

Reconstructions

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Introduction

As human beings, we exist in a perpetual state of change. We display a strong desire to change and alter the things that surround us. Whether it is for functional purposes or aesthetic pleasure, we continuously want to adjust our surroundings and the things in it. This constant need to alter affects us in a profound way. It exists both on the grand scale and insignificantly. It is perhaps also paradoxically present. One could imagine an environment to exist in a constant state of change while attempting to remain visibly unchanged. An example of this is a landscaped yard. The intent is to keep this space the same; but in order to do so, an unending state of alterations is necessary (weeding, trimming, etcetera). This is an observation that that I found particularly stimulating. I wanted to create a body of work that reflected my interest in this universal drive to alter.

Mary Engelbreit once said, “If you don’t like something, change it...” People have many reasons for modifying their environment, but two things seem to be constant factors: visual interest and function. My work attempts to display the way in which participation in this act of revision, minimal or drastic, can take a simple geometric sculpture, alter it, and improve its visual interest; therefore improving upon its function as

a piece of art. If art, in general, functions as a means to experience visual interest, then it is arguable that a more interesting object functions better than a less interesting object.

It is important to note that the experience and participation in modification is personal and subjective. As the saying goes, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” An alteration by one is not necessarily an improvement for all. Therefore, my work does not claim to universally improve the visual impact of geometric forms, but merely represents possible outcomes.

Initially, my interests were purely formal. I was not interested in a body of work that questioned or offered conceptual information to the viewer. I simply wanted to use this idea as a catalyst for a series of work that, in some way, abstractly represented the concept. A theme that I wanted to remain consistent throughout was the idea that one could imagine that the pieces in a single sculpture could be mentally reconstructed to form the original geometric shape; like a puzzle. As the project progressed, the concept became increasingly important, however, I do not expect the viewer to be able to glean content from this series.

Exhibition Description

A smooth white sphere, approximately six inches in diameter, is cut by two parallel planes. Each piece is shifted along the plane and reattached, elongating the form. The disc shape remains in the middle, and the two semi-sphere on either end. Visually, one could imagine sliding the pieces back together in the same fashion as closing a hand

of cards. The segmented sphere rests atop a metal rod which extends approximately six inches from the brown patina that covers the metal base. In visual weight, the sculpture and base are matched. The title of the piece is *Geometric Alteration: Spherical Form #3*.

Similarly, another spherical form with an additional cut that runs perpendicular to the first two, *Geometric Alteration: Spherical Form #4*, rests a little lower to its brown patina base. The color of the base is predominantly dark brown with areas of natural rust that intermittently shows through.

A tan sphere, with suggestions of a neutralized orange color throughout, approximately seven inches in diameter, is cut in half. From one half, an additional wedge is cut resembling approximately the proportion of an orange slice. The three pieces are arranged, elongating the form, with the smallest piece in the middle and the larger pieces on the top and bottom. The hemisphere displays a rough texture with varying tool marks while the other two pieces maintain a softer texture that is more uniform. This piece is called *Geometric Alteration: Spherical Form #1*.

Another orange sphere, the same size as *Geometric Abstraction: Sphere #3*, is cut into five varying pieces. They are all arranged, stacked on top of each other, to form an elongated piece that stretches just beyond two feet. The color is also the same tan/neutralized orange as before, with the same subtle textures. This piece is titled *Geometric Alteration: Spherical Form #2*.

Geometric Alteration: Rectilinear Form #1, #2, #3, and #4 are all made from the same three shapes, only arranged in different configurations. *Geometric Alteration: Rectilinear Form #2* has three pieces arranged with the largest on top supported by two smaller rectilinear forms on the bottom. Number three in the series is just the opposite; the large movement is on the bottom with two rectilinear forms resting on top. The clay body is white coated with boiled linseed oil that gives it an off-white coloration.

Geometric Alteration: Rectilinear Form #1 is also made from the same three shapes as number two three, only they are arranged so that each is stacked on top of each other. The whole sculpture is then tilted on the corner of the largest movement and secured to a metal base to remain balanced on its corner.

Geometric Alteration: Rectilinear Form #4 is made from a total of five rectilinear shapes. They are all stacked on top of each other to make a taller sculpture reaching approximately twenty-two inches. The top and bottom rectangles have been textured with a stripe pattern that runs horizontally along the form. The rest of the piece remains smooth. There is a hole in the middle shape that was created from the pour spout of the plaster mold. It was intentionally left as both a compositional element and to indicate the process in which the sculpture was made.

The next piece, *Geometric Alteration: Rectilinear Form #5*, was hand-built from an elongated rectilinear form approximately fourteen inches long and five inches square. It was cut in various places to make six unique shapes. The shapes were then stacked on

top of each other to reach a length of approximately twenty four inches. The whole thing is secured on a metal base. The texture, unlike the other sculptures, is very rough throughout.

Description and Reflection of the Process

I began each sculpture with a complete geometric form from which to make alterations. I was intent on starting with complete forms because it was important for the final sculpture be the actual record of some modification. It did not make sense for me to merely mimic the appearance of an altered sculpture, even if that meant it would be easier to construct. That seemed dishonest. The final sculpture needed to be real, not faked to look like an alteration had taken place. The act of manipulating the form was equally important as the final product. I want my work to reflect a genuine curiosity of the fundamental human characteristic that I have observed of the human desire to change things.

Throughout the year, my process changed as I encountered obstacles and challenges and experimented with different styles and techniques. I began by sculpting solid clay shapes that would eventually be hollowed out. The next process was a mold-making and slip-casting endeavor. I also attempted a wheel thrown piece to achieve a cylindrical shape. I finished the body of work by employing a combination of press-molding and hand-building.

Selecting the clay bodies and surface treatments was relatively trivial when

bearing in mind the final product. However, certain considerations were made regarding the color and properties of the clay since I decided this series would pay special attention to form. I selected clay bodies that would not distract from this by keeping them simple. I discarded any planned surface treatment because I did not want surfaces to distract from the final form. I selected various neutral colored clay bodies that I felt would achieve a visually pleasing quality when left bare. These included off-white, neutral-orange and dark-brown stoneware bodies that were fired to maturity in an electric kiln.¹ I also used a pure white slip that was used in the cast sculptures.

I started the year by sculpting geometric forms by hand from solid clay. Using a wire clay cutter and guide that I had engineered, I was able to cut straight lines through the mass of the solid wet clay, shifting the resulting pieces and arranging them into new sculptures. This process involved hollowing out the numerous pieces without taking any clay from the surface. The goal was to retain the appearance that the form was solid while reducing the mass inside.

The second process I used was mold-making and slip-casting. Slip-casting is a commercial technique in which liquefied clay (slip) is poured into a plaster mold. This process can produce multiple copies of the original object, and was therefore useful in making sculptures that utilized the same form, but with different outcomes. The downside of slip casting is that the casts are hollow with very thin walls. I foresaw some difficulties manipulating these thin walls of clay so I tried to think of ways I could alter the process of pouring the molds, making the alteration before the slip is poured.

After some research, I found some instructional videos on YouTube of people who had experimented with alternate ways of slip-casting. They employed a technique that allowed variations of a mug to be made by rearranging the pieces of the plaster mold. I spent some time in the beginning of Winter Term experimenting with this idea and adapted a new way to slip cast based on a method of slip casting mugs as seen in a video by John Britt Pottery. My goal was to engineer a method of arranging the pieces of the plaster mold, rather than casting individual pieces of a sculpture and attaching them after the fact. The idea would have been promising for smaller works, but it did not have a feasible application in the scale that I was working in (the amount of slip required to pour a mold of this size would have been in the hundreds of pounds). However, a feasible alternative did arise from this experimentation. Instead of trying to cast the entire sculpture in one piece, I proposed to cast the sculptures in three pieces. This allowed me to make multiple sculptures from the same basic shapes. However, before this process could start, I first had to make the plaster molds.

The molds I created were made from a particular type of pottery plaster that is very firm, but can absorb large amounts of water. I started by sculpting a rectilinear form, approximately sixteen inches high, from reclaimed clay.² I used plywood screwed together at 90° angles to make straight lines and corners. I dissected the form into three segments, following a style I had begun to develop of cutting straight lines through the object and shifting its mass along the flat plane; either vertically or horizontally. Then I covered each of the pieces with several layers of mold soap, a releasing agent, so that

when the plaster is poured over it, the clay can easily be removed and discarded. A coddle³ is then made from plywood to contain the wet plaster. Once the plaster is mixed and poured, it must be left to dry (drying times vary from a few hours to overnight). A pour spout is then cut into the plaster to allow slip to be poured in and out. The mold is then put together, secured with rubber bands and filled with slip. The water from the slip is drawn into the plaster, leaving behind a film of clay. As more water is drawn into the walls of the mold, the clay thickens until it is solid. It will continue to increase in thickness until the excess is poured out. The mold is then left to dry until the clay is at a soft/leather-hard state.⁴

I made enough casts to build four different sculptures from the same rectilinear form. In addition, I was able to create a few experimental pieces, but they did not align with my original concept. I discarded the work from my core series.

The last technique I used was a combination of press-molding and hand building. I cast a hemisphere in plaster and pressed solid clay into it. Joining two or more parts of a press mold together makes a complete form. For example, a sphere is made by press-molding two hollow hemispheres and then joining them together. I continued to use the press molds through Spring Term thereby hand-building the final pieces.

Throughout the year, I was also working on a series of metal bases for some of the sculptures. With the help of my father, I cut, welded and sanded the bases to provide a foundation to support the spherical, and some of the rectilinear, sculptures. Even though

the purpose of the bases is functional, I wanted them to compliment the sculpture while remaining as visually minimal as possible. After the bases and sculptures were complete, I used an industrial adhesive (PC-7) to affix the two together. The impetus for placing certain sculptures on a base came from my interest in viewing the complete form. I want the viewer to be able to see the form from all sides. If the sculpture is resting on a pedestal, the view is partially obstructed. By elevating the sculpture on a metal rod, the viewer is able to get a better sense of the entire form. I wanted to call special attention to the form by giving it a space to exist. “A work of art is situated in space. But it will not do to say it simply exists in space: a work of art treats space according to its own needs, defines space and even creates such space as may be necessary to it” (Focillon 65).

Technical Issues

One of the things I discovered is that working in clay is sometimes an engineering trial. When challenged, engineering my own tools helped me to solve problems and improve technique. Last year I built an armature to hold a wire clay cutter, a tool that usually requires both hands, so that I could free my other hand to stabilize what I was cutting through. I was able to use this tool continually throughout this series, with the use of a guide, to cut straight lines through my geometric forms.

Some issues that I faced came from the difficulty in getting smooth, flat planes with perfect edges using a soft and malleable material. Some were a matter of technique, and some were a matter of skill. As I worked, it became clear that I needed to change my

approach to achieve the results that I wanted.

The first challenge I faced dealt with the solid clay forms. The reason for working with solid forms may seem bothersome or inconvenient, but it was important for the process. The kinds of alterations I was making to the form involved cutting straight lines through the forms at various places and shifting their mass on the flush planes it created. Imagine a *hollow* sphere is cut in half resulting in two hollow hemispheres; shells. To reattach the shells in any other place, other than its original orientation, there would be (almost) nothing to attach it to; the space inside is empty. Hypothetically, if the two halves were secured, there is still the problem of the two gaping holes that must be filled to create a complete form. Now imagine a *solid* sphere is cut in half. Since the sphere has mass throughout, there is plenty of surface area to reattach the hemispheres. Also, there are no holes to fill. As long as the initial cut through the sphere is flat and smooth, there is little to fix. This is the reason why building solid was a necessity. It remained true to the original form in its entirety – nothing added, nothing subtracted. It is an honest exercise in taking a geometric form and altering it.

Though I was working with solid clay, I did not intend to leave them solid as this would cause a firing⁵ issue. Ordinarily, a ceramist would build hollow because thick clay has the potential for hidden air pockets to cause the work to explode in the kiln. To avoid this, I planned on hollowing out the forms after I had altered them, but the initial weight of the solid clay created a problem. They were too heavy and difficult to handle; something I did not expect. Since my first pieces were to be twelve to fourteen inches

long, I needed to start with a basic form about the same size in order to achieve my final height requirement. What I did not realize from the beginning was that a simple sphere, just nine inches in diameter, was about twenty pounds of wet, malleable clay. When I began to work with it, it was heavy and awkward to handle which resulted in misshapen forms. While I was building, the weight of the wet clay caused my fingers to make indentations into the clay. It was necessary to handle the forms due to the fact that I was building intuitively and needed to look at the form from all sides continuously. This ate up a huge amount of time. Each time a plane was deformed, I would spend a great deal of time fixing it, which would often cause even more distortions.

To combat the issue of deforming shapes, I allowed the clay to firm up by letting it dry. As wet clay dries, its ability to retain its shape improves, however the trade-off is the clay also stiffens, making it difficult to run a wire cutter through. If the previous pieces were nine inches thick and difficult to cut at this dryer stage, I knew the larger pieces would be even more challenging. To achieve the larger pieces, I chose to change my method from hand-building to slip casting. This, I felt, would alleviate the issues I experienced with the first solid-built forms.

I spent most of Winter Term experimenting and working with slip-casting, only to realize that it had not really offered me anything more than hand-building. In the last weeks of the term, I stopped pouring casts and attempted a few more pieces built with solid clay. One of the reasons I stopped hand-building was because of a confidence issue. I felt that my skills were not good enough. Moving forward with hand-building was, in

part, due to a newfound confidence I had in myself. It was also, in part, due to a newfound tool that I had not previously employed.

The tool that was a tremendous help was the press-mold. Previously, I had been forming geometric shapes by hand, spending large amounts of time making them visibly perfect. With the use of a press-mold, I was able to easily and quickly achieve geometric shapes by pressing clay into the pre-made mold, knowing that when I removed the clay, it would retain its geometric qualities. The clay would also be easier to handle because plaster is a material that absorbs water thereby drying the surface of the clay where contact is made.

Using the press-mold and slab-built structures, I was able to achieve larger structures. The first piece I fired in Spring Term, also the largest I have attempted thus far, cracked in three places at the base of the sculpture. Though the building method is improved, it caused an issue in the kiln. The new problem was the weight of the clay was too much to be supported by the thin walls with which I had now become accustomed to building. The final solution to my problems was to fire the pieces of the sculptures separately and attach them afterwards. Another solution would have been to use internal support structures, but I chose to fire the pieces separately as the scale of these sculptures were becoming difficult to fire in our smaller electric kilns.

Visual and Intellectual Research Findings

I was inspired by a lot of different artists, many in the field of ceramics. However,

the idea for this proposal was sparked from a curiosity in my own mind, and I later found artists that had also experimented in something similar. As my initial idea was developing, I searched for artists who had done similar things or things I found interesting. I looked through a few ceramic reference books in the library, but ultimately a Google Image search was what provided me with material to draw further inspiration from. I found the following artists: Teo Huey Ling, Michael Geertsen, Mika Negishi Laidlaw, and Zachary Eastwood-Bloom. Following the image search, I researched each artist and read their artist and process statements if one could be found.

Ling's work (see Fig. 1) provided a multitude of inspiration to draw from. Not only did I find her work fascinating, she has an intriguing way of mixing materials and processes that I have since drawn from. She speaks about her work titled *Stacked*:

This work was a reference to the house that I lived in, 'cube stacked high into the air' – the HDB flats.

The cubes were slip cast and altered, stain colored, glazed and Raku fired; their materials were stoneware bone china, a bit of wood and felt.

Just like Rojak, our local favorite food, I preferred to use a variety of techniques and materials in my art because of a consciousness to our multifaceted nation.

I enjoyed experimenting with the different techniques, stacking and balancing the precarious cubes, finally presenting the work as a search for identity through all these processes.

I was interested in how she related cubes and abstract geometric elements to architecture, using varying methods and alterations to convey the diversity of what surrounds us.

Another artist I drew from was Zachary Eastwood-Bloom (see Fig. 2). His work, similar to Ling's, features varying alterations of a basic geometric shape, resembling architectural structures. Not only is the craftsmanship admirable, but also there is something interesting about the process of trying to figure out what his work is trying to convey. For me, it was a process of recognizing similarity and trying to figure out a connection. The work is non-objective, so the message is ambiguous. I enjoy these kinds of work that have the ability to catch your attention for more than a moment to admire the craftsmanship. This was something I attempted to achieve with my work; a moment to admire a technical feat, and then something extra to try and make connections. The meaning behind it may never be known, but that is what I feel makes a work great as opposed to good. A quote from his artist statement provided me with insight into what I want my work to convey:

Everything that has a high aesthetic and/or functional value and/or cultural value: products, objects, works, ideas and experiences that present a high degree of quality, innovation, research and sustainability. Something capable of improving people's experience, at the practical and/or emotional level, and if possible the world in which we live, is necessary. Being necessary is not a question of price: it can be cheap or expensive (Eastwood-Bloom).

Above all else, I just want to make something that has value. I want my work to be validated by being seen and enjoyed. It does not necessarily matter to me that someone

“gets” my work, it just matters that they enjoy looking at it. If it is not an enjoyable experience, then I have failed as an artist.

Conclusion

My biggest realization from this project is that clay, though extremely versatile, is not always the appropriate material for every idea that comes along. For my original ideas, I needed a material that was workable, like clay, but rigid and forgiving, unlike clay. I was perhaps in a constant state of denial after the realization that a better suited material for this project would have been wood or metal. I kept working, but I was trying to force a perception that if I worked long enough, or found the right technique, I could make clay forms have perfect edges and flat planes despite the multitude of handling and cutting that took place on its soft and fragile body. The task was not impossible, but it was extremely time-consuming and challenging, especially considering the scale. However, I felt that I must continue with the task at hand, despite my failures, because it was what I set out to do and I was determined to accomplish my goals.

The hardest part of this series was to finally accept and work with the natural properties of the clay. It is evident that the beginning works are not as strong as some of the later works. This is because I was working against the clays inherent properties. Clay is a material that is very fluid, textured and fragile. To try and force this material into perfect geometric shapes with crisp delineated lines was a mistake. This is evident by the areas in my works that should be perfect straight lines, but are lacking in quality. This is not because I did not spend time trying to make them perfect, it was my best effort to get them the way they are now. The fault lay in my expectation of clay, not the clay itself.

Despite the downfalls, it would not be true to say that I failed at my ambitions. From this body of work came many learning opportunities, such as developed skills in mold-making, press-molding, problem-solving and experience in an extended body of work. I also created the opportunity to work with metal, a material I have yet to try. Most importantly, I have developed a better sense of how I work independently and formulated many ideas for future series.

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Notes

¹ While the mid-range stoneware bodies mature at 2100 degrees Fahrenheit, the slip-casting clay is a low-temperature formula that matures at approximately 1940 degrees Fahrenheit.

² Reclaim clay is sometimes used when making plaster molds because it is exposed to wet plaster. The reclaimed clay then becomes contaminated and therefore cannot be fired due to the fact that clay shrinks when fired, and plaster does not. This can cause cracks and blowouts in a clay sculpture that contains plaster.

³ A coddle is a plywood box that is made to contain the wet plaster that is poured over an object to make a mold. Coddles are generally made to be 2” larger in each dimension than the sculpture being cast.

⁴ Leather-hard is a term used in ceramics to describe clay at a particular state of dryness. Soft/leather-hard means the clay is firm, but still malleable.

⁵ “Firing” is a term used to describe the process of loading ceramics into a kiln and heating them to a determined temperature. Even though an electric kiln does not use actual fire, the term “firing” is still used.