with them evidence of their history.

Closely linked to the concept of impermanence is the philosophy of interconnection. Based on the Buddhist concept of impermanence and interconnectedness, all things are interrelated. All material things are a coming together of atomic particles under a long series of causal circumstances. These particles are in a constant state of transformation; eventually they dissipate and are reformed into new matter. My work is partially dealing with this state of change. I want to present the object or landscape in its state of transition. The forms that I sculpt and the landscape that I photograph bare the evidence of the circumstances that gave rise to their current appearance, thus presenting a window into their history. I am interested in this transitional state particularly towards the end of the existence of the object. This is when the evidence of its history is most noticeable and we can see the object starting to dissolve or transform.

Artistic Influences

While the Wabi-sabi viewpoint helped me to develop a visual language, I turned my attention to two American artists whose work seemed to have a similar aesthetic. Sally Mann (b. 1951), and her exploration of decay and the effects of death in the landscape, had an impact on what I was doing photographically. Whereas, Richard Serra's (b. 1939) impressive steel works had an impact on my sculptural pieces. His monumental, simple, steel forms had at once an organic and industrial look that I found remarkable. It was this dichotomy of organic and industrial that I connected to in my work.

I was particularly drawn to Sally Mann's photography depicting the Southern landscape. These images sparked my interest visually, yet as I read more about her work, I found that she was capturing the landscape as evidence of historical tragedy. As though the landscape itself holds confirmation or symbolism of what has happened on its surface. "The hands of time are stilled by the resonance of history at the sites [Mann] photographed" (Mann, 89). True to the nature of Mann's historical connection, she uses a photographic process that enables her to create prints that are at once modern and ancient. She revisited Civil War battlegrounds and using a wet collodion process, invented in the 1850's, she recaptured these historic sites 130 years later. This process uses large glass plate negatives in an 8"x10" view camera. The nature of the process produces motion blur, chemical stains, and blotches that create an imperfect image. It was these wet collodion images that allowed me to have a fresh perspective on the Maryland-Virginia landscape where I was raised. There was a beauty in the imperfect images they created that reminded me of the raw Wabi-sabi art of Japan.

Sally Mann's work led me to take a closer look at the early photography of the nineteenth-century. The photography of this era reflects the Romantic thought that spread to America from Europe during this time period. According to Jennifer A. Hurley, author of *American Romanticism* (2000), the settlers initially came to this new world with the old model "[t]o destroy the savage wilderness and make it bloom with European civilization" (Hurley, 80). Later writers and artists of the time "began seeing nature not as an obstacle but as the source of the spirit of American character" (Hurley, 81). You can see this Romantic outlook in the expansive landscape painting and photography of the mid to late nineteenth-century. The American wilderness is what "fostered the beloved American traits of independence, ingenuity, pragmatism, and resourcefulness" (Hurley, 83). This pristine view that nature is inherently good

and can be the source of man's strength has always struck a chord with me. The wilderness, in all its mysteries, becomes the symbol of the spirit of man and the world. The character of the old processes used by these photographers seemed to echo the imperfect and irregular nature of the wilderness.

On the other side of the spectrum is the work of Richard Serra. Serra's work is very industrial and flawlessly constructed. While Sally Mann's work represents nature, Serra's sculptures remind me of the height of industrialization. His monumental steel forms are only possible due to the innovations of the late industrial age. Yet, he has masterfully found a way to make his forms at once very rigid and synthetic, while giving them a natural flowing quality that is reminiscent of something formed naturally. It was this paradox that I find most interesting in Serra's work and it is this quality that is also evident in some of my sculptural work.

Photography

In my photography, I have taken inspiration from Sally Mann's work and the nineteenth-century wet collodion images. Most of the images that I capture are taken from the rural farm and woodland areas around my home. I am attracted to the simple beauty found in these rural landscapes that has remained relatively unchanged for 200 years. I am especially drawn to the light, as it just begins to break over the Blue Ridge to the east, illuminating the early morning fog along the Shenandoah River, as in *The Grey Ghost* (Appendix, 1). These conditions produce a haunting beauty as the fog shrouds the landscape and reveals only muted tints of its normal lush colors. This image received its title after the Confederate cavalry battalion commander John S. Mosby, *the Grey Ghost*, who raided General Sheridan's supply train near this site. This area has remained unchanged from that time although some of the surrounding area has been developed

for housing. We have already lost similar sites to development, and it is not long before the rest of them will be destroyed to produce prefab housing and green grass lawns. It is a tragic irony that this land, which was once taken from the Native Americans, is now being taken away from the descendents of the original settler's who have been forced out of business by large factory farms.

In another photograph, *East of the Opequon* (Appendix, 2), I used a digital process to overlay textured surfaces and old stained prints which add to the austerity of the subject matter. The muted color stains and textured surfaces are symbolic representations of the landscapes deterioration. I use the deteriorated appearance of the photograph as an analogy for the loss of these sites. With this image, I overlaid a page from an old book to give the photograph a yellowed vignette. After this vignette was applied, I overlaid an image with water marks to give the look of photographic chemical stains. As a final texture, I placed an image of an old steel plate from a rail car to achieve the rough, scratched appearance to the photograph. The color of this image was slightly altered through the overlays but I made further adjustments by increasing the vibrancy and decreasing the saturation of the original colors.

In *Virginia Arcady* (Appendix, 3) I photographed a sprawling landscape of slow rolling pastures surrounded by mountains in the distance. *Virginia Arcady* is what an early English settler called this area when he crossed Williams Gap and looked out over the vast prairie that spread over these rolling hills, all the way to North Mountain (Gold, 12). It truly was a peaceful place because it was for the most part uninhabited by Native Americans. Although it was used as a hunting ground for the large game the roamed this prairie. The area pictured in this photograph is the area below and to the west of Williams Gap. The image pictured in this photo is probably not much different then it was in the eighteenth-century when the writer dubbed it *Virginia*

Arcady, although out of the view of the camera much has changed. This image is small and intimate, only 4"x18". I created a warm texture over the surface of this photograph by overlaying an image of a cream-colored stucco wall. Then, I overlaid this image with a Polaroid transfer to create the ragged edges on this print.

These images depict an area of the northern Shenandoah Valley and Blue Ridge Mountains that is some of the most scenic country in the eastern states. This area is still far enough away from the major metropolitan centers that it has not become overdeveloped. Yet the cost of living in and around the cities has driven people farther west into this area. With this photography, I am attempting to capture these beautiful landscapes before they are lost. The old and deteriorated appearance of the images represents the unfortunate nature of the impermanence of this landscape as we know it. The appearance of the images also draws a connection to the past and the history of this land.

Sculpture

In my ceramic sculpture I utilize hand building techniques, particularly slab building, to construct my forms. I enjoy working with clay in this manner as it forces me to spread out the work on the project over several days and weeks. This allows me time to resolve any issues and make changes to the form and surface treatment. I allow the slabs to dry to a leather hard state before assembling them into their final form. Working with the clay in this state allows me to use the plasticity of the clay while having it hold and support the weight of the form.

I work the clay into mechanical looking forms, as in *Piping* (Appendix, 4). These forms are then treated with a pigment containing metal powders. The metallic powders make possible an oxidation process. The oxidation gives the sculpture a complex, aged surface characteristic of

worn and weathered metal. After painting the surface with the pigment, I use chemicals to accelerate the natural oxidation process. I continue adding layers of the chemical until the desired surface is achieved. In *Piping*, the surface was painted with a copper powder pigment which allowed me to achieve the light jade highlights with dark green undertones that is typical of oxidized copper. This piece, as with my other sculptural work, is inspired by relics of machine parts found on old farm sites in the area. I found these objects to be mysterious. Similar to the landscapes, they display evidence of years of use and deterioration in the elements. Yet the remnants that remain make it a challenge to identify their original purpose. It is this mystery that I draw upon for these pieces.

I also try to recreate the ancient look of these relics in my sculpture. With some pieces, I will remove parts of this original surface and then reapply more layers of the pigment and oxidation chemical. I find that this creates a more distressed looking surface. In *Link* (Appendix, 5 and 5a) and *Untitled* (Appendix, 6 and 6a), the surfaces take on a rougher texture as areas of pigment are removed and recoated several times. In *Link*, unlike in my other work, I am recreating an object almost as it was found. I took a three-section link of a drive chain, and using clay, enlarged and repositioned it to create the form as it appears. This piece, 7"x17"x5", was enlarged to allow the viewer to appreciate the beauty of this simple, common chain. The chain link also holds significance as a symbol. The chain in its full form is a strong, unbroken continuation of links but as presented it is broken. The broken link represents the disconnection with the land and the old way of life. We are now several generations removed from this way of life that has sustained humans for thousands of years, and we have lost that connection.

Unlike *Link*, *Untitled* was not a replication of an actual object but a creation of my imagination. I wanted to create a form that had the manufactured look but with a more organic

appearance. I chose the slight curves of a semi-circle to represent a natural form. In this piece, I removed the original rust color and applied a second coat of a copper-colored pigment to create accented areas on the surface. The irregular surface that the oxidation creates indicates the age and deterioration of the object. I use the deterioration of these objects to represent the transition out of an era. While these relics were once in pristine condition and part of a larger working machine, they now lay in disrepair and ruin. With my work, I want to pull these objects out of the earth and place them on a pedestal to be viewed as relics of a lost age.

With *Continuum Component* (Appendix, 7 and 7a), I treated the surface with various layers of underglazes to create a multicolored surface. I layered the underglaze on the surface then removed areas of glaze with a sponge before coating with another colored glaze. The surface treatment on this piece was inspired by the worn paint on the rail cars that run through town. The various colored layers of underglaze are meant to replicate the layers of sun bleached and worn powder coat on the steel train cars. The two pieces of this sculpture are designed to interlock with each other. This piece with its interlocking sections is a symbolic representation of the continuation of ideals through the generations. The number on the side of the piece is the birthday of my daughter. The way the pieces fit around each other, yet retain their own individual form, represents the way successive generations continue the same values and patterns that have been passed down to them. I chose a green color as a symbol for the respect for the land, while the yellow represent the optimism for the future.

Like my photography, these sculptures are representing the last remnants of a disappearing time. The disintegrating surface of these forms exemplifies the demise of this era. The forms are industrial in nature yet the surface textures and colors give them an earthy, natural appearance. With these sculptures, I am summoning a lost age that began to transform with the

introduction of industrial equipment, the relics of which I depict in my work.

Conclusion

In this body of work, I am working through the concept of impermanence and the transition out of the past. The visual evidence of this transition manifests itself in the deteriorating objects and landscapes of the area. While there is a continuity of culture and principles, there is also a transformation that is visible in the land and these objects. Like the Wabi-sabi art of Japan, this work is depicting a transformation during a time and by a people that were hard and humble. Generations of immigrants toiled over this land trying to eke out a living. The evidence of this formative time in early American history is still apparent on the land. It is the mysterious evidence of this old way of life that fascinates me and this work is a memorial to that time. I artificially deteriorate and texture the surface of the work to signify this transition. These objects and landscapes are just traces of what once was. They currently exist on the borders of extinction. The landscapes are slowly being transformed from rural country farms and woodlands into strip malls and suburban, commuter housing. The old homesteads and relics of the old farming machinery are being torn down or slowly dissolving back into the landscape as the elements take their toll over the decades. While my photography documents the evidence of this in the landscape, my sculpture focuses on the mechanical parts of the industrial machine that brought about this transition into the industrial age. While this way of life has all but disappeared and the evidence of its existence is slowly fading, there is still a continuum through of this culture through history and family.

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Appendix

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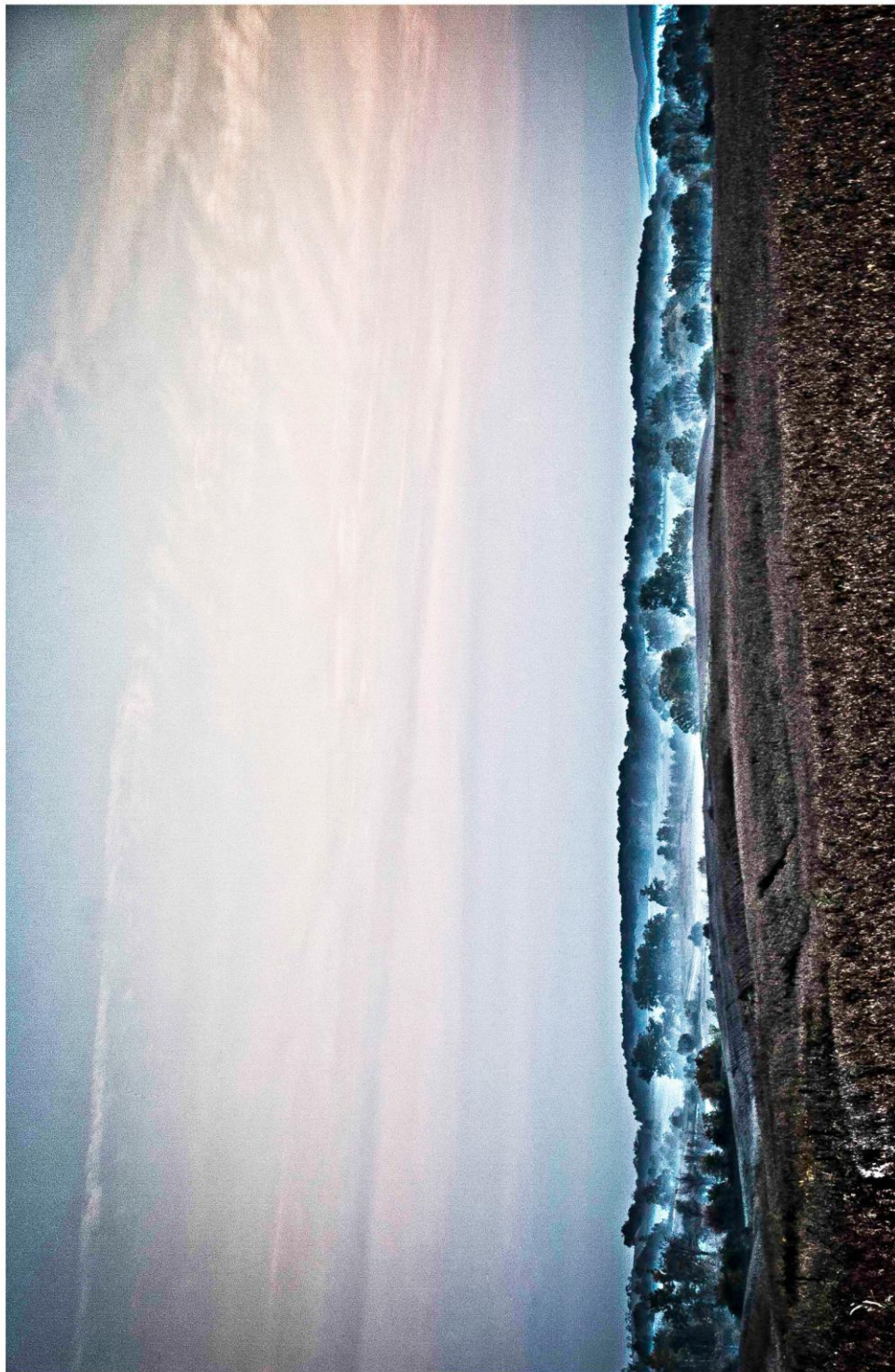


Figure 1. *The Grey Ghost*, digital photography, 11"x14", 2010.



Figure 2. *East of the Opequon*, digital photography, 11"x14", 2010.



Figure 3. *Virginia Arcady*, digital photography, 4"x18", 2010.



Figure 4. *Piping*, ceramic, 14"x9"x9", 2010.

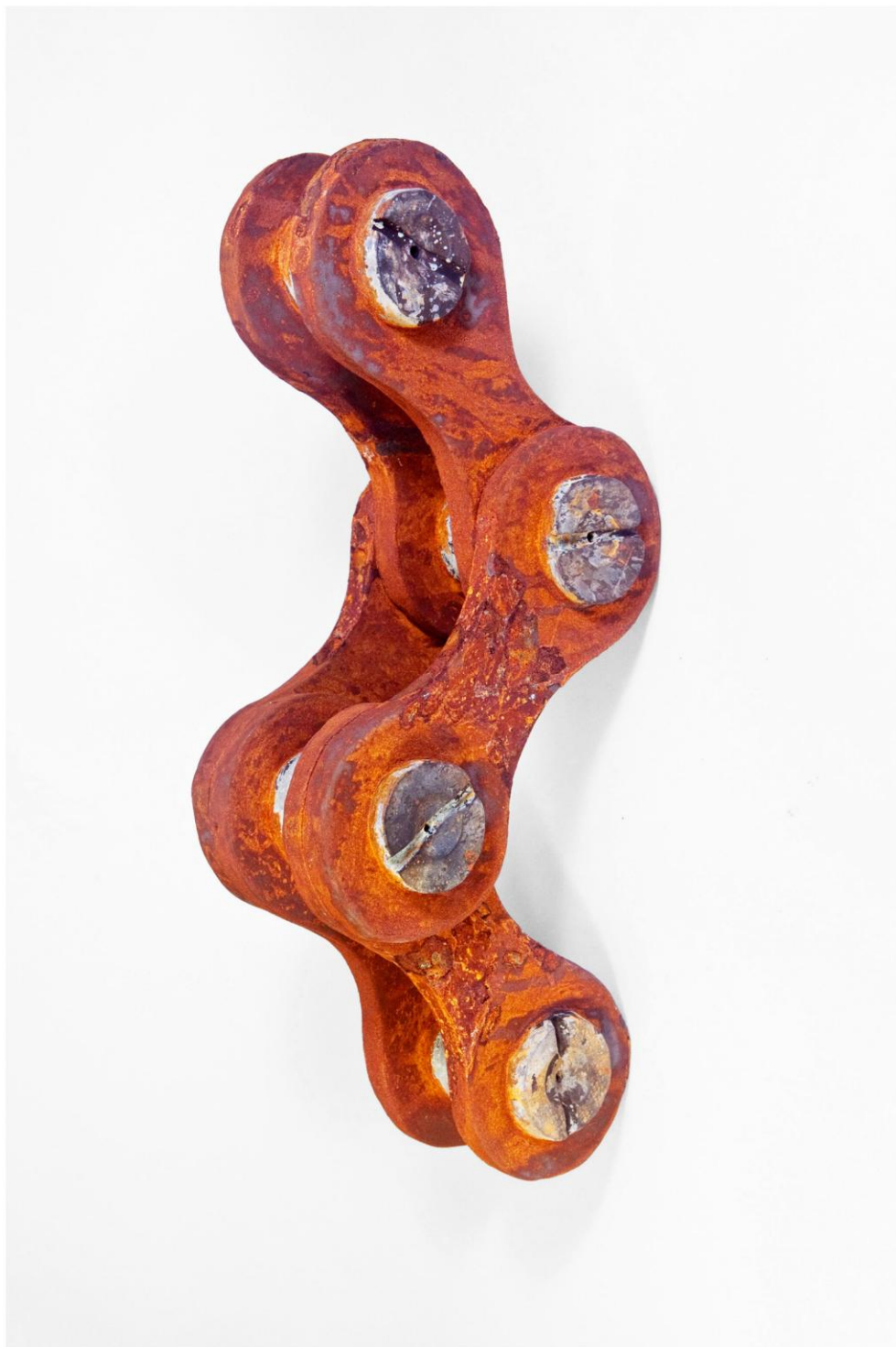


Figure 5. *Link*, ceramic, 7"x17"x5", 2009.



Figure 5a. *Link*, ceramic, 7"x17"x5", 2009.



Figure 6. *Untitled*, 9"x12"x9", 2010.



Figure 6a. *Untitled*, 9"x12"x9", 2010.



Figure 7. *Continuum Component*, 7"x4.5"x9", 2010.



Figure 7a. *Continuum Component*, 7"x4.5"x9", 2010.

Jonathan Gemmell

Education

- 2012 **Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art**
Concentration: Sculpture and Photography
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA
- 2004 **Bachelor of Arts in Secondary Education**
Concentration: Art Education K-12
Shepherd University, Shepherdstown, WV
Honors: McMurrin Scholar (highest honor at Shepherd University)
 Phi Kappa Phi National Honors Society
 Department of Art Scholarship
- 2000 **Associate of Arts in Fine Art**
Frederick Community College, Frederick, MD
Honors: High Honors

Certification

- 2004-Present Commonwealth of Virginia
Collegiate Professional License
Art Education Prek-12

Teaching Experience

- 2004-present **Art Teacher**, Eagle Ridge Middle School, Ashburn, VA

Related Work Experience

- 2003-present **Visiting Artist**, Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum, Winchester, VA
- 2003-2004 **Art Teacher**, Shenandoah Valley Discovery Museum, Winchester, VA
- 2003 **Art Teacher**, Boarman Art Center, Martinsburg, WV

Art Exhibits

- 2012 ***Vestiges***, Master of Interdisciplinary Studies in Interdisciplinary Art Thesis Exhibition, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA at Delaplaine Visual Arts Center, Frederick, MD
- 2007 ***Loudoun County Art Faculty Exhibition***, Enterprise Hall Gallery, George Washington University Virginia Campus, Ashburn, VA
- 2003 ***Antietam Review Photographic Exhibition***, Washington County Center for the Arts, Hagerstown, MD
- 2003 ***Cuba***, Entler Gallery, Shepherdstown, WV
- 2003 ***Unfiltered***, Blue Elephant Gallery, Frederick, MD
- 2002-2003 ***Honors Exhibition***, Frank Center for the Arts, Shepherdstown, WV

2002 ***Group Show***, Delaplaine Visual Arts Center, Frederick, MD
1996-2000 ***Student Exhibitions***, Mary Condon Hodgson Art Gallery, Frederick, MD

Publications

2003 ***Angel and Nature*** photograph featured in *Antietam Review* XXIII, (summer 2003): 62.
2003 ***To Survive*** photograph featured in *Antietam Review* XXIII, (summer 2003): 46.
2000 ***The Prophecy*** cover art for *Tuscarora Review* 20, (spring 2000).