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A Journal of Artist Interviews by MFA Candidates at Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, Graduate Seminar in Art, Art Department

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Inquisitive Forms: the Figurative Ceramics of Thaddeus Erdahl

by Jocelyn Howard
Thaddeus Erdahl is a figurative artist working in clay. Erdahl employs *trompe l’oeil* techniques to make objects that appear to have been unearthed from a different time and place. Though the scale of his work spans a wide range from figurines to three-quarter scale figures, Erdahl is best known for his larger than life busts. Erdahl successfully tackles prickly subjects, including race, religion, history, and personal experiences. Simultaneously honest and mysterious, each piece is driven by exploration and an openness that is fueled by the artist’s own curiosity and inquisitive nature. Though Erdahl maintains quiet formality with each piece, his works project an internal intensity that draws viewers in and rewards them with layers of complexity through detailed surfacing and well-crafted forms.

Thaddeus Erdahl received his MFA from University of Florida. He has recently been a visiting artist and instructor at Princeton Day School in Princeton, New Jersey. Before that, he was a visiting artist at Arrowmont School of Craft in Gatlinburg, Tennessee and co-coordinated a national symposium, Figurative Association: The Human Form In Clay. He has exhibited nationally, most recently at the Fuller Craft Museum in Brockton, Massachusetts, and has an upcoming show at Greenwich House in New York. A two-time recipient of the National Council on the Education of Ceramic Artists (NCECA) Graduate Fellowship, Erdahl has been published in several books and magazines, and has work in multiple private and public collections.

My first exposure to Thaddeus Erdahl’s work was at the 2012 annual NCECA conference in Seattle, where I encountered his piece *Stephen A. Douglas*. In a room filled with very strong work by numerous artists, this piece stopped me in my tracks. I didn’t care that it was clay, and I forgot about the *trompe l’oeil* processes that fooled me into believing it was an artifact. I felt the absurdity of the man behind the blackface makeup, the care and concern of the artist for the subject matter, and the gloomy, honest presentation of a complex narrative. Having the opportunity to interview and get to know the artist behind works like *Stephen A. Douglas* has given me an insight into the ceramic process that has fuelled my own studio practice and has inspired me to view ceramic sculpture in a fresh, new way.
**Jocelyn Howard:** I’d like to talk about how you approach the making process with regard to concept and form. When you start something new, do you conceive of each piece independently, or as part of a larger body of work?

**Thaddeus Erdahl:** It’s both. I try to work in a series because I want to limit myself. I’m very scattered when it comes to the making process. I think about lots of things and tend to get off track. I try to work in a series and sometimes it’s really loosely structured. When I first came to Princeton, I looked at things that were man-made. I wanted to tell stories. But I wanted to think about the idea of things being both artifact and art. So, the first body of work was artificial artifacts. It was a very loose structure. I framed what I wanted to make in terms of how I wanted the pieces to look and how I wanted them to be viewed. I wanted them to be viewed as objects, not as a piece of clay representing a person. I wanted it to be, ‘this is an object. This is from the past. I’m showing it to you in this contemporary setting.’ I wanted to use all the trompe l’oeil effects of what clay can do because it’s this great mimicker. I wanted to use all the aspects of what I liked about clay while keeping it within a time frame, this nostalgic era of our lives, but using more contemporary subject matter. That’s how I think about larger bodies of work. Within that larger body of work, it can jump around. Sometimes, it’s about religion, sometimes stories from the past, sometimes it’s about specific people. I always start everything off with some sort of personal narrative that I sneak in, and then I layer some history on top of it, and then layer some actual surface to obscure what’s happening. It’s always put together from my own experience, pulled from history or contemporary stories, and then sandwiched together.

**JH:** How much planning do you put into each piece? Do you work out the details ahead of time or do you like to improvise as you go along?

**TE:** I always have an idea of what I want to do. It’s loosely established and I don’t have the details worked out. Usually the details evolve with the piece. I don’t think I’d want it to be any other way. That’s what I like about clay: I can change things so quickly. I like that freedom to be able to manipulate it and take a different path.

I’ll have the piece fairly worked out, but then I’ll talk to somebody and they’ll point out an aspect of it that will change my perspective. I like how something looks aesthetically and it will fit into my overall theme of artificial artifacts and then, through the critique process, something else will come up and it will change. A lot of times, I’ll sketch out a whole series of pieces that I might make - I don’t know if I’ll make them or not, but I think about them - and then pull them out for a specific part of one, and I’ll take that part and then another part of a different piece and smoosh them together, and develop an idea that way.

**JH:** Are drawings involved in the planning process? You said that you’ve taught painting and drawing. Is that a part of your process?

**TE:** No, not as much. If you asked me that question when I was at Arrowmont as a resident, I would have said, ‘Absolutely. I do this with every piece.’ I had a studio there with these really big walls and I could do huge, eight-foot tall paintings and when I moved to Princeton I was in a garage and I didn’t have the space to do it. So, I’ll skip the step of doing the painting or drawing and just go to the piece.

**JH:** I remember seeing those paintings online and I wondered if those were separate from the ceramic pieces, or if they were planned as part of that Resident Artist exhibition.

**TE:** They were never planned as part of the installation, but they became part of it. The nice thing about working two-dimensionally is that I can create an atmosphere where this piece existed. I like being able to give it another life, another place where the idea could exist. It’s another layer of the narrative, I guess. Drawing is important; painting not so much. Sketching’s important.

**JH:** In regards to drawing, a lot of the more recent pieces I’ve seen are larger than life. Do you use sketches or do you work from maquettes as a guide for proportions? Or, do you approach the work in a less structured way?

**TE:** Less structured. For the larger pieces, I did a lot of research online. I have a folder where I collected images that I liked and
would take those images, and sketch out the idea a little bit. But I actually don’t work from maquettes too much. I just start. Sometimes I think it’s really bad that I do it that way. But, the thing about clay is that I can change it so it’s not that big of a deal. I like being able to diverge from the original plan and work towards something else. It’s based on some image that I cobble together from lots of different things. Then, I’ll go into the story research to get content.

**JH:** Does that take the piece in new directions?

**TE:** It builds it in an unexpected way, but also frames it in. It helps me figure out the title and I need that, sometimes. There are these silly titles like *Stephen A. Douglas*. But, I really want to make sure that people understand that this is Stephen A. Douglas as a minstrel show actor. It’s my way of getting the information out to the audience.

**JH:** You stylize the human form in a lot of ways with your work. When you’re doing that, it’s a form of abstraction. Are you staying true to any particular proportion within the piece or true to life? Are you considering how to skew proportion? How does that play into your work, or does it?

**TE:** It does play into the work. But I don’t really think about it. I want things to look proportional in that I want them to have human-esque proportions. I want them to be believable. I’ve never taken an anatomy course. I have no idea what the hell I’m making. I just know that it looks this way in my head. When I’m working, I want to exaggerate certain characteristics, which is what a caricature does. I’m not really thinking about these being caricatures even though they are, most of the time. I’m just trying to bring specific attention to certain areas of the face. As long as it looks good, that’s all I care about. It has to look right. There’s a very fine line of looking right and not looking right, so I do

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**Stephen A. Douglas**

Clay, underglaze, slip, glaze, encaustic, steel

32” x 28” x 18”

Photo by the artist
a lot of cutting off and sticking back on and re-arranging. I’ll move noses, and I’ll move it all around.

**JH:** Working with clay and in working with art in general, there are a lot of sacrifices visually that we have to make, decisions that we make. What kinds of sacrifices do you have to make, either visually or personally, in order to keep moving forward with each piece?

**TE:** One thing that limits me is availability of what I can fire the piece in. I have x amount of space to do this, so if I want to get all of my information into this piece, this is my parameter: 44 inches tall. That’s where I have to stop.

It’s different conceptually. When I was in grad school, I went in working on the figure and left working on something that was about the figure. The figure has always been a pretty limiting part of my work because I always have to think, what’s the story? I have to get the story across and how do I do that? I have to do it with the human form; that’s limiting. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time, though. My work has always been about the figure’s role in the narrative instead of figuring out if there’s another way to tell that story. Could I use a different object that’s not based on the human form? I love making figurative work, but sometimes I wish that I didn’t. I get tired of it. Right now, I’m at a point where I’ve been making heads for three freaking years in a row, and I’m ready to do something different.

I don’t have any of this worked out yet in my head, but I started thinking about fashion. In the fashion industry, a designer will come up with two bodies of work each year. There’s a spring and a fall body. I wonder what they base their ideas off of, so I’ve started looking at the world of fashion. Not because I want to make fashion clothing, but I want to look at how they approach their...

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**The Rabbit is Dead**

Clay, underglaze, slip, glaze, encaustic

34” x 14” x 10”

Photo by the artist
ideas. They’re working with the figure, the human form, and all of that. How do they go about doing what they do every six months? What’s the pressure like, where are they getting their ideas, and what is the market?

I read this article on the difference between style and fashion. Fashion is what the market says you’re supposed to wear. Kohls made this crappy sweater that I have on, and I wear it all the time. That’s fashion. And then there’s style. I could reinvent this sweater: I could cut the sleeves off and make it all punked-out. I could do something different with it, which is considered style or trendsetting. But I don’t want to be either of those. I want to look at making the figure in a different way. My work is always so literal and layered with concept and other things. At the same time, I don’t want to abstract the figure so much that it’s not the figure anymore.

JH: So you want to mystify the concept?

TE: Yeah, I do that sometimes. I deliberately don’t put in a lot of information because I want to raise questions like: ‘What is this? What’s he doing here?’ I want that mystery. It’s the hook that keeps you there. The piece is the bait.

So, back to the original question . . . sacrifices you have to make: it’s the thing that pushes my work forward but also what holds it back and keeps it from growing the way I want it to, sometimes. Not because I’m scared to do something different right now, because I’ve been doing these workshops and getting this label: ‘the guy that makes stuff look like old wood’. What do I do if I don’t want to make old wood anymore? What if I want to make something else?

JH: So, what do you look at for inspiration or ideas?

TE: I can show you my folders. I have everything in there from vintage photographs of Abraham Lincoln to the newest images out of Vogue magazine, to pictures of myself posing, doing things. I love looking at contemporary painting, even though it probably has no reference to my work. I love to see what’s happening with painters because I think they move through things so much faster than we do. And, they can. I look at abstract painting to see color and the way they’re using lines. If they’re doing figurative portrait painting, I like to see how they’re referencing the portrait. There seems to be a trend with some painters now, where they’re removing the information that reveals the identity of the portrait. I like that idea of deconstructing the figure by taking it from something recognizable and putting on layers of paint, or rubbing out areas and obscuring the content.

JH: When you’re looking at making the next piece, how much do you consider pieces you’ve already made? And how much do you consider works by other artists? How much does that influence the decision-making process?

TE: The one thing I get worried about is making work that resembles somebody else’s work too much. If you’re both thinking about the same thing, how do you re-invent it? I’m not saying that I look at other work and then decide to make it, but it influences me. Tom Bartel’s work definitely influences me. Sometimes it’s the same scale and subject matter. It’s weird, especially since ceramics is so close. Everybody knows what everybody’s doing. It’s like a small town in that way. That’s why I like ceramics. I know what’s happening, who’s doing what, and it’s very well connected.

JH: Historically, the figure is used as a stand-in or representation for a particular person or story. By making the bust, you’re inserting your work into that tradition. But you add a layer to that by acknowledging the bust as an object through your use of trompe l’oeil surfaces. So the figure becomes both a person and an object. You mentioned artificiality: could you talk more about that?

TE: I think it comes from growing up with my dad being an antique dealer and wood worker. I grew up around objects. That was my understanding of what art was: an object. You look at this thing, you can pick it up and move it; it has some place in history. My very first ceramics piece was to re-create a historical piece in ceramics. I looked through my dad’s arts and antiques books and came across face jugs. There was an article about Dave the Slave jugs and I thought it was cool and did that. But, that was my understanding of art, through antiquity and the historical process.
In my own work, I want people to not only relate to it as a story or narrative about a person, but I want them to relate to its place within a timeline. I want the viewer to think about what they’re looking at, this object or person, and think that it has its own separate history from the person it’s depicting. I want it to look like it was dug out of the ground and has a mystery of where it came from. Something’s broken off and it looks like there’s this piece that could have been attached to it. It’s another layer where the object and person fit together.

**JH:** In *Ceramics and the Human Figure*, Edith Garcia introduces your work by stating, “Humor is a veneer he uses as a buffer against the serious, sometimes gloomy aspects of life, which presupposes that there are some things in life so serious you just have to laugh at them.” In certain works like *The Smoker* this sense of humor seems to be quite obvious. However, in your most recent pieces, humor seems to have taken a backseat to a darker, macabre, or gloomy aesthetic. Does humor continue to play a role in your work, or is that disappearing?

**TE:** Yeah, well . . . what do you think with *The Smoker*? What was the humor?

**JH:** It’s something about his moustache, his facial expression; everything about it makes me smile when I look at it. But, with pieces like *Stephen A. Douglass*, or *The Peanut Man*, there doesn’t seem to be that level of humor. It seems more serious. That gloomy aspect that she talks about seems to rise to the surface more.

**TE:** More so than the actual humor part, huh? I haven’t really thought about that as much as you have. (laughs) Why has it taken a back seat in your work, or is that disappearing?

**JH:** I mean, you look at the pig heads, and those are funny.

**TE:** (laughing) Those are funny, those are funny. Yeah. Maybe I just want to think that I’m being funny . . . I’m not really.

**JH:** *I* mean, you look at the pig heads, and those are funny.

**TE:** (laughing) I guess they don’t anymore. And I guess maybe the title . . . you know, you’re right: they’re not funny anymore. I thought about the title as . . . Billy Lee was George Washington’s slave, you know. I was thinking about him being half the man of George Washington in his time. You know, he took care of him. So, I guess they’re not funny.

**JH:** I’m also thinking of *Honest Abe* or *Hooker 1*. And then there was *Billy Lee the Half King*. They don’t seem to have the humorous veneer anymore.

**TE:** (laughing) I guess they don’t anymore. And I guess maybe the title . . . you know, you’re right: they’re not funny anymore. I thought about the title as . . . Billy Lee was George Washington’s slave, you know. I was thinking about him being half the man of George Washington in his time. You know, he took care of him. So, I guess they’re not funny.

**JH:** I mean, you look at the pig heads, and those are funny.

**TE:** (laughing) Those are funny, those are funny. Yeah. Maybe I just want to think that I’m being funny . . . I’m not really.

**JH:** I’m not saying that you’re not being funny, but I . . . do notice that there’s more of a sadness to them when I see them.

**TE:** There is a sadness. Maybe, personally, I’m just going through a sad state.

**JH:** One particular subject you have addressed in a direct manner is that of African American identity and history. How do you personally relate to this topic?

**TE:** I grew up in a super conservative town with one black person. And he was the only one going to my school. He had this stigma around him, which was racist, actually, that he was more white than he was black. And I never knew how to think about that. I still don’t know how to think about it. I don’t know how to react to that stuff. I still don’t know if I’m supposed to say black American or African American. I feel like I still don’t understand it. For me, it’s so much in the past that I don’t know how to relate to it sometimes. But, then I go down south and it’s still an issue.

**JH:** Did moving to the south affect your understanding of that?

**TE:** Addressing these issues is my way of peering into that world a little bit, trying to understand it. There needs to be a whole other generation that goes by, until it gets to the point where it doesn’t matter. It gets to a point where it does matter, because I don’t want it to be a big deal. It is still a big deal, even though I don’t want it to be.
JH: You’ve been in Florida and Tennessee, and I don’t know if there are any minorities in the mountains of Tennessee…

TE: There weren’t any African Americans that I remember in the Gatlinburg area. There are cities in the Midwest that are very integrated. Iowa City, for example, is very cosmopolitan. But, then, my hometown is different. When I was growing up, I didn’t meet a black person until I was in middle school. I didn’t know what to do. And, it wasn’t because of racism at all.

JH: Do you feel displaced by the subject matter?

TE: I’m trying to understand it more. So, I make the work about it. I do wonder if people think, ‘What’s this white guy making work about black people for?’

JH: Has the work involving race elicited any negative or controversial feedback?

TE: No, that’s what’s gotten the best feedback, honestly. Those are the ones that people gravitate to the most.

JH: When I look at those pieces, I feel that there’s a certain confidence, as though you’re not afraid of the subject matter. Do you think that’s a factor in the work? Or, is it maybe that you approach it so inquisitively?

TE: The piece is maybe more fresh because I approach it inquisitively. I question a lot when I make these works.

JH: In a Boston Globe review of Fresh Figurines: A New Look at Historic Art Forms, Cate McQuaid describes your piece Blackface in Sheep’s Clothing as “dark and chiding” and states that “the layers of identity and falsehood are so thick it’s hard to imagine who might really be there under all that makeup and costuming”. Do you feel this is an accurate description of this piece?

TE: I do actually. She hit it pretty well. I’ve sent that statement to galleries so they know how to talk about the piece. It is supposed to be about layers of false identity. It’s supposed to be about, who is this? Who’s it about? Is it about my own personal feelings? Is it about somebody from history? Is it about the actual figure? Is it about the fact that it’s a black person dressed up as a white person, or vice versa? I want the work to be about that mystery and the idea of the sheep’s clothing.

The Smoker
Clay, underglaze, slip, encaustic, hair, wood, glaze
28” x 18” x 22”
Photograph by Charlie Cummings
JH: I feel that age, race, and gender are major discussions in critiques of figurative works. A lot of artists I talk with cling very closely to their own personal culture, age group, or gender. As a young white male, what is your approach to these factors? Or do you consider them at all? I have noticed that you make work about older, younger, men, women, obviously also race.

TE: It’s what the piece demands. I feel more confident making things about males simply because I have a certain sensibility towards male anatomy. But, to sit down and make a female is something I have to recondition my brain to do. The features are softer. I feel more confident in my sculpting skills when it comes to male figures.

JH: During your career you’ve moved around quite a bit. Do you feel that the place you’ve lived has influenced the sense of history in your work or does that sense of history come from a more personal narrative?

TE: At Arrowmont, the work I made was definitely influenced by living in Gatlinburg. I was dealing with the theme of compensation. Each piece was directly related to people I observed in that town. I didn’t make the pieces look like them, but the idea evolved from being voyeuristic and watching people, families, kids, etc. I watched the battles that took place between brothers and sisters over who got the ninja sword and who got the cotton candy. There was an excess of things in Gatlinburg. I thought about why those things existed there and why people visited and spent all of that money there? Why this particular genre of people? Then, I moved to Princeton, a place with an abundance of history, which caused me to think more about history. I’m not directly pulling from Princeton’s history in everything I’ve done. But moving here and seeing the historical buildings and visiting campus is pretty awe-inspiring. I started thinking about historical people, contexts, making the figure, and how the object relates to its historical place.

JH: As far as problem-solving with the work, you display your work on pedestals, on the wall and, in some cases, the pedestals that are part of the work. How do you make those decisions?

TE: I’m doing this because I like it, but I also want to sell work. I’m not trying to take the fun out of what I do, but if I can make something that hangs on the wall, I can almost guarantee that I can sell it sooner for the price I want. A pedestal piece is harder to negotiate. I don’t want that to dictate the work, and it doesn’t, always. But, if a piece can work on the wall because I want it to have a certain presence coming off the wall at a level that I can’t achieve.

Billy Lee the Half King
Clay, underglaze, slip, glaze, encaustic
18” x 17” x 10”
Photograph by Charlie Cummings
with a pedestal, and it removes the visual clutter of a pedestal, I’m going to go with the wall.

Coming from a Ceramics background, the solution is to put it on the pedestal. So, in my rebuttal of “let’s put it on the pedestal”, I will consider the actual pedestal as part of the piece. I take careful consideration of how that’s going to look or be presented. Other times, I know it’s going to be on a pedestal for different reasons.

JH: Does the display of work on the wall elevate it to art, or is it just more convenient for someone to hang work on their wall?

TE: I think it’s more convenient for somebody to hang it on the wall. Does it have a different meaning? It has a different presence. The viewer is getting the view I want them to have. That’s part of the consideration, but I don’t think it elevates the work. Everybody makes stuff that goes on the wall. You can make a cup and put it on a shelf on the wall and it’s the same thing. It’s a matter of convenience.

JH: Looking at your older work, you have a mix of free-standing figures, busts, and pedestal pieces. It seems recently that you’ve been doing exclusively larger-than-life busts. What caused that shift?

TE: I love portrait work, for one thing. I love the idea of sectioning off the human body and focusing in on what I feel makes up the identity of a person. It’s the eyes, mouth; the recognizable things that people gravitate towards. I grew up with portraits that my uncle had painted in our house. I always loved that and believe in that old idea that eyes are the window to the soul. It’s kind of a romantic way to think about it, but I think there’s a lot of information that’s right there in the nose, mouth, and ears. That’s all I really need. I don’t need the rest of the body to talk about it. I really just wanted to work on big heads. I wanted to make larger-than-life heads. There’s a totally different feeling when you’re working on a baseball-sized eyeball versus a ping-pong ball-sized eyeball. I can get really close and work on the detail but also step way back from the piece and get an overall view that a human scale doesn’t have. I enjoy that.

When I was looking at these larger-than-life-sized heads, I was also looking at where things like these have existed in history. I started doing research on figureheads from whaling ships. I took a trip to Denmark last summer to look at figureheads and research them. Seeing the figureheads out of context is like my work right now: you don’t know the rest of the story. It’s a piece, a chunk. These objects were a piece of a boat and now they’re displayed in a museum. On that boat they were probably small, tiny. In this gallery, they’re huge; they have a presence.

JH: When I saw Stephen A. Douglas, I was surprised by the large scale and was drawn in to view it more closely. What importance does a monumental scale play in your work? What exactly compels you to work at that size?

TE: It’s all about the monumental aspect and centralized focus. I want it to be the first thing you see, to have that immediate, homing beacon aspect. I really want people to examine it and see all these little things happening that you might glance over if it wasn’t for the presence that it has. It’s just an enlargement of my idea.

JH: Are there different projects that you’re considering? Are you going to keep working with these busts? Is that what’s propelling you right now?

TE: No. I really want to escape from those for a little bit. I want them to be a part of my new show, but not all of it. They’re fun and it’s what I like making. But, I also like to challenge myself. I’m doing some standing figures right now that are about three-quarters or half life-size. I want the idea of what I’m making to drive what the work’s about. For example, with the show I’m doing at Greenwich House, I have ideas for pieces that have very little to do with the figure. They’re a bunch of things that relate to the figure somehow but they aren’t only about the figure. Like I said before, I feel like I got rooted into being ‘the wood grain guy’. But, if I change too much too quickly, what does that do? I still want galleries to carry my work. They’re carrying it for a reason and I don’t want them to stop.

JH: What artists influence you? How much of an impact do they have on your own work?
**TE:** Maybe more than I know. They’re the people that I looked at when I was going through undergrad. I liked them and probably tried to emulate aspects of their work. One particular artist who has definitely influenced me is printmaker, Mauricio Lasansky. I am just dazzled by his work. His prints are amazing. They’re deeply dark and humorous and all of the things that I like. He has this amazing gesture with lines and the work is character based and his color palette is nothing but drab colors. You could probably look at his work and pick out a few things that bear a resemblance, but I can’t get his work out of my head. It’s so ingrained in my thinking. When I saw his huge Nazi prints and drawings, they were so emotionally captivating that I couldn’t stop looking at them. I felt like I was going to start crying right there, it was that strong. I couldn’t make a connection to the subject matter, but I wanted to make that connection to it. I wanted to feel whatever he was feeling. He didn’t experience the Holocaust, but he was depicting it. And so, maybe it’s the same thing with the Blackface series. I want to feel it and I want to know and understand it even though I didn’t experience it.

**JH:** Do you ever see your work as a response to or a conversation with other artists’ work, or is it much more introspective?

**TE:** It’s more what I need to make, what I’m thinking about. After it’s done I might say someone’s doing something similar to this. When I do this show at Greenwich House, it’s going to be based off of my perspective about being in the Army for three years. I’m not trying to preach pro or anti-military. I want it to be about that surreal time in my life. I went into the military because I had no idea what I was going to do. It’s awkward as shit because I wasn’t the guy who would scream and put his war-face on. I felt completely out of place all the time.

There are plenty of artists who have made work about wars. But, what I’m really interested in is making work about people who have just come back and they’re amputees and missing limbs. I don’t ever want to do it in a way that’s comical. I want the work to be very thought out and I don’t want it to be depressing, either. I want to interview people and talk to them and see what their life is like. That could have very easily been me. I just happened to be enlisted during a three-year gap where nothing happened. It was total dumb luck. When I got out, the Iraq war was starting and I remember thinking, ‘Oh shit, that could have been me.’ I just got lucky.

**JH:** With the Blackface pieces, you have a very empathetic approach; you’re trying to understand that darker side of history and you’re respectful of it, even if you don’t understand it. There seems to be a driving force to understanding something and be able to get some part of what you’re exploring.

**TE:** I want to get it. They’re very personal pieces. I want to know what’s happening. I hope each piece conveys an internal emotion. I hope they can convey an internal sorrow or conflict. That’s how I am. I act one way because I don’t want you to know that I’m thinking this other thing. I don’t know if it’s the way I was raised as a mid-westerner or what it is. I have to be polite, ask how you’re doing, but don’t tell me really if you’re not doing well.

**JH:** It’s interesting because with your work, you really embrace the unpleasant side of things.

**TE:** I do. I’m not a gloomy guy, but I see that part of things. There’s a lot of conflict within people and I see a lot of gray. You talk about artists being black and white. I think of Robert Arneson’s work and think about him being very anti-war. There is a black and white part of the thing, but there is also so much gray. And, it’s hard to distinguish between the black and white. I see life like that.

**JH:** What is it about ceramic sculpture in particular that keeps you working in this medium?

**TE:** I like a lot of the things clay offers me. There’s so much versatility with the material. I like that clay can look like wood, it could be metal, it could be some unknown foreign substance with some drippy glaze on it. It can be so many things and I don’t have to switch. I understand the material so well that I’ve become ambidextrous with it. I do like to work with other materials like cast plastic, wood, painting, and drawing. But, in the end, I always go back to the clay.

**JH:** You said you felt limited by the figure. You said you like to
make other things, but you make the figure, but I don’t think that’s what you meant.

**TE:** My ideas are driven by the fact that I make the figure. My concepts are always starting with the figure and move towards the figure. So, the work revolves around a narrative, a story. For me, the story is human interaction. If I don’t want to make rabbits or wombats or goats, then the figure is my outlet. If I didn’t have the figure, would I be making more ambiguous object-based things? Would I make pottery? I’ve defined myself and that’s fine. It’s what I want to do. I can re-define myself later.

Image of Thaddeus Erdahl with his work
Photo credit: Charlie Cummings
Birds and Flight, Decoration and Ornament: An Interview with Chris Irick
by Nash Quinn
Chris Irick is a metalsmith and jeweler who lives in Utica, New York. She received her BFA in Metalsmithing from Texas Tech University, and her MFA from the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth. She is known for creating a remarkable series of contemplative wearable vessels, as well as investigating form and material in a series of elegant, oval-shaped jewelry pieces. Her recent work is based on her interest in birds and early attempts at human flight, and the ornamentation found in Victorian objects. Throughout her career, she has skillfully incorporated non-traditional materials such as mica, felt, slate, and acrylic into her work. In addition to one-of-a-kind art jewelry, Irick also makes colorful, formal production pieces in silver and anodized aluminum. Her work has been featured in *Metalsmith* and *American Craft* magazines, as well as *The Metalsmith’s Book of Boxes and Lockets*, *The Penland Book of Jewelry*, and several editions of Lark’s 500 series craft compendiums. She has exhibited across the country, and her work is featured in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Irick is head of the Jewelry and Metals program at Pratt Munson Williams Proctor Arts Institute in Utica, New York.

I visited Irick in Utica, where she lives with her husband, Jonathan Kirk, a British-born sculptor. We sat down in her spacious studio on the campus of Pratt Munson-Williams-Proctor and discussed her work, inspirations, and process.
Nash Quinn: Metals and jewelry is a small and somewhat obscure field, and people often stumble into it as much as they seek it out. Describe your trajectory through the discipline - how did you find yourself doing what you do today?

Chris Irick: I moved a lot when I was a kid: twenty times by my parents’ twentieth anniversary. School was hard enough for that reason, but I also have a very severe learning disability. I am incredibly dyslexic, and I also have a visual disturbance disorder: I naturally write from right to left, and backward. I still have to force myself to write the correct way. So although I did well in school, I really struggled, especially moving as much as I did. But, I always did very well in my art classes. When I was sixteen, we were living in Kentucky, and my art teacher told me about an arts high school in Dallas, where her sister taught. I applied and was accepted, and did my last two years of high school there. If that had not happened, I would probably still be in Kentucky, barefoot and pregnant.

Pretty much your whole day at that school was art, and I really liked the jewelry class. I was awful at it, but I liked the techniques, and I liked that, at the end of the day, I had something to wear. The work had a utilitarian sense that I didn’t find in some of my other classes. It was in that class that I first saw the Oppi Untracht book, *Jewelry: Concepts and Technology*. We called it ‘The Bible’. Arguments about jewelry between students were settled on the word of Oppi Untracht. In that book, there were pictures of women jewelers, at a point in time where all you learned about in art history classes were male artists. There were pictures of how other cultures adorned themselves. And there was also John Paul Miller’s work in that book. With his work came the realization that you could make jewelry about cephalopods; you could make jewelry about anything. It didn’t have to be diamonds. Miller taught me that you could embrace those traditional techniques, but have anything as your subject matter.

NQ: Why did you start making boxes and vessels?

CI: My undergraduate program was incredibly technical – it was all based on technique and design and hollowware, so I had a really strong technical background coming out of school, which I will forever be grateful for. When I went to grad school, I wanted something that would be the exact opposite – all about concept. I started thinking about ideas, using images in the work that were more illustrative. Having made a lot of hollowware in undergrad, making boxes was a natural progression for me. Growing up, my dad always worked in the industrial areas of town, and as a child, I was fascinated by how different those areas were from where I lived – their dilapidated brick walls, train tracks to nowhere. I wanted to create spaces that you could open up and mentally explore, and using perspective to draw the viewer into the piece.

I had an internship at the Whaling Museum in New Bedford, where I learned about pocket watches, and not like any pocket watches I had seen before: spherical watches with incredible little mechanisms. The watches had an outside case that would open, and then on the watch itself, the front would open, and the back would open, and there would be detailed engravings with the date of every time the watch had been repaired. They were fantastic little things that had so much depth and presence. I really liked undoing the layers and discovering the history of the piece. Those watches led me to creating pieces that are worn like pocket watches. I liked the idea that the work was hidden in the wearer’s pocket, but there were certain parts that were exposed.

NQ: Symbols play an important, if somewhat cryptic, role in some of your earlier work. How do you want your viewers to understand the symbolic elements in your work?

CI: Well, you should read my twenty-page thesis; that will put you to sleep. A lot of this work stems from the fact that I suffer from really bad migraines. When I was younger, I would get migraines so bad that when I looked in the mirror, I saw a lump or a growth on my head that I thought everyone could see. When I have a migraine like that, I want to go into a space where everybody is going to leave me alone – there aren’t any lights, there aren’t any sounds – so I created these spaces that I could mentally crawl into. I do not expect anybody to get that out of the work but, from a psychological perspective, that was part of my interest in creating dark, creepy places. Some of the earlier vessels I did were much more referential of the migraines: blind spots, hallucinations. I looked at a lot of tunnels and stairways, trying
**Left: Egress, 1995**
Sterling silver, copper, brass
21” x 1.75” x 1.25”
Courtesy of Collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum

**Right Top: Gyroptere (closed), 2008**
Sterling silver, 14k yellow gold, brass, mica, magnet
12” x 14” x 1”
Courtesy of Chris Irick

**Right Bottom: Gyroptere (open), 2008**
Sterling silver, 14k yellow gold, brass, mica, magnet
12” x 14” x 1”
Courtesy of Chris Irick
to come up with interesting visual cues to let the viewer know that they’re going down into a space.

**NQ:** Making work about your personal health must have been difficult - it is always a fine line between work that is personal enough to be unique, but universal enough to be meaningful to everyone.

**CI:** During my first critique in grad school, we looked at everyone’s work in the whole grad program. There were all these students making very personal work, as in “I have an eating disorder” or “I was abused as a child,” and I immediately realized that when work is that self-referential, you’re really building a wall between the artist and the viewer, and it winds up as a one-liner piece. I didn’t want my work to be like that. I wanted it to communicate with a larger audience. I think the same way now, and it guides my research. I do a lot of research; I look at a lot of aeronautical things, but I don’t need to know how an airplane works. When researching, I learn what I need to learn, but I try not to take the mystery out of it, so it doesn’t become a one-liner.

**NQ:** You mention Guston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* in your artist statement. Where did you encounter that book?

**CI:** I initially read *The Poetics of Space* in graduate school. It’s a really great book for jewelers and metalsmiths to read. There are several different sections that are particularly pertinent to our work – drawers, nests, interior spaces – things very relevant to the kinds of objects that we are making. For me, it was more about the psychological aspects of spaces in the home, and the different psychological presence that parts of the home have – your basement versus your attic, for instance. That book doesn’t have much of a role in my work anymore, but I still use it as a teaching tool.

**NQ:** After graduate school, where you made your series of containers and wearable vessels, you transitioned to making more formal explorations of the oval shape. What drove that change?

**CI:** Well, I hate to say this but, for a lot of people, grad school is a very dark period. My peers made a lot of very introspective work – crazy, dysfunctional stuff - and for almost everybody, about two years after they left, their work totally changed and became something decorative and happy and light. I had done a lot of dark, moody work, and I wanted to force myself to do something different.

**NQ:** Your earlier work was a series of shadowy and mysterious vessels. Then, as we were just discussing, that aesthetic transitioned into more formal explorations of shape and material, and has now become the *Flight* and *Ornamentality* series. How do you maintain your visual identity as your work changes?

**CI:** That is something that I think about, and something Jonathan and I talk about a lot, but I just can’t keep making the same thing over and over again. But in the last couple of years, I’ve come across some things and had some ideas that are a little bit more like my older work, and I’m thinking, ‘Well, should I make them? Am I taking a step backward?’ But honestly, I make my work to make myself happy. There is always a bit of a lag time – when I really change, make something new, a year might go by where I’m not getting into any shows. Then, all of a sudden, it’s okay and I’m getting into shows again. But now I’m at the point where most of the shows I’m in are invitational, so it doesn’t matter: they get what they get. It’s a mistake to worry about how the public is going to perceive you: you don’t want to get pigeonholed into making the same stuff you were making fifteen years ago.
**NQ:** Your 1995 piece, *Egress,* is in The Smithsonian American Art Museum, which bills itself as “an unparalleled record of the American experience.” Can you talk about how *Egress* found its way into the Smithsonian? What are the qualities of *Egress* that make it an appropriate addition to that collection?

**CI:** That was one of those happy coincidences – a woman who used to live in Utica noticed me at a faculty show here at MWP. She had done a residence at the Smithsonian. The museum was doing exhibitions of their permanent collections – one on glass, one on ceramics, one on jewelry – and they were acquiring new pieces for the show. They asked her for some recommendations. *Egress* was one of her favorite pieces, and she recommended the museum acquire it. So, that piece is not a statement on the American experience. Oddly enough, the show that piece was in became embroiled in a political battle going on at the museum: the Smithsonian jewelry curator was at odds with his more conservative boss, and ended up leaving his position after that show was over.

**NQ:** Your *Flight* series celebrates primitive and outlandish flying machines. What did you look at when you were preparing for this work? What makes fanciful early flying machines so magical?

**CI:** I had been looking at a lot of World War II airplanes and the early turbine jets, and also looking at historical early attempts at flight. The British Museum has a really great collection of miniature models – the actual models that would-be aviators built when trying to fundraise to build their wacky contraptions. The models are of all sorts of crazy aircraft and dirigibles and, because of their scale, you can’t help but think of jewelry. I was attracted to the sheer lunacy of their ideas – the humor in them. Looking back from today’s perspective, it’s like, what on earth were they thinking? That led me to the *Gyroptere* piece – the gyroptere was an asymmetrical, one-winged aircraft built by the French that never flew. I knew when I started the *Flight* series that, because of my interest in birding, birds would start to work their way in. I knew when I started that I would do some work with ornithopters, airplanes based on birds, where early aviators were combining very technological-looking frameworks with actual feathers, and then strapping them on.

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*Left:* **Oval Brooch Series III,** 2004
Sterling and fine silver, 24k yellow fold, acrylic, stainless
Each brooch approx. 2” x .75” x .5”
Courtesy of Chris Irick

*Right:* **V&A Brooch I,** 2009
14k yellow gold, slate
2.5” x 1.15” x .25”
Courtesy of Chris Irick
When it is not being worn, your *Gyroptere* neckpiece can collapse, and serve as a sort of model of the gyroptere aircraft. Why did you choose to make that piece have dual functions?

**CI:** The Science Museum in London had a display of scientific models that had been built by jewelers; some of them were working models. A 17th-century British king who was a science aficionado had a series of model microscopes built by jewelers, and the microscopes were totally decorative, totally over-the-top beautiful objects, along with ship models and the like. Using those objects as my inspiration, I wanted the piece to look like a model, then transform into this weird, wearable object.

When you have a piece in progress made of real bird feathers. How did feathers find their way into your work as a raw material?

**CI:** I kept looking for scientific illustrations on the anatomy of a bird wing. But, because I am a three-dimensional person, I kept thinking, ‘one of these days, I’m going to have to find an actual dead bird.’ One day I did find a dead bird, a migratory bird that had flown 3,000 miles from Central America, only to run out of steam on a path near my cabin in the Adirondacks. So I took its wings as a reference, but started thinking, ‘I really like these wings. I wonder what I could do with them?’ So I started looking for dead birds. And on the road to my cabin, which I would drive once or twice a week, I would find three to ten dead birds per trip – finding birds and finding more birds on this one little road, listening to NPR and hearing the phrase “unintended consequences.” At the British Museum, there were beautiful displays of hummingbirds that had been killed as decorations for someone’s home in Victorian England. Though we no longer have that mindset, there are still unintended consequences – cars, high rises, light pollution, wind farms – that have a dramatic effect on bird populations. Collecting dead birds has led me from using the birds as inspiration to working more directly with the bird wings as material. While I’m still referencing early attempts at flight, I’m also working on new work that deals with starling murmurations – that’s when a flock of birds change directions *en masse*, similar to a school of fish. My first experiments with murmurations were these lenticular pieces – I liked the idea that the lenticular pieces were wearable objects that, as the wearer moved, the image changed.

**CI:** As jewelers, we learn about the history of jewelry, and it’s hard not to get stuck on the Victorian era: the level of decoration that occurred and the wealth of materials used at the time. Jonathan and I are both very interested in the aesthetic and technological atmosphere of the industrial revolution. So much knowledge was being gained in those days, and things were changing so quickly, but at the same time, there was an incredible aesthetic that went with everything being made. If you look at a piece of industrial equipment from that period, every utilitarian object, even something as simple as a manhole cover – someone very carefully designed it and made it decorative. That was the thinking of the time: if you’ve got to live with it, it needs to be something worth looking at, which is very different from today. That is what the *Ornamentality* series was about – a mourning of the loss of decorative aesthetic.

**NQ:** Many jewelers and metalsmiths seem to find it necessary to confront ideas of ornament and decoration head-on. What was your goal in creating the *Ornamentality* series?

**CI:** I don’t think our work is informed by each other’s work, but our work is informed by our similar interests. We’re both looking at the same source material, and we were looking at that same material before we met. That’s how we got together: I was giving a lecture, and he came up to me afterward and said, “Hey, I have these books you need to look at.” And I thought, ‘what kind of a pickup line is that?’ It turned out to be a pretty good one. We sometimes tease each other about whose ideas came first, but we work in very different
ways. He avoids being overly decorative but my attitude is, bring on the decoration.

**NQ:** Do you pay attention to trends in contemporary jewelry? Are you concerned about how your own work fits in with those trends?

**CI:** I get asked a lot about who the jewelers are that influence my work, but it is a funny question, because I don’t really look to other jewelers. I look to my own interests and the research I do. I am definitely aware of lots of other artists work because I am a teacher, and I want to keep my students abreast of what is going on and how things are changing. So I pay attention to the overall shifts in the field. Jewelers are very accepting as to what working in the jewelry field means. As a jeweler, I have no problem working on a video installation, then coming back to jewelry, and having them be related. However, if I was a sculptor doing video installation and I wanted to start making jewelry, it may be received very critically.

**NQ:** Your production work couldn’t be more different than your one-off pieces. Have you always made production jewelry?

**CI:** I've always had an interest in making production work. I made production work when I was still in high school. It is not usually related to my one-of-a-kind work. I used to primarily use sterling silver and gold, but have recently begun using anodized aluminum and silver to introduce a cheaper, colorful material. I think mostly about design and process in my production work, and not so much the heavier topics that go into my one-of-a-kind work. It is also another way to make some money, and a way for people to be able to afford my work, who may not otherwise be able to.

**NQ:** What direction is your work headed?

**CI:** I’m continuing to work more closely with birds and feathers. I proposed a video installation about starling murmurations in the lobby of the art museum on campus, and I am still working on the necklace with the bird wings. My sticking point is this: I am not legally allowed to have those wings. I could get put in jail or face a serious fine. Because they’re native songbirds, I cannot collect them. So I need to find a way around that!

Chris Irick’s work can be viewed online at chrisirick.com.

**Turbine Brooch Series, 2008**
18k yellow gold, sterling and fine silver
Each brooch approx. 2” x 2” x .75”
Courtesy of Chris Irick
An Interview with Anne Wilson

by Angie Seykora
Anne Wilson is a visual artist and professor in the Fiber and Material Studies program at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Wilson works across disciplines creating drawings, sculpture, installation, performance, and video with materials such as human hair, thread, cloth, and lace. She is represented by the Rhona Hoffman Gallery in Chicago, where she has an upcoming solo exhibition in the fall of 2013. Other recent exhibitions include the Armory Show 2013, The Dublin Biennial, a solo exhibition at the Knoxville Museum of Art, in Tennessee, and many other national and international exhibitions, including the 2002 Whitney Biennial. I met with Anne Wilson at her home and studio in a quaint suburb of Chicago to talk with her about her work and studio practice.
Angie Seykora: Process and the work of the human hand is an important aspect of your work. Is it easy to get caught up in the act of making? Do you ever feel like the act of making sidetracks you from other conceptual or aesthetic considerations? Or are none of these things an issue since you conceptualize most of your work before it is physically realized?

Anne Wilson: I am an artist who very much thinks through the process of making. I develop a conceptual structure for my projects that have certain parameters, material properties and, often, certain time durations. The work unfolds as I make it and that is a really important position to clarify, because it is a different process from a number of very well known early conceptualists, like Sol LeWitt. One of my favorite periods of his work are his early wall drawings, where rule-based instructions direct the wall preparation and the kind of stylus used, and very specific guidelines direct how the marks are to relate to each other within a given space. He doesn’t need to be present.

I develop a conceptual structure that has parameters, but within these parameters there is liberty to shift visual properties. I think through the process of making; the making itself has a very lively and improvisational aspect. This way of proceeding is very engaging for my assistants and me.

AS: Talk about where you started earlier on in terms of your career. Have you always been a concept-based artist that has driven the more physically-realized forms of these projects? Or have you seen a material, been attracted to its physical properties or characteristics, and then been interested in what the material is capable of doing, allowing the material to drive the form?

AW: The materials I use are all borne out of their connections to particular contexts and meanings within culture. Project by project, there is a lot of variation in how I proceed and what materials are used. I think of my art as a conjunction between visual art concepts and material culture, where the histories embedded in materials, and the way things are made, are critically important to the content of the work. The textile itself is the core as both subject and process, I would say, for the last 30 years of my work. As to why textile: when I was a young artist in graduate school, at the California College of the Arts in San Francisco, it was at a moment in time when there was a confluence between multiple art movements in the use of soft form. I was exposed to many interrelated fields as a young art student. First, I remember a grad seminar at CCA taught by a New York art historian and he was talking about Clement Greenberg and Barbara Rose and these debates around ‘what is painting?’ The work was self-referential: a highly formal critique. However, he was also bringing to our attention artists like Oldenburg, Rauschenberg, Christo, Eva Hesse, Robert Morris, and Barry Le Va -- artists who were working with pliable materiality in making these extraordinary new contemporary soft forms, and these artists were getting a lot of attention. At the same time in the ’70s in the San Francisco Bay Area, there was the emergence of feminist thinking, and the empowerment that many women felt, including myself, to use processes that had been rather marginalized within the western art canon--knitting, knotting, crocheting, and weaving--and to celebrate the alignments of these processes to the work of women, and men, too, in many cultures.

AS: Were these things that were simply being brought up in art school for you at the time? Or did you have an awareness of these movements or cultural climates outside of your academic environment?

AW: The seminar by the New York art historian was in school. The women’s movement was a social and cultural condition of the time. As well, there was an opening of the art world to looking at forms of art that were not just western. A multicultural view of art was entering the art discourse. Of course textiles are some of the highest art forms in non-western cultures, including Indonesia, Southeast Asia, South America, and Africa. Textiles are a carrier of a cultural narrative; they may have spiritual meanings, high degrees of skill and considered aesthetics, as well as frequently being functional. So new arenas of form, meaning, and context were being considered. This multicultural view of art, the inclusion of non-western art forms including very significant textile forms, has been profoundly important to the development of contemporary art discourse internationally.

Also, in the 1970’s, there was a movement called the Art Fabric
movement. Artists like Magdalena Abakanowicz from Poland, Peter Jacobi from Germany, Olga de Amaral from Bogota, Colombia, and a number of other artists in the United States, including Ed Rossbach, Lenore Tawney, Claire Zeisler, were using fiber, thread, and cloth to create really diverse forms. Abakanowicz was making four-story high woven textile environments that were immersive and textural and could be rolled up and transported across the sea with easy mobility. These powerful works explored the tactile characteristics of the fiber medium. The haptic sensibility, the sense of touch, was really exploited in these early, large, installational textile works.

It has only been recently that Elissa Auther wrote a book, *String, Felt, Thread and the Hierarchy of Art and Craft in American Art*, where she talks about the relationship between the mainstream western art canon, the women's movement and feminist work, and work from the Art Fabric movement. She discusses these three movements and how they intersect. Author’s book is an example of recent emerging scholarship that is looking at some of these intersecting histories.

**AS:** Elaborate on the cultural implications of the materials you use and how important it is that your viewers make the connections to what these materials are doing conceptually in your work. Are these materials esoteric and enigmatic, or do you think that their purpose is obvious?

**AW:** Each project is different, so I will answer your question by talking about a specific project. In the year 2000, I had a large solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, entitled *Anatomy of Wear*. In the time period leading up to this exhibition, my mother had been divesting the family household of many things, including piles of linen cloth, which were given to me because of my background and interest in textiles. When I received it, a lot of the cloth was formal, starched, and hardly used. Most of it was patterned damask cloth, a white-on-white table linen. However, some of it was kind of scrappy with holes;
it had never been thrown away because the quality of cloth was so special, even the fragments were still kept. I had started decoding these cloths in terms of cultural context and my own family context, as signifiers of propriety and formality. Certainly within some homes, including my own, linens would be presented when we would have a formal family event, dinner, or special occasion. These white linen cloths are also, of course, present in finer restaurants even today. Prior to receiving this gift of linen, I had been working with human hair and the associations of human hair to personal and cultural identity. To some individuals, the use of hair was distasteful and unsettling. Rather than moving away from the disturbing responses to the use of hair in my art, I developed an interactive website entitled An Inquiry About Hair (1996) to probe further, asking the questions: How does it feel to lose your hair?, and What does it mean to cut your hair? Questions such as these were a way to think more deeply about personal-, gendered-, cultural-, age-, class-related contexts, and to more deeply understanding the connection people had to the subject of hair as a material.

So, I started this project of stitching into the white linen cloth with human hair, beginning by tearing out the holes or worn areas within larger cloth pieces and engaging in this kind of subversive mending — stitching the holes open with hair and thread rather than covering or closing. By stitching a hole open with hair, bodily associations emerge quite quickly. There were also connections to insects and specimen-like images, but I was more interested in encouraging the more bodily image associations in this work — and most importantly, the oppositional aesthetics between the formality and propriety of white cloth, on the one hand, and the abject (the unclean, dirty, unwanted aspect of hair detached from the body) on the other hand. For many years, then, I worked with that essential idea about material contradictions, heavily informed by cultural context. I kept putting hair and cloth together in different ways. I created whole, large hair-stitched cloths, such as the sculptures entitled Lost, Found, Misplaced, and the wall piece I made in 1998 called A Chronicle of Days, now owned by the 21st Century Museum of Modern Art in Kanazawa, Japan. Over a number of years I continued to make wall pieces, sculpture, and a continuing project called Areas of Disrepair, which were smaller torn cloth fragments, with hair just surrounding the hole itself. These pieces were specimen-like images of hair-stitched holes — my work called Hair Work is like a dictionary of vocabulary that emerged from this work. There is a way in which some people look at the work where, instead of reading first the cultural connections, ask questions like, ‘Is it a drawing?’ With some of these cloth pieces there can be connections to a page or maybe even a canvas, to histories of painting or drawing. I call much of this work, particularly when it is wall based, materialized drawings or physical drawings. I like thinking of this work as participating in the discourse around drawing, the expanded field of drawing with contemporary art discourse, because drawing is often aligned with linearity.

AS: Was it easy to get caught up in the act of making and the act of laboriously stitching these pieces?

AW: In that work, and actually in my current work, which is very time consuming, I have never thought of the work as being laborious. It is filled with labor, but I have a fluidity with my process. The more I stay with it, I can actually work quite fast. The word laborious brings with it assumptions that the work is painful or hard to do, or any other number of negative spins. Indeed, it might look that way to someone else, and whatever that might bring to the content of the work or one’s experience of the work, is what happens. As a maker, I am able to stay with work that builds slowly over time; I am deeply invested with the slow process.

AS: You call these works physical or materialized drawings, particularly when they are presented on a wall. Do you draw with traditional drawing materials in order to realize some of your ideas before you execute them in a more physical or tactile sense?

AW: No, I don’t. I have had early training in traditional drawing methods, but I find that there is no need to draw with pencil in my current practice. Some of the work I do with materials might be considered studies or preliminary sketches, but I always draw directly with materials because of their particular qualities of line — a line of hair, or a thread of a silk or cotton, a slightly textured material, or...
Anne Wilson, Topologies (detail)
lace, thread, insect pins.
Photo credit: Christopher Wiley
The answer to your question varies from project to project. After my show at the MCA Chicago in 2000, I wanted to continue working with found materials but I felt I had played out the hair-stitched cloth. I wanted to move my vocabulary in a different direction, but continue using found objects. For that same exhibition, my newest work was a large horizontal table sculpture called Feast. Feast was a compilation of hundreds of hair-stitched fragments that were put back onto a horizontal surface with insect pins to create an abstract topography. This horizontal orientation allowed me to see my work at a raking view, looking down and across at a subtle elevation of parts, related to landscape.

I had quite a collection of lace at this time and I started pulling it apart and looking at the structural properties of lace. Over the next few years I developed a large expanding sculpture/drawing project called Topologies, first shown in 2002 in the Whitney Biennial. I remade Topologies many times; there were four or five iterations. The last iteration was at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, in 2007-08. When making Topologies and setting up temporary installations of this work at different venues, I always acknowledged that there was something about it that was like a stage set. There were latent meanings and associations that referenced futuristic worlds, odd sci-fi scenarios, and fictive spaces. The torn lace fragments were filled with irregular kinds of character. I wanted to create a time-based work where new possibilities could be emphasized and acted out: performed, if you will. I wanted to make a movie. It felt like a direction that could activate a new conceptual space, and encourage another kind of content through movement and time. After a number of trials, stop-motion animation seemed the most relevant film making process. I was privileging and encouraging some of the qualities that are quite available in stop-motion, especially aspects of foible and irregularity in relationship to these quirky, odd, fragmented lace subjects. This video work emerged into a major video and sound installation called Errant Behaviors, which was comprised of twenty-three animation segments, played against each other on two screens. Shawn Decker was the composer for the project. So, that is a specific example of why I used video. It emerged from something that is tightly twisted, smooth or variegated, glossy or mat. There are enormous variations, in what I loosely call a thread, which could be a hair, or any number of other materials. So, no, I don’t draw in graphite, pencil, or in the traditional sense to think through my concept or material resolution. I draw directly with materials.

Would you say, then, that your drawings with these materials lead to larger, more realized pieces?

Yes, and such an example of this is the dictionary piece called Hair Work. When I was creating the little scrappy fragments of hair-stitched holes and edges of holes from fragmented cloth, I didn’t know that they might build into this important work, which the MCA Chicago currently owns. I was just finding my way through understanding this vocabulary with the materials. I start developing something that had a conceptual premise and direction, and then it grew and took on a life that was acknowledged in the process of working.

Your work takes on a number of different forms: sculpture, 2-D, performance, and video installation. How do you know which discipline or medium is the best way to convey an idea?
the implications and possibilities of an existing sculpture that I had previously made.

**AS:** Would you say that your performance works emerged in a similar way?

**AW:** The first performance, *Wind-Up: Walking the Warp* at Rhona Hoffman Gallery in 2008, came directly out of the larger sculpture project called *Portable City*, within that same exhibition. *Portable City* explored relationships between woven textiles and architecture. Taut parallel lines, relating to weave structure processes of warping, are present throughout the *Portable City*. In the performance in the adjacent gallery space, we enlarged the scale and performed the making of a weaving warp on a 17’ x 7’ stainless steel floor frame. Working with a group of collaborators, we performed the making of a weaving warp over six days of durational performance. At the end of that time the work sat in the gallery as a still sculpture. The core of my work is textiles, as both subject and process. In the last four years with the *Walking the Warp* performances, and in *Local Industry* (moving a weaving factory into a museum), I was working with the infrastructure of making processes versus focusing on the resulting object.

**AS:** With *Topologies*, it seems as though they are open-ended in terms of their chronology. Is that still an ongoing work for you? Can you discuss what it is like to have a work of art that continues over time and doesn’t really have a closed time frame to the making of it?

**AW:** *Topologies* was always something that could keep expanding or contracting depending upon the space in which it was shown. I made it a few different times and each exhibition offered a new kind of space to work in and provided a different kind of context in terms of my own work, or the work of others. The time it takes to make *Topologies* is really important for me, along with working with art students at the local schools in the cities in which the work is presented. Space, time, and the people I worked with were all factors that went into making each of the iterations of *Topologies*, and it was really exciting to do it again each time and also add in new parts. There was often a template that created basic areas that I knew and then, within that which I knew, there was always an element of improvisation at each temporary installation. I made *Topologies* for the Victoria & Albert Museum and I also made a small permanent piece for them so that idea of *Topologies* could travel. I couldn’t keep traveling myself to all of these different locations in England to keep remaking it. It wasn’t that the work couldn’t be re-imagined or created again and again past the V&A venue, but in the time I have in my life to make art, I felt there were a lot of other ideas that were developing. Allowing it now to rest indefinitely wasn’t because it didn’t have continuing potential; it was because I wanted to use my time to develop new things.

**AS:** When do you know a piece is finished? Especially when you explore the concept of labor? Is it a lot like what you just described with *Topologies*, and responding to when you feel it has reached a conclusion?

**AW:** Well, with *Topologies* it would be the scale of the surface upon which it was installed because there is an end there; a width and a length. In a work like *Errant Behaviors*, why is it finished at twenty-three animation segments on two screens versus forty animation segments on more screens? I suppose the answer to that is somewhat formal and somewhat intuitive. I felt that the interpretive possibilities of this way of working had been explored; a range of emotive characteristics had been realized. There was a quirky humor and psychological dark side within this work, a range of emotions and odd behaviors, as well as a range of formal characteristics of these lace fragments. It finally felt like there was a critical mass of animation segments to make the work have real life and content. I had a conceptual structure, a reason for making the work, a point of view that was material based, but I didn’t know before I started that it would be twenty-three animation segments. That is something I discovered through the process of making.

**AS:** You mentioned that some of these materials you work with are found or family heirlooms. Where else do you acquire the materials you work with?

**AW:** Almost all of my materials have a connection to textiles and fiber materiality -- things we wear, things we walk on, and the hair on our bodies. I find that this material base opens up so many connections to old and new technologies, to cultural contexts, to the personal and
social, to issues of labor (both domestic and industrial), the handmade and machine made, analog versus digital. The textile is an incredibly present and rich material subject. It just continues to open up in different ways.

When I started working with lace as a material, I had quite a collection of it. Most of it was pretty scrappy but I wore lace and it was around me. Lace is a part of lingerie, hat veiling, stocking mesh, any kind of mesh in open knit structure, any netting kind of structure. I included a large variety of open work things in my definition of lace and I started collecting it from all over the world.

When I was in London at the antique markets, there was a Belgian dealer and he would have these scrappy bags of stuff, not really worth selling in his mind but a lot of it was just incredibly beautiful. So I would buy things from him. I also bought Chinese machine-made lace from San Francisco's Chinatown, high-end and very old Belgian, French, and English-made lace. My collection of lace included some things I had from my own family, things that I wore, things that other people wore, and things I found in thrift stores. The open work properties that emerged were really diverse in terms of social, cultural, and personal contexts. I just kept collecting it and if it wasn't black, I dyed it black. I just kept working for several years through these open work materials.

I was also theorizing and interested by the fact that the World Wide Web really borrowed the language of lace: mesh, net, network. These terms identify a textile, in particular a lace textile. And all reference interdependency and interconnectivity that exist in both a textile and the WWW. I'm interested in how early forms of linear thread intersections have resonance through language and structure to some of the very newest technologies.

AS: In your interview with Caroline Picard for Art21, you mention, “my art has a kind of conjunction between visual art concepts and material culture, where the histories embedded in materials and the way things are made are critically important to the content of the work.” Could you please elaborate on more specific “visual art concepts” that interest you within our “material culture”?

AW: I am interested in studying visual things that are art, as well as visual things in anthropology museums, things within the domestic realm, and things as part of the decorative arts. When is a Neolithic pot a work of art and when is it part of material culture? Navajo chiefs blankets are incredibly profound visual forms – are they art or material culture? The issues of context and hierarchies of naming and inclusion or lack of inclusion are born out of intellectual inquiry, cultural differences, economics and power. Perhaps in the United States there is a greater awareness or openness to women working and asserting their identity as artists and as individuals. Some of us have a certain privilege within a history that has opened up freedoms of expression and material use, but I believe this is an area needing continued research and inquiry, and a profoundly troubling issue for women in much the world.

AS: Discuss how the idea of hand labor or the work of the hand that is prevalent within your work fits into a greater contemporary art discourse.

AW: We are now in a place where there is a lot of work made around the subject of labor. The crisis of textile production in this country was certainly an influence to my making of the project, Local Industry. With increased offshore production, many theorists would say that our country is losing skill-based knowledge that could deeply effect the potential of our creative and artistic assets by losing the ingenuity in production. Through production comes invention and knowledge, a deep knowledge.

When I was in New York a month ago, I went to the Brooklyn Museum and saw the El Anatsui show. Essentially the works are textile, although I think he talks about them as soft form. Many works are made by taking a unit like a scrap of metal, and puncturing it so it can be laced together with other scraps of metal. By doing this, he creates large articulated surfaces that can drape and be affected by gravity like large tapestries. There is acknowledgment of the artisan workshop that makes the work. El Anatsui is the conceptualist that directs production, but the hand is very present in that work.

I don't think that this condition of a renewed acknowledgement of hand labor is a reaction to one thing. I believe it is an evolving process that's part of a complicated history of actions and reactions that build
into an openness in ways of working. There is a new critical inquiry in the use of the term craft – craft as a way of producing things, not just with focus on refinement and skill mastery. We are at a moment now in art where there is acknowledgement of hand labor from crafting that might be considered very sloppy, or provisional, or un-monumental (like work within the New Museum’s Unmonumental exhibition) to something that is very systematic and refined, or outsourced crafting, where the artist is not touching the materials at all but directing the production through skilled artisanal labor in another facility entirely. All of these ways of making seem to be in contemporary art discourse now, and are theorized, looked at, and understood, not just formally, but in terms of the meaning of those ways of producing things. There is clearly an acknowledgement of the hand and thinking through making in art.

Anne Wilson’s work can be viewed online at annewilsonartist.com and at Rhona Hoffman Gallery at rhoffmangallery.com

Anne Wilson, Hair work (detail), 1991.
Maria Tomasula: The Grotesque and the Sumptuous

by Ashley Jones
Maria Tomasula is known for elaborate, symbolically-charged still life paintings, which are painted in a classical style. She is an esteemed artist who has exhibited at Forum Gallery in New York and Los Angeles, Zolla/Lieberman Gallery in Chicago, and the Indianapolis Museum of Fine Art. Reviews of her work have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *New Yorker*, and *ARTnews*. Ms. Tomasula received her Master of Fine Arts from Northwestern University and Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Illinois at Chicago.

I interviewed Ms. Tomasula in her office at Notre Dame University, where she has taught since 1994. There were accomplished paintings hanging salon-style on every wall, each given to her by previous students. After looking at the paintings we settled into our chairs, and she spoke with me about her painting process, concepts, and imagery.
Left: **Chorus**, 2012
Oil on Panel
12” x 9”
Courtesy of Zolla/Lieberman Gallery

Right: **Cantata**, 2007
Oil on Panel
42” x 36”
Courtesy of Zolla/Lieberman Gallery
Ashley Jones: How did you arrive at the color palette that you work with? Is it consistent, or does it change?

Maria Tomasula: When it comes to the color palette and the consistency of it, I look at my images over years and I do see a change, not so much in terms of hue, but in terms of saturation. I like to use highly saturated colors and wide value ranges. I think part of that comes from the drama or the theatricality of that kind of color and that kind of palette.

AJ: What material do you paint on?

MT: The material I paint on has changed a lot over the years. When I went to school in the later ‘80’s, some of the earlier teachers had come of age in high Modernism and they were not that interested in things like the archival quality of materials. I wanted things to be archival so I read on how to prepare a surface. A lot of my earlier work is on linen with rabbit skin glue and oil priming white that sanded down. I used lead white: that’s really bad for you, and I did it for years and years. When I got to the point where I wanted to have kids I stopped doing that; the damage was probably done, already. These days I custom order panels from Ampersand; it’s very archival. That’s basically what I paint on: gesso panels and clay board.

AJ: What determines the dimensions of your paintings?

MT: I just did a show at Zolla/Lieberman and all the paintings were really tiny. Some of them were small as three by four inches. A lot of times an image will feel like it needs to have a commanding presence, so it will be bigger. Or, if you want it to be more intimate it will be smaller. Most of the shows I have variable sizes. However, the last show I had was all very small work. That’s was because I had a little bit of a reaction towards the overblown, gargantuan, artworld stuff. But that was the only time I did a whole show of tiny-tiny pieces. I probably will never do that again. There are advantages to it with some of the images. Some images I didn’t do, because they wouldn’t work on such a small scale.

AJ: Do you create images for yourself, for an audience, or both?

MT: I am not sure that you can really answer it. I remember reading this interview with that musician, Moby, years ago. Somebody asked that question and I thought, ‘Oh brother, he is going to say something stupid.’ I like the way he answered it. He said he has this imaginary listener in mind. As I recall, it was a seventeen year-old girl. He thought, ‘Well, would she like this? Would she move to this? Would this affect her?’ He imagined someone, not an actual group of people. I don’t think that I can say that for myself. You can’t help but be affected by the people you are around. I know that if I had a different upbringing or had a different group of friends I would have been different. There are some things that I wouldn’t do just because I wouldn’t want my mom to see. There are all kinds of people that haunt you and stay with you. Even when they die they stay with you. Maybe that’s the audience: all the people you come in contact with. There are some people you want to impress and some people that you want to do something for. I think it would be the people that I know.

AJ: Are your still lives observational?

MT: Less and less so. Well, I take that back: I don’t really set them up but I do have objects like the ones in the still-life, or something like the object. A lot of it is invented.

AJ: How do you prepare yourself to work on a piece?

MT: I don’t have time. I’ve got laundry to do! I just start working on it. I just go into my studio and start painting. I usually have the radio going. I like lectures and books on tape. If I want any sleep I just have to get in there and paint.

AJ: How did you learn about galleries and the pricing and selling of pieces?

MT: I had a great experience when I got out of graduate school. One of my teachers was at a gallery and they needed a gallery girl. So I applied and got that job. I worked at a gallery for a year and that was an eye opening experience, because I saw things I hadn’t understood in school. Schools do a pretty good job now to find a segue to being in the actual artworld. I know a lot of artists who are really involved in pricing. I am really bad at that, so I just ask my dealers to do it. I am not saying that’s smart. I know artists who are very aware of those sorts of things. They calculate where they are at, and how the next show needs to be up ten percent. I am not savvy in that way, so I just let my dealers do it.
AJ: How did you come to be represented by the Zolla/Lieberman Gallery?
MT: William Lieberman's mother, Roberta, came over and put her hand on my hand and said, 'Maria, I am going to be your Jewish grandmother.' I was like, 'Alright! I don't have one of those!' She was so nice to me. She had an incredible eye. I knew other artists that were represented by them and the way they talked about Roberta and William made me interested in being represented by them. I was with another dealer at the time. They showed interest and I showed interest, and it just happened. It's been great; they have been really good to me. I think that's the harder thing: to get in the first one. Just show your work. It wasn't from applying to a gallery; it was from having these little shows and somebody saw my paintings and called me. That's usually how it works. That's how it worked for me.

AJ: In a 2002 interview with your former student, Julie Farstad, you discussed your upbringing and how you were surrounded by art. Do you consider that time to be a part of your artistic development? Did it influence what you do today? In what ways?
MT: Absolutely. I think that's the case for each of us. Somehow you absorb these ideas from your surroundings. I think each one of us has a treasure chest of images. When I talk to students they will talk about things like childhood toys or movies from the '80s. That's a really important part of their coming-of-age. That's not what I drew from, because I came from an immigrant kid's experience.

AJ: Does your religious upbringing still play a role in your images? Are your objects to be viewed symbolically, spiritually, or both?
MT: There is a difference between - I am talking about the objects to be viewed symbolically - making work and interpreting images. I try to be cognizant of how images might function in the larger culture and then balance that against what I want them to do, but I know that people from larger culture are coming at it from all different points of view and, of course, don't view them the way I do. I see them as symbolic and other people tell me what they think about my images. They view them from a much broader spectrum than I ever would have.

AJ: Artists make images that are often perceived differently than how they intended. Knowing this, are you okay with your images being misperceived? Or would you alter them to be perceived as intended?
MT: It's probably a case by case basis. I will give you a specific example. The combination of the grotesque - and I would even throw pain in there - combined with images that look like they are sumptuous, that are beautiful, satiny, that kind of combination: I just like it. I will make paintings where I already know people will react more strongly to the icky parts than I want them to, but I will usually make them, anyway. Those are the ones that tend not to sell, but I keep making them because I like them.

AJ: It seems that there is a lot of speculation on the political statements that your pieces make. Do you intend for there to be specific political statements, or is it mostly conjecture?
MT: I intend for there to be a political statement: very much so. I don't know if it's the political statement that people get out of it. My parents were really politically involved. A lot of my politics come from what they did. In the pictures that I make, it is not on the surface. It is more embedded in the way it is made. There is a view that may be extreme - at the same time maybe not so extreme - that says we're individuals; we are fully responsible for who we are and what we become; we are responsible psychologically and financially. I completely disagree with that. We are not individuals in that way. We can only become what we can become through social, political, cultural conditions that we are born into. Those put constraints on what is possible, what tends to happen, and what tends not to happen to each of us.
The politics in the paintings may be boiled down to the images being centered around a feeling and a motive. I try to make them elicit a feeling, maybe pain, maybe a tactile feeling of being in the world. But the way I make the paintings is so constrained. You will never see a mark or a flourish. That was very important for me to learn when I went to art school. It was a really new idea for me: that art is a route to freedom and that there are certain ways of making marks that signal to a viewer, like in Abstract Expressionism. I do the exact opposite, to show that I can only become what the constraints of my society allow me to.

AJ: How did you develop your glazing technique?
MT: I just read about glazing. When I was in college I read a lot of old technical manuals about painting. When I went to school and the particular teachers I had at the beginning, there wasn’t a lot of interest in technical. That just wasn’t what it was about. I got interested in that by reading those old manuals and those old books.

AJ: Do you ever want to stylistically leave a mark in your paintings, yet by mere concept and technique you cannot?

MT: Yeah it’s funny, because at the beginning it looks very brushy and painterly, but I stipple all of that out. So maybe I get both: with that under-painting, and then I go in with the little brushes and stipple it all away.

AJ: You are a self-professed “technique geek”. Is your technique an end in itself or is it a means to an end?

MT: Maybe both. I think of the technique and the process as a metaphor for what kind of sense of being in the world, this accretion of tiny little moments that add up to something, and all the invisible histories that create who we are. You think about something like the fact we are speaking English here, which is not a native language. You think of all the empire building and everything that had to happen just for this, and then multiply that by a thousand different aspects. We can only be who we are because of what happened before us.

AJ: Who would you say inspired your technique? Who do you consider some of your conceptual influences?

MT: Actually, things I have read. A lot of books that cover human development since the time that humans became humans, how we evolve. I like books that get at what humans are, and our particular form of consciousness. Some of those are conceptual influences.

AJ: You state that you “pick every element in these pictures for its expressive values; the image is meant to engage a viewer’s powers of reflection and to engage with them emotionally, using an aesthetic founded on the embodied self”. Do you use any other elements to evoke emotive responses from the viewer?

MT: I think so. By elements I mean color, value, and composition: whatever is done. I tend to pick all of that stuff. I have never made a film but it would be cool to go to a location, set up the lighting, pick the elements in there, who the actors are. It feels a little like that, only that it’s all made up.

AJ: How do you decide on the objects used to portray symbolism in your paintings? How do you attribute a particular meaning to objects in your paintings, to ensure it is conveyed effectively?

MT: Often it will be something that conjures up an idea, like a body. It could be a flower, could be fruit, could be a doll, could be a glove, could be any one of a number of things in the way it’s composed. It suggests a person and once you have that you can cut, pierce, or bind. You can do anything to it to give the viewer the right idea. It seems clear, at least from what people tell me, that the images aren’t about fruits and flowers. It’s clear that it’s about something other than what is being portrayed.

AJ: Is subjectivity significant to your imagery?

MT: I think it is. It’s like the experience of being a supposed individual. We are singular, like a penguin or a cell is singular, but what I think I am trying to do is focus on a sense of singularity, but also how that is constrained by all sorts of things.
Left: Corona, 2011
Oil on Panel
6” x 6”
Courtesy of Zolla/Lieberman Gallery

Right: Please Don’t Go, 2010
Oil on Panel
42” x 42”
Courtesy of Zolla/Lieberman Gallery
**AJ:** Can you discuss the theatrical settings you create within your paintings? Why do you present your subject manner in this way?

**MT:** When I was a kid, we would go to churches a lot. We were in there all the time, it seemed. I like them. You have to understand that my dad was a steel worker; it was like mill industrial settings. But the churches were really different because they were so sumptuous and resplendent and high saturation; a lot of gold, a lot of glinting: they were very-very dramatic settings. They had candles and it was really like theatre. I realized later on that these paintings that were under lit and big shadows: that that’s how a lot of the images that I saw were. I think it all comes from that high drama setting.

**AJ:** You seem partial to symmetrical compositions. Is the symmetry a conceptual aspect of your pieces? What is your aesthetic intention in using symmetry in your work?

**MT:** Yeah. Again, this is one of those things that I wasn’t really that aware of. People kept pointing that out. I think it has to do with the fact that it’s sort of heraldic, and sort of iconic. I didn’t grow up with a lot of those icons like the orthodox icons, which are all centrally placed figures and are often symmetrical. Yet there is something about the heraldic quality of a symmetrical composition that is like a statement of grandeur, which appeals to me, obviously, because I keep using it. Beyond making the connection to symmetry and icons and the kind of immovable quality they have, there may be more to it, but that’s what I can articulate.

**AJ:** Do you feel that there are visual cycles in your paintings? For instance: the figure was said to be a primary focus of your paintings but was then removed. Then you proceeded to paint your images with flowers. But now, fragmented portions of the figure are beginning to reappear.

**MT:** There does seem to be cycles. This is a good example of how that’s allowable in your time or place, and the pressures that we live in. When I was in school almost none of my teachers thought that the figure was art. I shouldn’t say that, because there are people who did. The impression I got from some of my teachers was that there was a real bias against Realism and the figure. You had to do a lot of explaining and I wasn’t able to explain it. I didn’t know enough about art history and what had happened in art to be able to explain it. I just knew it wasn’t allowed, so I stopped painting it. I wanted to paint about people, about what it is to live, so I used a lot of symbolic language.

Times have changes a lot since then. After I got out of school, suddenly it was okay; you could do that again! So, I have been painting a couple faces and some figures in my more recent work. That was an early prohibition that took me a long time to get over.

**AJ:** Looking at your history as an artist, what would you change about your journey?

**MT:** It’s too bad that we aren’t born with the accumulated knowledge of human history and that we all have to start new. Every single one, every time, again and again and again, we start off with nothing. I tell my friends that as soon as we can get a chip in our head I’ll be the first one in line. Of course there will be subliminal messages, too, like ‘drink more coke’.

**AJ:** What differences do you find between the commercial arts and fine arts?

**MT:** That wall between paintings and other art is not a solid thing. We are just surrounded by images, with advertising and such. You should know how you are being manipulated by it and how these images came to be, so that you are able to analyze them for their formal qualities. You can direct an analyzing apparatus onto any image, whether it’s a painting or an advertisement. We are in a river of images and objects that we can look at and draw inspiration from.

Maria Tomasula’s work can be viewed online at zollaliebemangallery.com
Domestic Grunge: An Interview with Janis Mars Wunderlich

by Benjamin Lambert
Janis Mars Wunderlich is a figurative clay artist who lives and works in Columbus, Ohio. She is a mother of five who makes richly surfaced, highly complex, sometimes creepy, and always playful sculptures. She transforms everyday interactions with her family into sculptures that are curious, accessible, and mysterious. Wunderlich received her BFA from Brigham Young University and her MFA in Ceramics from Ohio State University. She has exhibited her work at the Red Lodge Clay Center in Montana, the Sherrie Gallery in Columbus, Ohio, and the Ferrin Gallery in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Wunderlich has lectured and taught workshops at the Penland School of Crafts, California College of Arts and Crafts, and the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA). Her work has been published in numerous books and magazines, including *Ceramics Monthly*, *Confrontational Clay*, 500 Figures in Clay, and The Figure in Clay. Her work is in the permanent collections of the Mint Museum of Craft and Design in Charlotte, North Carolina, and The Taipei County Yingge Ceramics Museum in Taipei, Taiwan. Wunderlich was also featured in the 2008 documentary film, Who Does She Think She Is?, which explores the social and professional issues surrounding five professional artists who are also mothers.

Upon entering Wunderlich’s house, I was welcomed by some of her sculptures hanging on the wall. Murals covered the walls of her entryway and staircase, and the smell of freshly baked cinnamon bread wafted from her kitchen. She guided me to her downstairs studio, a modestly-sized room framed with floor to ceiling windows and sky-lights. Her backyard, gardens, and patio are nestled around her studio, which extends off the house. The studio includes a kiln, large table and countertop, and high shelves that are filled with her and her children’s work.

She showed me her extensive sketchbooks filled with notes, clippings, sketches, and her children’s doodles. The work surrounding her in the studio offers an informal retrospective of her career, ranging from her BFA show to some of her most current pieces. I talked to Janice Mars Wunderlich about her technical and thought processes while she worked on a large bare-footed figure that would soon be wearing a dress of tiny figures.
**Ben Lambert:** I'm curious about what you do to balance your creative life with your social life.

**Janis Mars Wunderlich:** I'm curious about that, too. At this moment, I don't have any more kids at home. In fact, my oldest is about to graduate college. It seems not that long ago that I had babies and kids and they were working with me in the studio. I'm constantly challenged with where I can squeeze the art in.

From the very beginning of my ceramics career, it was really important for me to balance because I knew I wasn't willing to choose family over art, or art over family. I needed a model that balanced both of these things that are so important to me. My sculptures take a lot of time. They don't take a lot of material. I don't use very much clay. I work really thin, and I'm very judicious with my materials, so I can make a little last a long time.

**BL:** Do you make a schedule for yourself?

**JMW:** It depends on what's happening and what I've got going on. When I have something very big on the horizon, I have to be very disciplined. I have to make sure I get in here six or seven hours a day. Other times I'll have other things weighing on our family, and I'll need to cut back on the time I'm in the studio. I have a couple of big shows coming up next year, so over the summer I need to have a disciplined schedule.

**BL:** Are those solo shows?

**JMW:** Yeah, I have a big one coming up next year. I'm at the point in my career where... I don't have anyone pushing me anymore, saying, 'let's try this.' All that changing of direction comes from myself, and pushing myself is hard to do, especially when you do something well, and you're used to it, and your audience is used to it. I like to do stuff that makes me uncomfortable. I'm terrible at drawing and painting, so I force myself to draw and paint, and for this upcoming show next year, I'd like to do several large canvases. I have a wheel, too, to try and push myself to expand. It's not comfortable to me.

**BL:** When you're building your sculptures, I notice that you're brushing something on, but you are not scoring as you add on clay. Do you use sodium silicate to assist in adding on clay?

**JMW:** No, I used to always put darvan1 in my slip, but I don't find that it makes much of a difference. I work so slow that I don't even develop cracks in my work. The climate in Ohio is so humid that things don't dry quickly here.

I work layer by layer; it's a lot like building a pot, or making a vessel. I usually start at the bottom first, and then I go up. I work on the details as I go up and as the piece starts to dry I start adding layers of color to the bottom to keep it from drying out.

**BL:** How long does it take to build a piece?

**JMW:** This one will take about a month. I always start with a sketch first, or a drawing, and in this case (the female figure she is working on) I'm thinking that I want this sculpture to be a really large figure, but I don't want this dress to really be there when I'm done. I want it all to be figures. Her whole body is going to be covered in people, action and energy, animals. I'm interested in the negative space, and I think for a while and figure out where I want to place each arm and leg. I want it to be balanced. A lot of my work has to do with capturing chaos, or energy, or a lot of layers.

**BL:** Is this piece that you are working on a literal metaphor for motherhood?

**JMW:** Yeah, I would probably say so. I'm sure its autobiographical; all of my work has been about the things I struggle with in my family; things that are on my mind. I don't always do it on purpose. I don't say, 'today I'm going to make a sculpture because my teenage son hates me, and I'm feeling really angry about that.' But I will come to my studio and be stressed-out, and work that stress out by noodling on details, and all of a sudden something emerges that is telling what I am thinking about inside. In a weird way it's therapy.

**BL:** When did you know that you wanted to work in ceramics?

**JMW:** I went to college thinking I wanted to do art, but I had no idea in what. I had no experience other than a basic art class in high school. I fell in love with drawing and painting, and then I did printmaking and absolutely fell in love because there was a process.

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1 Darvan or Sodium Silicate: Types of defloculants; alkaline materials added to slip in ceramics practice, that give flowing consistency with less water content, resulting in lower drying shrinkage, which important in joining-slip.
I got married between my freshman and sophomore year, when I was nineteen. I was super-young and crazy. I hadn't done ceramics since my sophomore year. I got married in August, and started ceramics two weeks later. I already knew I loved processes, and grinding and cutting and scratching. I felt at home with ceramics with all the fire and materials. I was a big, mature nineteen year-old, so I had a lot of things on my mind about my relationship and how it changed everything. It was a great time for me both in terms of finding the material that I could respond to and tell my story in. It became really natural for me to talk about what was going on with me, and my relationship with my family, through clay.

BL: Did you ever want to throw pots?

JMW: The thing is, we started with pots. And the pots I was making had people on them and had figurative stories to tell. I would scratch little details in the surface, and knew right away that I wanted to tell stories, and they all had to be about me, right? Most of what I did in graduate school was mold-making and slip-casting, but after graduate school I had to learn how to work without molds. I wanted my studio to be at home, and our first house was really tiny, and I didn't have a studio. All I had was a corner of the dining room. I had a table and a window and a kiln in the garage. That was how I worked for three years. I taught myself how to build with the thinness of slip-casting.

BL: What strikes me about your use of molds is that slip-casting has the tendency of looking manufactured, crisp and hard edged, whereas your work is covered with textured details and the mark of your hand.

JMW: This is true. Generally I would slip-cast a basic form. I would slip-cast feet and a middle section, and then add all of the details on top of the surface. I would make a mold of a head, with a mound for a nose and hollows for the eyes and make fifty of them, and then go in and make each one individual. I made hundreds of pieces and parts, and then would assemble them.

BL: How do you think of color and pattern in your work? In the 1999 Ceramics Monthly interview, you mentioned that Aurore Chabot informed your use of color while you were an undergrad.

JMW: Yeah. She was a visiting artist, and talked about underglazes
Previous: **Antler Girl is Thirsty**  
25 x 11 x 9”, 2010  
Handbuilt earthenware with multi-fired slips, oxides, underglaze, and overglaze. (Bisque cone one, Glaze cone 04)

Right: **Nursing Chihuahua**  
16 x 8 x 7”, 2005  
Handbuilt earthenware with multi-fired slips, oxides, underglaze, and overglaze. (Bisque cone one, Glaze cone 04)
around the time that they were being made commercially. She introduced me to more of a color range. Up to that point we were just dunking our pieces in one glaze and then firing it. So, it was a whole new world thinking about surfaces, and painting on colors.

The look that I’m going for in my surfaces is a balance between baby sweet feminine colors and grungy, mossy, dirty: almost like something that has been unearthed. I also like the surface of my pieces to look energized and sort of wet, but I don’t want them to be too shiny. I want the pieces to look hydrated in some way, and that can be a difficult thing to achieve in ceramics.

**BL:** Do you achieve that sheen on the surface by using a clear glaze or with a flux, such as gerstley borate?

**JMW:** I do it by layering a lot of glazes. I put on a first layer of gerstley and lay in some patterns for the (bisque) firing. Then I lay in some color for the second firing, and I’ll start to see some of the gerstley pop through the colors. That will achieve a mottled or stippled effect. I’ll start with a crazy baby pink - they come out of my kiln looking like Easter eggs - and then I’ll lay a darker, grungy oxide wash over it. Then I’ll put another layer of gerstley over the oxides to get another layer of colors. I basically try to make a mottled surface that is not the same all over. I like layers: it makes me want to spend more time with the piece. It also makes the piece more mysterious; you don’t know if it has been unearthed.

**BL:** Have you ever felt like you have gone too far with color?

**JMW:** That happens sometimes, but with the colors that I use it’s hard to get there. For example, the reds that I use burn out with multiple firings. If I don’t apply them too thickly I can rely on them burning out, somewhat.

**BL:** It appears that you had a pretty clear vision of your career early on. Had you always imagined yourself as a studio artist?

**JMW:** The main reason I went to graduate school was because I didn’t have the knowledge or finances to set up a kiln and studio at that time. Ceramics isn’t something that you can do with no budget and equipment. You have to have access to facilities. With a seven-month-old daughter it wasn’t going to get any easier, so I figured that I was going to seize the moment and go to graduate school.

I was trained how to be a professor and I did figure that was what I was going to do. At the end of graduate school, though, I was surprised at how much I loved spending time with my daughter. I started to rethink my future career. Do I really want to be in a college all day surrounded by students and miss my kids growing up? The number one thing that I needed, besides my family, was to make work, and it’s still that way. I wasn’t willing to sacrifice that for a teaching job. I was also able to get a really great exhibition opportunity right out of grad school and sold a lot of my work. That motivated me and gave me a little financial backing to set up my own studio. That made me realize that I didn’t have to teach to make it as an artist. It was hard for me, though, because I thought that you weren’t a real artist unless you had a position at a university.

I get that fix by teaching workshops, or by being a visiting artist. I just go, and I’m treated as a guest, and the only people I’m working with are people who want to be there. Honestly I can make as much money teaching one workshop as I can teaching an entire semester, adjunct.

**BL:** Antler Girl Is Thirsty is a little bit creepy, and a lot of other work could be described as such. Your work is also very playful and bright. Is there a deliberate line that you tread with your imagery? Describe some of your thoughts on the difference between creepy and playful, and how either does or does not apply to your work.

**JMW:** It comes from conversations that my kids will have with me, and I’ll look at them, and I’ll think… and tweak it slightly in my mind and write it down, and it becomes something different in my sketchbook. Like the juice-box thing: one of my kids was squeezing a juice-box so hard that it was exploding, and I said, ‘Jeez, I can relate to that juice-box,’ and then I write it down. I was dropping my son off at school one morning and he said, ‘talking to you is pointless’ and then slammed the door. I take that teenage angst and put it in my sketchbook. That sketch turned into a bunch of sculptures with attacks coming out of the person’s mouth.

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2 Flux: a low-melting component in clay or glaze that reacts with silica to form a glassy surface during the firing.
A big theme in my work is being a mother and being around my family and my children, and they’re really being fed by me, in fact they take a lot of my time and energy and a lot of my patience. All of my patience! Frankly, I would have the most boring art in the world if I didn’t have all of these crazy challenges and experiences, and all of these things happening with my kids and my family. It’s what I talk about in my work, so I’m grateful for it, but I’m also exhausted by it. I was trying to show that symbiotic relationship in the piece Antler Girl is Thirsty. I need them, and they need me, and we take turns feeding off of each other and feeding each other.

My sketchbooks are really important to me. I’m not always in my studio, and I’ve got the sort of mind that’s always looking for and receiving inspiration, so even at dinner time, or when I’m getting attitude from someone, or driving down the street, it’s always a flow. I’m always looking for it. I always have a sketchbook with me. They’re messy because I’m either in a car or they’re in a bag and I just pull them out and I’ll write whatever someone just said. I put them in the books because, when I walk into the studio, chances are they’ll be gone.

BL: Do you think other people can read into the content in your sculptures?
JMW: I don’t want my sculptures to be an inside joke for just me. I don’t want to be the only person who understands what’s going on.

BL: On your website and under your piece, Nursing Chihuahua, you told the story of your son Izak saying, ‘I always wondered what Chihuahua milk tasted like.’ Is the little boy in your piece your son Izak? If so, do you use other similar inside jokes in any of your work?
JMW: Yes, that is Isak. I put him on one of the teats nursing. I said, ‘look, I’m putting you on so you can know what it tastes like.’ ‘Aw, thanks, Mom!’ It’s just one of those crazy moments that are totally gone now that he’s in high school. He’s not into nursing Chihuahuas, anymore. I found that little chatter inspirational when I was building my sculptures. I’ll be working on one of my sculptures thinking, ‘what do I do next?’ and all of a sudden I’ll hear, ‘and then I went to la-la-la…’ and I’ll think, ‘Ooohhhhh.’

I like the images that are in my sculptures to be universally related to. It’s a tall order, and I’m not saying that I’m successful at it, but that’s what I’m going for in my work. I’m tapping into this universal thing that is parenthood. No matter who you are in this world, you are part of some family, or have some sort of a relationship. Either you hate your family or you’re very close to them but, either way, it’s always emotional.

BL: Do you think that the emotional content in your work is softened by your use of animal forms and stylized figures?
JMW: I like the play. I like a balance of grotesque and scary versus sweet and yummy and sappy. I’m intrigued by both, but I want a balance. I don’t want them to be so creepy that they’re difficult to look at but, on the other hand, work that is sentimental and sappy is so dishonest to me. In talking about my own family, I like to strike a balance because that’s what my family is. It’s awesome and I wouldn’t change anything, but it’s not all easy. We’re not this picture-perfect family. I think it’s dishonest to talk about families and just have the sweet stuff.

I was always self-conscious about making creepy art. I didn’t make this kind of imagery on purpose, to be edgy. It’s just what I needed to say. My work used to be more edgy, and it was dark and made people feel uncomfortable. I tried to counteract that by putting more little roses and buttons on it, and it ended up being creepier, and I made people more uncomfortable.

BL: Would you say that your audience sees the sweet side of your work first and that’s the entry point, and then they realize the darker imagery once they’ve been hooked?
JMW: I often look at my work critically and think, ‘What is the deal with my work?’ The work that I make is challenging because it is a little bit edgy and because it is a little bit sweet and about families. That subject matter, by nature, is not considered fine art. It’s “mother-y”; it’s not “fine art”. I don’t know where I belong. When I’m with people who are not artists and we’re talking about art and they ask me, ‘What do you do?’, if I ever show them my art they can’t respond to it because it’s too weird. With the fine art crowd, when they find out what I do they respond, ‘Oh, you do ceramics. Ohhhh, you’re the one who does mother ceramics.’ With (Knock Out) I was thinking of making something dealing with the seven deadly sins. I started off making witch boots, and I was going to turn it into this evil something. And I got up to here (the top of the legs), and my daughter walked in. At the time she was 12 or 13, and...
she was talking about why she needed to buy a bikini. I thought it was ridiculous, and we were fighting about it. I was trying to tell her my whole feminist thing about how women shouldn’t be objects, you know? We don’t have boobs so that guys can stare at them: they’re meant to nurse children with. And she, of course, is like, ‘I have it, and I want to show it off.’ She’s just this young thing, but she was curvy… As we were having this conversation I was building this sculpture and its torso ended up a bathing suit. Not on purpose, though. Whenever I see this piece I remember that conversation. It was a half an hour, it came and went, but it left its mark on the piece. I put boxing gloves on the piece and called it Knock Out, because I wanted to empower my daughter to be modest and to punch out any guy that looked at her boobs. It’s so stupid but that’s what I was thinking when I was making the piece. That whole conversation was nothing, but it was everything. My entire artistic career is capturing these moments.

Janis Mars Wunderlich’s work can be viewed online at janismarswunderlich.com, and at sherriegallerie.com

**Knockout**

19 x 10 x 8”, 2009

Handbuilt earthenware with multi-fired slips, oxides, underglaze, and overglaze.

(Bisque cone one, Glaze cone 04)
Post- INDUSTRIA: An Interview with Doug Herren

by Austin Wieland
Doug Herren is a ceramic sculptor currently living in Philadelphia. His recent work, *INDUSTRIA*, abstracts traditional pottery forms and combines them with industrial visual motifs. Each vessel is created at a confrontational scale, rendering it useless, and is arrayed in bright colors that result in very playful surfaces. Herren is influenced by both urban and rural landscapes, such as industrial detritus and various architectural structures, including bridges.

Herren received his BFA from Wichita State University and his MFA from Louisiana State University. After graduate school, he completed residencies at the Archie Bray Foundation in Montana and at The Clay Studio in Philadelphia. He is currently an instructor and technician at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. Herren has exhibited nationally, conducted numerous workshops, and his work has been featured in *Ceramics Monthly*. He is represented by the Snyderman-Works Gallery in Philadelphia. I met Doug Herren at Snyderman-Works to discuss his artistic process and evolution of *INDUSTRIA*. 
Austin Wieland: When did you decide to pursue a career in ceramics?
Doug Herren: I was at Wichita State originally, studying graphic design. I saw the type of work going on at the time and decided I did not want to do that for a living. So I switched and doubled in ceramics. The program was focused on the wheel and pottery. For someone who wanted to learn how to throw on the wheel, it was a great place to be. When I was at Louisiana State University for graduate school, I continued to stay focused on the wheel.

AW: When did handbuilding and slab construction work its way into your process?
DH: The wheel was very seductive and I didn’t start handbuilding until almost twelve years after beginning with clay, when I was at the Archie Bray Foundation. I was trying to get away from generating all the forms on the wheel. The little handbuilding I had done in school never made an impact on me. Now handbuilding easily dominates my work, and the wheel-thrown parts become accessories.

AW: Do you incorporate molds into your process?
DH: No molds: everything is slab-built and thrown. For the bolts I have little sprig molds, but I have been moving away from these. In my recent body of work, everything is without nuts and bolts. I wanted to start reducing that trompe l’oeil effect and make it look like something else. I feel like the forms are becoming more complex and I want to get rid of the industrial element that was so referential with my previous pieces.

AW: Do you sketch a general idea of your forms or do you work more intuitively and impulsively?
DH: Usually I will sketch everything out. The teapots, especially the early ones, were all sketched out and I had a pretty good idea of what I wanted to make. With some pieces, I know what kind of forms I need. However, it is more fun building without the plan because I generate a lot of parts and I don’t really know what I am going to get. I know which parts will be a spout or a body, but I don’t know what will actually go with what. In my studio, I have a couple tables that I fill up. It takes me a few weeks and I keep everything wrapped up. I throw parts and hand-build sections; I get a couple hundred parts to start working with. I try to match up and improvise with what I have, but a lot of times I feel like

Above: Doug Herren with his sculptural ewers and teapots at the Snyderman-Works Gallery. Stoneware with bronze glaze, enamel paint. Photo by Austin Wieland

Right: Industrial Teapot, 2012. Stoneware with bronze glaze, enamel paint, 48” x 34” x 18” Photo Courtesy of Doug Herren.
I have to make more parts or particular shapes. Not having preparatory sketches for these has been a real learning experience. Almost all of the other work I have done has been pretty well mapped-out. Usually they will diverge from the drawing a little, but not much.

**AW:** Do you work on more than one of these at a time? When working on a sculpture, does one ever influence another?

**DH:** I actually made all of these at the same time (pointing to five teapots). Usually I will start them all at the same time and begin with the base section, attaching legs first, so they can have a chance to set up before I start mounting all of this heavier stuff on top. They feed off each other. I say to myself, ‘this might look good on this part, but I think I can try something different on that.’ That’s why I like working on multiple pieces at a time instead of one, start to finish.

**AW:** Why do you use stoneware?

**DH:** I use stoneware for the firing temperature I can achieve. I want to fire to cone five, but not higher because then I start to have more warping and cracking. Also, because I am familiar with it and I know how to push it. All the clay I use is recycled. When I was at Archie Bray and Clay Studio there would be big recycling buckets full of clay from throwing classes. It was a free supply because I could take that up to my studio and just add a little grog and fireclay. I didn’t like seeing clay wasted, but I didn’t need anything precisely mixed. People who work with porcelain are much more finicky and that is understandable. However, I am using really forgivable clay that can take some punishment.

**AW:** Your new work, **INDUSTRIA**, utilizes industrial imagery. What is it about old machinery that interests you?

**DH:** I am originally from a small town in Kansas. While growing up there I saw a lot of people making due with what they had and you see some of the oddest things in peoples' yards. Some of what I am doing comes from that. Living in Philadelphia, I see a lot of what used to be a heavy industrial city. The detritus that is left over - not just the buildings, but also the equipment - is something that impressed me when I moved here. It was kind of a shock, but I really enjoyed seeing the bridges. While at the Clay Studio here in
Philadelphia, you had to go by the Ben Franklin Bridge everyday and it’s such an imposing structure. It’s hard not to look at it and get taken in by what that thing offers. To me, even abandoned machinery is related to pottery in the sense that they are like vessel forms. It isn’t an association I am deliberately trying to make; I think it is more about the process of making these things. I like welding these things together and not hiding the seams, which goes back to the pottery I do, where I try not to clean things up too much. I want the viewer to see how things are attached in areas which are typically smooth, like the spout and handle on a teapot. This carries over into the sculpture, because I don’t want to come back in and start cleaning everything up.

AW: Your work is obviously not functional. Do you consider yourself a potter or a sculptor?
DH: I consider myself a sculptor, with oblique references to pottery forms. These larger forms - I still call them vases - are starting to move away from pottery forms and becoming sculptural.

AW: Ceramic artist Kukuli Velarde mentions an American fascination with size on your website. How are you using scale in INDUSTRIA?
DH: I like the physical challenge and presence they have. I like wrestling with big pieces and putting them together. When you are face to face to something that is close to your size it challenges your space and is more confrontational. These really start to impose themselves in your space, especially due to the bright colors.

AW: Is there a contradiction between the size and cartoonish colors?
DH: I forget who made the comment to me, but they referenced playground equipment. I thought that was a perfect reference because to me the act of making them is very playful, and they are rather severe forms. I like the bright colors in terms of making them like toys because it gives them a bit of levity. If they had darker colors, I don’t think they would have the same effect. I don’t know how it would work out without the color.

AW: How did you decide to begin using paint on the surface?
DH: It was necessity. The pieces I made several years ago were going through multiple firings. It was working alright, but it was taking a long time to get work done and the process was really discouraging. I like the effects I was getting with these very textured surfaces from crawl...
glazes, but they started to become expensive pieces to make because of all the firings. I know I can get brighter pieces with low-fire, but the problem with bigger pieces is getting the glaze application correct. With paint I didn’t have to worry about that. I wanted to get away from traditional ceramic solutions, too, because I felt that I was restricting myself by using only glazes.

**AW:** How do you go about choosing your color palette with the paint?  
**DH:** I make a sketch of everything to create an outline and mark down what the final colors will be. Once I find out what I want the final coat to look like, I work backwards. Many times, I have two or three colors going on underneath the final color. I have a first coating over everything, then a second coat of various spots of color. The last coat covers everything. For example, blues are often underneath greens, so when you scrub through them you get a nice, vibrating effect.

**AW:** When you scrub them with steel wool, how do you decide to what level to distress them?  
**DH:** It depends on how the piece is looking while working. There isn’t a lot of deep digging. Mainly, I am trying to get everything to matte down. When the paint dries, it is very glossy and I just want to get rid of that gloss. After that, it’s mostly just attacking edges to get those colors to come through. On other pieces, if I like a color popping through, then I will scrub more. I would like to experiment with a sand blaster to see what blasting something would look like. I would love to try that on a piece to really soften all of the edges.

**AW:** Did you have to fight the urge to use traditional ceramic finishes, such as glazes, when you began painting them?  
**DH:** After the first piece, I had put my toe in the water and didn’t have to worry about it. I had a year to make work for a show coming up and, once I painted the first piece, I felt like I had it figured out.

**AW:** How do people react to your use of paint instead of a traditional ceramic surface?  
**DH:** Everyone seems delighted by the color of it. I don’t think they are used to seeing a ceramic piece this bright. I haven’t heard negative comments, but I have read comments questioning that. To me it is really kind of silly, because these are not pottery; they are sculptural forms, and to try bringing a ceramic solution to something like this doesn’t really make sense.

**AW:** You make your own stands and bases to display your work. Do these re-contextualize your pieces for you? How do you utilize the stands and bases when displaying your work?  
**DH:** Yes, they add another dimension to them. Instead of having it on a white pedestal, I was intrigued by what it would be like if I made my own stands for them. That’s what I did with the List Gallery show at Swarthmore College. I only had a few stands, and a few years later I had a smaller show at the Kelly & Weber Gallery. There I had large table stands and I thought it really made everything pop. I like when one of my pieces sets on top of one of my stands because they dominate the room.

**AW:** Do you like the engineering challenge of piecing the stands together?  
**DH:** Yes, I like the problem solving and challenge of making the stands. For me it’s a whole different problem compared to the sculptural vessels. There is a lot of leeway in getting them to fit and (they) can all be interchanged. The legs are all hand-built and I try to get them done in one shot, so the shrinkage is consistent. They are all mapped out. I have paper templates I use to get everything to work out. I can’t imagine making a mold for these; that could be too complex, and become a nightmare.

**AW:** So, your newer work will move away from this industrial imagery?  
**DH:** A little bit. I want to revive some of this earlier work I was doing. The handbuilding I did in the past was very floral and linear and I would like to incorporate that with these somehow, but I am not sure how to, yet. I feel like (my previous work) is something that is a little incomplete and can be incorporated into some of the other things I have been making. It’s funny, when you work long enough you make something that might make sense at a later time. It has been a good two or three years doing this body of work, and it has run its course. The process of working feeds the work.

Doug Herren’s work can be viewed at dougherren.com and snyderman-works.com/artists/doug-herren
Strand by Strand: The Making of Mementos with Melanie Bilenker

By Megan Gainer
I walk through the door of my apartment after my brief trip to Philadelphia and begin what, to me, is a normal routine. I take off my shoes, unpack, grab a seat on the couch, and lay out the treasures I’ve recently gleaned for examination. Most people would find this last bit quite odd, especially since, for this trip, my treasures consist of a spent train ticket from South Philly to Center City, the fortune from a cookie I got at a Hibachi restaurant, and a dime I found while walking along the waterfront, just to name a few.

This strange habit is something that I’ve always had, and have become much more mindful of after talking with jewelry artist Melanie Bilenker, whose work focuses on everyday, mundane objects - such as the ones I collected during my trip - and tasks people perform. These commonplace items and tasks assume greater significance, thanks to how Bilenker presents them in a quiet and reflective light, with drawings fashioned from hair. Bilenker creates her hair drawings and their metal housings in her home studio, surrounded by tufts of hair, quirky viewfinders, books, metalsmithing tools, and lots of photographs.

Melanie Bilenker’s works are in the permanent collections of several museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, The Mint Museum of Craft and Design in Charlotte, North Carolina, and The Museums of Fine Arts in Boston and Houston. Bilenker has a BFA in Jewelry and Metalsmithing from the Philadelphia College of Art and Design. She still resides and works in Philadelphia.
Megan Gainer: I have seen a few other artists (such as Barb Smith and Nichola Scholz) also use hair in their works. What encouraged you to draw using hair?

Melanie Bilenker: When I was in school I used a lot of discarded materials, materials with history; things from my life, not just things that I found. Use of found materials may be common in jewelry since it is often worn as a keepsake or token. Prior to the work I am doing now, I had used hair to play on the attraction/repulsion people have with it, and was also researching Victorian mourning jewelry, specifically portrait miniatures and hair work. While reading an exhibition catalog of portrait miniatures called Love and Loss, I noticed that some of the images I assumed were painted in sepia, were actually painted using hair dissolved in acid as the pigment, which I found astounding. After that I figured, if they could use hair as paint, then I could try using strands as lines. I’d worked with eggshell inlays and other techniques using epoxy before, so I carried that method on into this work. So much of the jewelry of the Victorian era was meant for commemoration – portraits given to memorialize the deceased, or a small single eye painted and discreetly given to a lover. Though what I found most interesting was the use of hair – woven into bracelets, watch chains, intricate floral wreaths; painted with as pigment; concealed as a lock in a locket; used in family albums to represent each family member. Hair was a stand-in, a physical remnant, and that really resonated with me.

MG: You mentioned that the history of objects is important to you. Has this always been the case? Do you often collect and keep small things?

MB: Always! You’ll be able to see my collections all around the house. There are a lot of small things that I keep, kind of like visual records. This is something that drew me towards jewelry in the first place. I’m not a person who wears a lot of jewelry for fashion
reasons. It’s more because of the sentimental/personal value they hold.

MG: What is it about your drawings in hair that you find most successful?

MB: I’ve always loved drawing, so that was a big part of it, as well as the Victorian idea of mementos.

MG: I’ve noticed that you have a brooch of a cat with cat hair listed in the materials. Does the hair you use come from the animal, or person, being depicted in each work?

MB: Yes, the hair used in the work is that of the person being depicted or, in that particular case, my cat, Nico. All the work you see on my website is done using my hair and is self-portrait work. When I’m asked to do a commissioned work, the person will send me hair to use. I also have friends who, when they get a haircut, will ask if I want their hair. Eventually I want to make a family and friends portrait album using everyone’s hair.

MG: How do you obtain the hair you use?

MB: I have a from-the-comb box where I keep the hair that gathers in my hair brush but when I’m making a piece and I need a specific type of hair, a specific color or thickness, I’ll go into the bathroom with a pair of tweezers to get one I need.

MG: When you are creating your drawings, how do you decide what moment to capture?

MB: When you have a studio outside your house, going to the studio feels more like going to work. I’ve worked at home for a long time so, even in the middle of my workday, I find myself doing normal, domestic, everyday sort of things. Doing these mundane things are a big part of our lives and when you add them all up, it makes up who we are, not the larger events, the vacation you took or anything like that. I like the universality of those kinds of images.

MG: These seem to be very personal works. Are you depicting yourself?
MB: Yes, all of the works are self-portraits and, to an extent, personal. I have done portraits of other people, but I don’t post them on my website because I feel that those pieces are something private, for the people who commission them.

MG: Why are these moments so important to depict?

MB: I strongly agree with a quote by French philosopher, Henri Lefebvre, when he said, “I am not interested in the high points of life. Only five minutes of every day are interesting. I want to show the rest, normal life.”

MG: Would you briefly explain your process?

MB: I start out with photographs and then I make drawings based on those photographs, scale them down and then do the hair work. Sometimes I’ll know that I want to make a specific body of work, like a certain series showing what I do before I leave the house, and then I’ll dedicate a day to taking photos of those actions. Usually I’m the one taking the images and, since I use myself as the model, often I’ll use a tripod and the camera timer to take photos of myself reenacting the tasks I want to capture. Other times I’ll catch myself doing something, like pouring tea, and think, ‘this might look kind of nice.’ The tripod and camera are pretty much always set up for moments like that.

MG: I’ve noticed that you often crop the body, leaving out the head or face. Is it important that the identity of the person be left a mystery?

MB: Yes, I feel that this allows the work to be more universal and a little bit less identifiable [as a specific person].

MG: Several of your works seem to suggest a series with narrative (In Bed and Still In Bed). Is it important that these works be seen together, or do you wish for them to be seen as individual works?

MB: I want to make sure that they can all work independently because, while it would be fantastic if a museum or collector were to come and say they wanted to buy eight pieces and have them all together, more often than not, they are going to end up in individual hands. It is nice, though, to have a photo to look at to show the progression and see all of them together. There’s something nice about having a part of a series, to know that there are related things out there.

MG: Your works seem very reserved and tranquil; no extra frills in the framework, even though the image details are exquisite and some even have moving components. What do you hope the viewers/wearers of your work will gain from this?

MB: I think there’s something about them being so quiet and serene, and that is a response I hear from people who have seen or have my work. They like the quietude of the work and to have that calm moment to carry with them, something to reflect on. I guess that’s another kind of universal thing. Not everybody’s like that, but a lot of people seem to want something quiet to meditate on.

MG: Your drawings seem to closely reference Japanese woodblock prints, specifically the subject matter and viewing angles. Are these something you look at while creating your work?

MB: No, actually. This is one of the reasons I love questions like these, because it makes me look at my work differently, and I actually have had someone ask me this before. I’ve had people ask me if I like Mary Cassatt’s drawings, and I love them. It’s work that I appreciate looking at, but not something I ever decided to emulate. I never really noticed that connection until someone pointed it out to me.

MG: You occasionally hide some of your images inside lockets and viewfinders. Why do you choose for these images to be viewed only by the wearer/handler?

MB: Most if not all of the images I depict are pretty private but the ones that are most private or voyeuristic, I like to contain a little bit. There’s something nice about that discovery, something that’s only for the person wearing it. Even the big wall-hung pieces I recently made are constructed that way. They are shallow boxes with antiqued mirrors on the front. There is a coin-sized clear spot in the mirror to look through. As you approach to peek, a sensor turns on an interior light, which backlights a hair drawing of a nude. When they were shown last year, the best response I heard was when one man looked inside the piece. After he stepped close and
the light came on, he stepped back and laughed. His response was something like, ‘Well, I looked in there, and she was naked. And when I stepped back, I saw my face reflected in the glass, saw I was smiling and I couldn’t help but laugh.’ That kind of unexpected discovery is something that I enjoy having with jewelry, as well.

MG: Do you ever have any intention to bring color into your works?

MB: I did actually try introducing color a little bit in a few pieces, in a very selective way, where one object or area would be highlighted, but I really like something about the simple, clean, almost black and white look.

MG: Some of your pieces seem to have a yellow, aged appearance. Is this due to the materials you use? If so, what do you hope it adds to the piece?

MB: Some of it is due to the background material used. Quite a few of the works have old piano ivory as the background. Sometimes I wouldn’t fully sand them white, which would give the work a warm tone. I also ended up switching resins at some point, which also changed the color a little bit, since resin yellows as it ages. That was one of the reasons I was excited to switch to paper, which might yellow a little bit, but not much. The drawings are also set under mineral glass, which helps to provide some UV protection. Even then, I’m not using a pure white paper; more of a crème color.

MG: There are other jewelry artists, such as Jennifer Trask, whose work also draws from the Victorian style. What is it about the Victorian era, specifically the hair and mourning jewelry, which attracts you?

MB: Mostly it’s the memento aspect and the tradition of wearing jewelry as a token or keepsake that attract me. It’s the idea that a piece of jewelry can be a stand-in for a person or time. That’s often how people wore jewelry then, and why it is interesting to me.

MG: What else, besides the everyday, inspires you and your work?

MB: I seem to look at more photography than jewelry, specifically the idea of photography of the everyday. There are a lot of people, especially now with things like personal blogs, who are working with this. But even prior to that, there were many in the art world...
Brooch, 2005
7/8” x 13/16” x 1/4”
2.2 x 2.1 x .7 cm
Materials: Gold, sterling silver, ivory piano key laminate, epoxy resin, cat hair
(Photo: K. Yanoviak) Courtesy of the artist.

like Sophie Calle, Hans Peter Feldmann, Rinko Kawauchi, William Eggleston, that work with everyday images to set up a narrative or give you a glimpse of some kind of life. Kind of like a fragment of a larger story, or a portrait in absentia. I also enjoy reading magic realism, like the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, where the otherworldly is interspersed in the everyday.

MG: I have read some reactions to your work after viewers realize your drawings are actually composed of hair. Is it an advantage or disadvantage in your work that the hair is disguised as line and encased in resin?

MB: The fact that the hair is not immediately recognizable is a good thing, in my opinion; it’s another layer of discovery for the viewer. I think people did like the fact that, with the resin, the hair was totally untouchable. The resin removed the ‘ick’ factor that some people have when hair is no longer attached to the body. So far I’ve had a good response to the paper work as well; nobody’s said ‘ew’ yet, which is always beneficial.

MG: Most of your work consists of brooches or rings, even a chatelaine (Victorian women’s tool belt). What is it that drives you to create wearable works?

MB: Part of that has to do with the idea of the token or keepsake, something you hold close and bring with you. That’s something that I’ve always responded to and enjoyed, and gives me a desire to make similar objects. I also like working in a very small scale, which lends itself to that, as well. I have made some larger wall hung works like the light boxes and some playing card-size drawings. Similar to the small peepholes in the large light boxes, the drawings were framed in oversized mats, to help narrow your focus and draw you in close. I do enjoy making wall-hung works but wouldn’t abandon making jewelry since I so appreciate the relationship of the work to the wearer. Further, when you are drawn in close to look at someone’s jewelry you are in their personal space. It is far more intimate than looking closely at a piece on a wall. It is a shared experience between wearer, viewer, and object.
MG: Do you intend for your jewelry to be worn by either gender, or only one, as in the case of the chatelaine?
MB: I have never intended for my jewelry to be for women only. The norm seems to be that more women wear my jewelry, but I know of a few men that have my work and it’s exciting, simply because it’s less common. It’s less common for men in general to wear art jewelry, which is why it’s so refreshing to see it at jewelry gatherings, like Schmuch and SOFA (Sculptural Objects Functional Art).

MG: You’ve begun making work without the use of resins. What prompted you to alter your process?
MB: Mainly, I got tired of having to wear a respirator and working with toxic materials; it just didn’t seem necessary. I also had some trouble with one of the resins turning a lemony yellow color as it aged and was introduced to more sunlight. I liked the results I could achieve with resin, so I started researching all of the ways to do what I wanted with paper, and I’ve found some methods I’m satisfied with. I am basically gluing each little individual hair in place, with tiny tweezers and a little knife. The nice thing with resin was that I could have a foreground, mid-ground and background in separate layers. I haven’t quite figured out how to do that with the paper method I’m using now, though I am still experimenting.

MG: Has it been difficult for you to alter your process after your resin work has become so well known?
MB: Not really, because I decided that I’m going to keep making work like this, but I’m going to change the way that I’m doing it, and hope that people respond well. You can’t let the audience dictate everything that you’re doing because, if all you think about is what other people want it to be, then it’s not you. It loses something. You always have to concern yourself with your intentions. Is it wearable? Does it fit the parameters for what I want to make? Otherwise, making work based on what you think people will want is not effective. You are an audience for jewelry, too, and if it’s not what you would want to make or wear then, odds are, your audience will not respond to it, either.

MG: Why have you decided to create larger, off-the-body pieces, such as light boxes?
MB: After switching from resin to paper, I wasn’t as limited to the size of image I could make. You can go large with resins, but it’s hard. With paper I can make almost any size image I want. I also wanted to try something different and get out of my comfort zone. Even with the larger light boxes there is still a small-scale, intimate interaction within the piece. I’m not opposed to making more large-scale works, and actually want to make more of the viewfinders, which could be wearable, but don’t necessarily have to be. I’m not excluding either.

MG: How has changing your technique altered the concept behind your work?
MB: The new work is pretty similar, besides the use of materials, but it does allow me to work in different ways. It hasn’t been very long that I’ve been working this new way, so I’m still trying to find out what boundaries I can push.

MG: Do you think you will keep working with wearables, as you have with your older resin work, or will you begin working strictly on larger, off-the-body works?
MB: Since I am using the paper now, I can work as large as I want more easily because I don’t have to worry about making a large resin pour, but I still want to make wearable work. Jewelry is something that you have a different connection with. It’s not a painting you hang on the wall; it’s something you carry with you on your body, so the person wearing it tends to have a more intimate connection with it. They ultimately have to identify with it personally, because it becomes a part of their identity once they put it on.

Melanie Bilenker’s work can be viewed at melaniebilenker.com.
Dagnabit! A Conversation with Britt Spencer

By Aaron Pickens
Walking along the beautiful streets of Savannah, Georgia on a warm afternoon in March, I arrive at the quaint old duplex of the artist Britt Spencer. As I enter his home, I immediately step into a small studio that is illuminated by several large windows. The open workspace is littered with artwork, drafting tables, books, old video games, as well as several very comfortable chairs.

Britt Spencer is a painter, illustrator and an instructor at Savannah College of Art and Design, also known as SCAD. His commercial accolades include illustrating several childrens books, a recent graphic novel, and contributing to both national and international publications, such as the Saturday Evening Post. Spencer completed his MFA at SCAD in 2011 and is now exhibiting his paintings throughout the United States. His work blurs the boundary between commercial illustration and fine art with his unique sense of humor. Britt Spencer’s paintings combine a comic sensibility with a bold “fast-food” color palette in order to address perverse content in an inviting format. His current body of paintings is a non-illustrative story about a man-child and his existence.
Aaron Pickens: Why did you decide to pursue an MFA in painting as opposed to an MFA in illustration or other forms of sequential art?

Britt Spencer: I was actually trying to decide between sequential and painting and, ultimately, the only reason I didn’t do illustration was because I was coming back to SCAD. I thought my portfolio was starting to stagnate and I just wanted to have a reason to create a new body of work. I didn’t want to do illustration because I figured it would be redundant in the education. I decided on painting because I thought sequential would still be so familiar as a commercial form of art, in that you have an objective to communicate a message, and it generally is someone else’s message. So I thought painting instantly was going to be more of a vacation, ‘cause it’s like, hey, I get to dive into whatever I want, and it’s only validated if people like what I am doing. I don’t have a set goal of what I need to be creating.

AP: Did you find it to be a vacation?

BS: In many ways, because the things I was diving into had no practical reason for me to be interested in, unless I was doing things that were just for myself. I did this one painting that I took two months on, and it was big. I gestured three feet by a foot, and it took me forever. In the end it was kind of a failure. If I had done that as an illustrator that would have almost bankrupted me, or would have just been a bad decision. But the notion that I am not really trying to make a profit here, ‘cause it’s like, hey, I get to dive into whatever I want, and it’s only validated if people like what I am doing. I don’t have a set goal of what I need to be creating.

AP: When you were pursuing your MFA were you still producing commissions for already established clients?

BS: Yeah and that was actually really stressful. I didn’t want to go into any debt for school. I wanted to keep working but I definitely took less jobs.

AP: If you had to choose between creating fine art or commercial illustration, which would you prefer, and why?

BS: I used to always say that I like them both equally. I like that you have the objective of the client, and you need to express your voice because that’s what they want. So you have to meet in the middle of their message, and your voice. It’s challenging and stimulating in a way that you don’t get with fine art. Fine art I see as something so inherently self absorbed, and ultimately I need it to communicate to someone who’s going to buy it. But when I am actually sitting down to create it, it’s just my thoughts and I have to go through it methodically. There is no art director that’s overseeing it and dictating what needs to be what. It’s just completely me and that’s really fun. I need both, but I am starting to get a little tired of illustration, honestly. It would be nice to just make paintings. Maybe that’s evidence that I am getting older and losing interest in accommodating other people’s visions, and starting to think I just need to do my own thing.

AP: Do you feel that fine art is a truer representation of yourself?

BS: I guess ultimately it is, because no one else is…

AP: …dictating what you’re doing?

BS: Yeah… If they are, that’s actually a part of it. I’m very aware of the audience for my work, but that’s a reflection of me more than it is… I treat it as a commodity that I want to sell to somebody. One thing that is interesting is fine art is this, and commercial art is this. But if we’re supposedly in this Post-Modern viewpoint of art, it seems so counter-productive to continue that division. A lot of people put emphasis on what is high art in museums. There is much more to be learned culturally from not being in a museum, because that is such a specific Modernist viewpoint in the sense that you’re making a pilgrimage there. In my work I try to play on the general relativism that Post-Modernists try to adhere to: that everything is level, so I don’t have a problem with using things like McDonalds and other lowbrow aesthetics. That goes all the way from childhood, thinking my work wasn’t complete because it didn’t have the glossiness that something in print had. I’ve always liked the aesthetic of things that are mass-produced, and bold, fast-food colors.
AP: Do you consider illustration to be a fine art or is there no such division in your mind?
BS: I don't know if I do. I still see the division. I don't know if I see the value division, though. I recognize differences between things, but it's a lot more superficial than it's made out to be. I don't know if I would say one is better than the other, but you can generally sell a fine art painting for a lot more than an illustration. That's just a value thing, but it's not really a cultural relevance type of thing. It's not like one has helped advance society more than the other, although I would say McDonalds has done a lot more for effecting society, more than MoMA has.
AP: You stated in a previous interview, ‘The gallery world seems so stagnant to me at times... artists doing only what seems relevant to them, somewhat forgetting the necessity of communication to others. I always try to stay focused on my intent to communicate an idea.’
BS: Certainly some [artists] are. I would maybe go back and change that specific quote. That statement has informed how I am now. Now I am almost not trying to communicate, as some joke against Post-Modernism. Now my paintings are more about being evasive. It's very willful. I'm going to use red herrings and sprinkle in... I call them impotent narratives, because they have a structure of a story, but there's not really a story to be told. Now I am really trying to make a barrier between the communications. I add in things that are useless and symbolic as a way to divide the audience so that, ultimately, they are really not saying anything. I call them counter-illustrations in that respect: they're not really illuminating anything, certainly not saying anything, only communicating to me. So in that respect it's about me. I am hopefully succeeding in your interest in the image, but not on a realm of communication, certainly not a realm of accurate communication.
I might start with an idea, and then I purposefully deviate. I'm trying to create a world where you think that you're being lead through a narrative story, but ultimately it doesn't connect to the piece and, to me, it's not even important if it connects to the piece. It's more about you having to come up and ask me, ‘What's this mean?’ And my answer - if I was being truthful - would be, ‘It's nothing... there's nothing behind these.’ If you wanted it to mean something, then you would say I'm illustrating it. If you're saying I'm illustrating it, then I'm not doing fine art. I'm giving you what you want, but I'm doing it in a way that's deliberately annoying for you to have to participate with my painting, because you don't want it to illustrate something.
AP: Now when you do have an opportunity to make personal work, you said in your artist statement, ‘though the content is charged persuasion is not my objective.’ Is this a reaction towards contemporary artistic practice?
BS: It has to do with my view on contemporary art and also personal insecurities for making a stance. Once you make a stance then you actually have to be questioned on it, and I have no interest in that.
AP: In your personal work there are a few elements that seem to reoccur, such as water, snakes, and naked figures. What is the role of these forms in your work, and is the meaning they embody consistent, or do they evolve over time?
BS: I guess the snake... that's often a compositional thing. I really like that you can guide an eye through with something like a snake. The water and the defrocked people are a little bit more meaningful. The water is usually more of a fatalistic thing. The idea that if you were in a dingy boat in the middle of the ocean, there's some sort of predestination involved there. Where you're in a boat you have control, but if a massive tsunami comes it's not really up to you if you're in a little dingy boat. It's much more about the control of outside forces. The humans being naked, I've always liked. I never liked the idea of a comic book hero or the super person. I've always liked more pathetic-looking people, with not all that musculature. I especially like a not very attractive male who doesn't have his clothes on. Another imagery I use a lot is a man-child, floating in between infantile qualities and grown-man qualities. Like that [pointing to his painting, Voyage to Amazonia]: that is a man. A lot of people think it's a baby, but those are actually Amazonians. So those are massive women, and a little, tiny man-
child. That’s kind of the body of work that I’m making now, this non-illustrative story about a man-child and his existence. But the nudity is also something that I’ve never been bothered by. It all of a sudden makes the image more charged. It’s not a sexualized nudity. It’s very much an animal form of nudity, like, ‘Here we are... we ain’t got clothes on, and not looking too good.’

AP: You have described your work as attempting to ‘package misery in a very digestible way.’ Do you have specific observations in your daily life that provide inspiration for your work? How do you package misery in a digestible way? Is it through humor?

BS: I consider them euphemisms, where instead of saying, ‘God Damn it!’ you say, ‘Dagnabit!’, which is taken directly from my mom. I always thought that was so funny. Why not just express an emotion? Why is it such a thing, where you can’t express it? Rather than just saying it, how about I dance around it and say everything but that? It’s a very cowardly approach to language and expressing anything. But to me it’s a necessary way to communicate. I want to say it but I want you to also like me, and not feel like I’m being too pushy or tyrannical about it.

AP: Do you feel that humor has a place in a fine art setting?

BS: Oh definitely... I think humor is definitely a good thing to have; mine is supposed to be humorous. I guess that’s the ‘misery in a digestible way’: it’s a cynical message but it’s a funny, Kurt Vonnegut-way of expressing how awful something is. I’m not in
Noose
36” x 60”
Acrylic on panel, 2011

the mindset that things are really all that bad. I’m more like, ‘Isn’t it great how you can buy a hat on Hollywood Boulevard that says ‘Compton?’ What does that say about anything?
AP: How has your environment shaped your current artistic practice?
BS: Umm... well, I grew up in Lexington, Kentucky. My parents were always very supportive of me being an artist, but they always thought it would be funny if I turned out to be an artist that just put a dot in the middle of the canvas. I always thought that the real art was art that was published. What’s in print; that is what makes art valid and when it has a use. But the Kentucky upbringing definitely had an influence on the commercial side of things. …I do very much identify with American culture. I went to Europe for a while, and I just didn’t get it. So, being an American is a big part of my philosophy.
AP: It almost appears that you would rather have your work appeal to The Average Joe, than to other artists. Is there any truth in this observation?
BS: … I consider McDonalds to be the best restaurant because it’s the most successful restaurant. Maybe I don’t enjoy things that are popular but I consider them the most successful. The Mona Lisa, I say, is the best painting because it’s the painting. Any argument beyond that is very subjective and it’s just unnecessary. It’s the best painting because it is the painting, and I really want my work to communicate to the masses. I don’t know if I care about being accepted by the artistic community. If you can communicate to the masses, you’re going to reach the artistic community, as well as the community at large, as well as the monetary community... meaning the abstract notion of me being wealthy, which I wouldn’t mind.
AP: I don’t think anyone really would.
BS: Some people have this notion that the monetary is somehow corrupting. I want to make it ‘cause I enjoy making it, but I want to know how I can sell it, too. You’re buying freedom. If I made a painting and I sell it, I don’t have to work a job I don’t like. This notion that being concerned about the market, is somehow tawdry: that’s asinine. That’s just someone who wanted to pay sixty thousand dollars for school and have it flushed away, which I don’t understand.
AP: How do you ensure that your artwork is able to communicate successfully to a larger audience? Is there a difference in how you communicate in your fine art versus your commercial work?
BS: Well, the difference is that I set out with a very specific objective with illustrations, where I need to communicate this particular idea. But in fine art it is just the opposite. I’m using very populist ideas of drawing the form: they look like comics, and people can relate to them pretty easily. Bold colors, fast-food colors, and they’re kind of playful; they’re inviting images. They’re relatively empty images. I’ll say it again: impotent narratives. They don’t actually have any story, so they’re useless as a narrative, and yet people can connect to them as if they’re narrative.
AP: Andy Warhol started off in commercial illustration before venturing into the fine arts. Is it your ambition to move in a similar direction?
BS: Yeah… but I would also say that, in the Warhol sense, I don’t consider the commodity of painting to be defined as two dimensional paint on canvas. I like the commodity to extend into product: hats and plush toys. I like all that stuff that validates the industry. So I wouldn’t close it out on only painting in a studio. I would extend the fine art to other industries that aren’t just me painting. I like Thomas Kinkade a lot, and I really like Jeff Koons, all because of their attitude. Jeff Koons tries to claim it’s much more about uplifting the spirit and all that, but whatever. Just the fact that he doesn’t even have to touch his work and it’s still a Koons; I appreciate the idea that artist can be removed and it’s still their art, still their industry.

AP: Are there any particular art movements that you closely identify yourself with, either philosophically and / or aesthetically?

BS: I don’t know. Every time I think that I have, I’ll start reading more about them and realize that I’m not, really. I’m sure there is one out there. When I heard of the Pathetic art movement – ’Oh, that’s me!’ - and it seems like it is, but it’s not really at all what I’m doing. I really like Ayn Rand and Objectivism. I’m a short little guy, and I know I’m not the best painter, I know I’m not the most intelligent person, so that would put me in a very specific place in society, at least as Objectivism would put it.

AP: Outside of the label of illustration, could you name any specific artists that have had a great impact on the work that you have produced? Roy Lichtenstein?

BS: Actually, I don’t think I’m anything like him [Lichtenstein]. Mine’s more incidental on why I’m using pop culture, and it’s even anachronistic because that’s not what a comic book looks like these days. As far as how to compose a picture, I really like Neo Rauch. Philosophically, Warhol, and Koons; those are the ones that I would hope to be like one day, in terms of being that established in thought and that established in what I’m making.

AP: Could you talk about your use of line and color? How did you arrive at the palette that seems to dominate most of your work?

BS: Well the evolution of that, for fine art at least, was I tried to get away from being so controlled about it, as I was familiar with illustration. …That was the first one of the pop stuff, but I didn’t know how to color it. I kind of just wanted to keep it black and white. Then I saw a lecture, [and the artist] was doing things with comic book sensibilities. It clicked with me; I want to have my line but use that comic book Ben-Day dot because I was trying to do these euphemisms where it was kind of sad, or sick subject matter, but I wanted them to be palatable and inviting. So I’ll make them look like they’re these friendly kid images, but the subject matter will be kind of nasty, or obscene. So that’s how I arrived at that primary color palette. But then I got away from that to what I considered more primary. To keep it real, bold, and friendly, and I guess ‘fast-food’. Actually, one of them [Noose]: I just had a McDonalds fry box and that was the color palette that I went with. So the main character is wearing a really bright red blazer, and he’s got these yellow and white stripe pants. It’s just such a nice packaging for fries, the yellow and white in there...

AP: Why do you create works that emphasize a graphic linear quality as opposed to a realistic approach?

BS: That’s a part of my appreciation of print as a way to validate the artwork. I’ve always liked things that are glossy and in print, so that’s just an aesthetic choice. I like how looking like it’s a comic, or looking like it’s in the world of illustration, people are familiar with it. They’re comfortable with coming up and looking at it, because it seems like a nice digestible image... I also didn’t want to paint something that turned into a Pop Surrealist type of thing.

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**AP:** How many preparatory sketches do you usually produce before solidifying an idea and moving forward with a project, in the final medium you choose?

**BS:** This piece [*So, There’s This Prostitute, An Old Prospector, And a Jockey, All On a Boat*] in the hallway, (was) originally inspired by prostitutes in Amsterdam. So I started sketching out about how much space I want to take up. Then I establish how much that’s going to cost me. I started sketching for it and none of them are really like a sketch *per se*. They’re all these disconnected sketches until I like something about it.

I get it to this point, and then I take it into Photoshop and do the colors. Other times, if I feel like I got a pretty good rough sketch, I’ll just take that rough sketch and develop it so that it’s tighter. Then I’ll go in and actually design the colors. It’s essentially a glorified masking tape method, but we’re using technology to do it. With that we design it, vectorize it, and then get it printed out with a vinyl plotter. So, everything that wasn’t yellow was a vinyl sticker. Put it on the canvas and roll it out. Once I have the digital file design, they don’t actually take that long. That’s the look I want. It takes a lot of work upfront...
but, once it’s designed, it goes by pretty quickly. This (painting) was eight feet or something. It took me three hours to go in with the black, and just hand draw it in there. Here is my yellow layer; so everything that’s not yellow will be masked off. I don’t mind that I’m merely rolling on color at that point. I don’t feel like I’m not painting. This is the image that I want and the best way to get it is to have a machine produce it. Anybody that thinks that having a machine do your work for you is somehow taking away from your...

**AP:** artistry?

**BS:** Yeah... that’s absurd. Especially if you’re dictating how the machine works. It goes back to the whole idea of what they’re buying is the idea that the artist was slaving over the work. I think it’s funny. I do appreciate from a buyer’s standpoint of wanting an original over a print, but from an artistic standpoint there’s no difference to me. I would say that the artist doesn’t have that much to do with the painting. If I was looking at an artist online and really enjoyed their work, and I went to see an original and I find out that it was actually a random painting generator machine making them, would that make the paintings any less valuable to me? I doubt it. I would be fascinated that someone has actually made a machine that can produce paintings.

**AP:** How important is it for you to have a sketchbook on hand?

**BS:** It’s not important for me as an individual. I rarely am out and thinking, ‘Oh, I want to capture this scene, or I need to jot this down.’ When I want to start working, I want to be at my studio.

**AP:** It seems that you have worked with a lot of mediums: pen and ink, graphite, gouache, acrylic, silk-screening, and digital. How do you decide which medium best suits the project or commission?

**BS:** For illustration I definitely always use pen and ink with gouache. I phased out watercolor entirely. Clients contact me because they know what my stuff looks like. That’s what they want and so that’s what I give them. I’m definitely more open to changing what I do in fine art. I still consider myself in this series of thought where it’s very much the Pop look, so... I use the Disney house paints that are in the kids section. The name of the red I use is called *Mickey’s Pants.* I would honestly use other things, but Disney is the only one that makes house paint in a gallon that’s that saturated.

**AP:** Your newest publication, *Journey on Starlight,* is a 200-page graphic novel, about Einstein’s imaginative journey across the universe. Was this project exceptionally daunting considering the length?

**BS:** It sucked... I don’t know why they contacted me. I didn’t imagine that it was ever going to take up as much time as it did. I was thinking that color was the thing that slows me down. So by just doing ink, it’ll be really easy. But it wasn’t that way at all, because it wasn’t just 200 pages, it was 200 pages with sometimes nine different illustrations on each one. So I’m over the book. I’m glad it’s out but it brought me no pleasure.

**AP:** Artistically speaking, what makes you the happiest? Or, what makes you the happiest outside of art?

**BS:** Not art. I do art because I got to make a living and it seems to be a good way to do it, at least better. There’s probably ways I could make a living better than art but I enjoy making art. I’m making it because I want to sell it. My heart isn’t fluttering when I make a piece. I definitely don’t buy into that notion that it’s some mystic thing that is tapping into my soul. But, what makes me happy in art? I guess when I think I made a good image. There is a little pride in that, and selling it feels good. This is for illustration, too, when I know that I have my rent paid for the month, just because I was able to draw for somebody.

Britt Spencer’s work can be viewed online at brittspencer.com
2,000 Light Years from Home: the Sculptures of Ian Pedigo

By Justus Cotterill
I first became aware of Ian Pedigo by chance. I had been on a gallery website researching another artist when I stumbled upon his sculptures. I was taken by his use of raw and found materials. These items had been placed together in such a poetic way that they fit completely, despite the divergence of elements.

The idea that I had discovered Mr. Pedigo’s work by accident was not lost on me after viewing his sculptures and installations. His art is based on the discovery of materials and arranging these finds in a way that conveys a sense of place, and a visual language that speaks back to the viewer about time and history. His sculptures and collage-like reliefs are comprised of man-made materials such as plastic, building supplies, and mylar. Recently he has been adding natural materials, such as tree limbs or stones. His pieces range anywhere from small wall pictures to larger, freestanding, installation-type arrangements.

Ian Pedigo was born and raised in Anchorage, Alaska. After high school, he spent time in San Francisco pursuing various music projects before deciding to further his education in Texas. At the University of Texas at Austin, where he would receive his MFA in Sculpture, Mr. Pedigo studied music theory and composition. He was thinking in a way that was beyond the musical parameters of the school yet the department did not offer a creative studio music class where improvisation and the building of soundscapes were a focal point. During this period there was an emergence of visual art in his thought process. As he was envisioning the musical compositions as a soundtrack that interacted with the physical presence of an object, he started to construct sculptures that dealt with the ideas of atmosphere and space. He found himself moving away from musical compositions and focusing on his visual dialog. He was achieving visually what he was conceiving musically, and sculpture became his full concentration. After completing his MFA, Pedigo moved to New York, where he has been living for the past ten years. Mr. Pedigo’s U.S. Gallery, Klaus von Nichtssagend, is in Manhattan.
**Left:** Spine of Sagittarius, 2012
black foil, shoe laces, bone
7ft x 7 ft

**Right:** The Partition Between Other and This, 2011
wood, mason’s line, jute twine, bone ash,
charred bone pigment, aluminum paint,
clay, basalt, granite, slate, concrete, mica
approximately 48 x 108 x 72 in.
I arranged to meet Mr. Pedigo at a coffee shop in Long Island City, New York. We had originally planned to meet at his studio, but he instructed me to come to a café that was nearby. He explained that he had been under the impression that he needed to vacate his workspace, and had everything packed up. It was only then, as we were finalizing our meeting arrangements, that he learned he would be able to retain the space and unpack. Even after this, as well as concluding his show *Eyes Fixed Upon Pictures* at the Abrons Arts Center in Manhattan, Mr. Pedigo seemed calm and at ease. This ability to adapt to situations and make appropriate adjustments is a strength that is reflected in his work.

Ian Pedigo's creations are constructed of found and repurposed materials. His art deals with aspects of time, and his sculptures give clues to moments in the past or future. In this, he considers these pieces as contemporary versions of relics. The objects and materials have a traceable place within a time period and the viewer is able to make associations with the articles that give reference points to their own history. He looks to geography, architecture, and our physical refuse as sources of influence. His visual idea is that there is evidence of something left behind, an object or pictorial trace of something we do not understand, but which, over time, becomes decipherable when the viewer has reached a level of knowledge and can retrace the path that the object has taken. This theory is a catalyst for much of Mr. Pedigo's work.

Pedigo constructs many of his pieces over long periods of time. Physical components of his works move in and out of each other, as the surfaces are painted, attached, discarded, and then reassembled. Sometimes new elements are introduced. A new material, such as a lighting gel or piece of carpet, becomes a wall element instead of a part of a floor piece. This working and reworking of parts gives a history to the materials. Here is another level controlled by the artist, which adds layers of time to the work. Mr. Pedigo assembles multiple pieces at once so they can inform one another. He has said that he prefers to not to have the work overlap and have each individual sculpture, whether it is a wall piece, floor piece, or installation, serve its own purpose and not fulfill functions that other work has already achieved.

While we discussed Mr. Pedigo's studio practice, the conversation turned to a solo exhibition in Canada. In 2009, Mr. Pedigo was invited to show in Alberta where he was offered a large space to exhibit, but the gallery's location was across the border and far from his Long Island City studio. He saw this as a challenge and a different way to construct a show. He started with computer-based drawings and was able to get a feel for the gallery and its physical space. He employed Montage and Photoshop so he could go to Alberta with a developed, detailed plan of how the show could be arranged. He had used a similar process for earlier shows, but never on this scale. Once in Alberta, Pedigo explored the outlying territory for objects and items that would fit within his vision for the installation. The arrangement of these objects became the work for the show, *Those that Float Because They are Light*, at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery.

When discussing this method of constructing a body of work, Mr. Pedigo talked about living in New York and how an awareness of space can have an effect on one's artwork. He also spoke of how he finds it interesting to make intelligent and challenging art with parameters that are limited by a small budget. “Living in New York, things become compartmentalized… I am aware of the congestion of the city and I do not want my work to become cluttered. I reduce things to a level where the idea is communicated from the smallest form necessary: no excess.” He went on to describe another show, at a new gallery in Paris, where the director's budget was tight. The director could pay for the flight and accommodations but asked if Pedigo could help cover the cost of shipping the show to the gallery? Mr. Pedigo replied that he could and had the entire show fit in one suitcase. The work was spread throughout the space, engaging the viewer both visually and physically. The assemblages interacted with each other and the area between the sculptures became part of the whole.

As with the work of other sculptors, the negative space, the space between the work and the viewer, as well as the space between
the work and the gallery, is important in making his sculptures effective. “It becomes about dealing with space visually and physically. Blocking things out and responding architecturally to places in a way that creates an allusion, I feel, to the possibility that my work is completely site specific, although I don’t necessarily consider it to be so. It’s just that I always work with the space in mind.”

In his more recent work, Pedigo places man-made objects together with forms from the natural world. They coexist within his sculptures, occupying the same space much like we correspond with our own history as well as the history of the landscape we inhabit. Both the artificial and natural objects have timelines, though different; they exist within Pedigo’s work at a particular moment. Here a stick or branch is displayed with a fluorescent tube. Each has a presence and we, as viewers, can see the stray branch as a castoff from a tree the same way a burnt-out light bulb can be seen as the refuse of a building. This gives contrast as well as unity to the materials. We see time in a stationary instance. “I usually need a layout of the gallery if I haven’t been there. This way I can work out the arrangement of the work, and also, I am able to incorporate the work into the context of the building. For some shows, I have played with the gallery’s facade windows for example, putting up colored gels and materials that filter light. Or once I had a show in London where the gallery had large columns everywhere in the viewing area. I felt that I needed to think about how to enter into that space with work that gave the impression that the space was divided by the work rather than the architecture. In this case, my response was to make a piece that actually surrounded and hid one of the columns. The question that usually arises in this context is: ‘What do I close off from visibility, what do I leave open?’ “ Here again in the use of the negative space as part of the installation. Through materials, Pedigo can move the viewer through the area focusing them on certain elements. The sense of time and history can be marked by what the viewer sees and experiences.

There is both a two-dimensional and three-dimensional aspect to Pedigo’s work that brings up the question about whether he sees the work as sculpture or as drawings in space. “They are diagrammatic in that way, and I have always felt that the relationship between two dimensional and three dimensions in my work are in the sense that it is relating to something that is almost graphic, albeit physical. I think about logos and symbols, and how they become detached from what they represent or, conversely, they become identified with what they represent merely by the visual association. So I always use sculptural materials in that way: graphically; which makes the suggestion that the physical material is always approaching or indicating the direction of something else outside of it.”

When I view Mr. Pedigo’s work I am struck by how much information is implied without the overuse of materials. A patch of color becomes important because it exists alone. You pay more attention to each part, as opposed to just seeing everything at once. This slowing down of the viewing process by the consideration of choice materials is one of the strengths of Pedigo’s work; “For me, there is this threshold, a median space where things can either be reduced too far, or there is too much saturation. I want to exist not necessarily in the middle of this center, but at the edge of the peripheral extreme in either case. It’s that moment before there is too much information or too little and you don’t know how which direction it is leading; that you can’t tell how natural or artificial the thing is.” When asked about the additive and subtractive nature of his work, and the idea of threshold, Pedigo responds: “I would say that, on a whole, I work additively, but there are subtractive qualities in the way that I leave space open to be resolved. I generally like to stop before something feels resolved… in that sense I am working with the negative, or at least the work shows an awareness of it.”

Another aspect of Mr. Pedigo’s work that I notice almost immediately is his use of muted colors to emphasize a particular color or small group of colors. “My sensitivity to color, I would say, is hyper-sensitive in the way that, in a muted ground for example, all of the individual colors become more prominent because variation is slight and the shift between each becomes more noticeable. In
Ian Pedigo's work can be viewed at klausgallery.com and at mishmish.ws
Looking for Moments of Beauty: a Conversation with Holly Walker

By Mary Baugh
Holly Walker surrounds herself with beauty. Her studio perches on a small hill in Vermont with a view of the Green Mountains in three directions. Pottery by peers and friends is thoughtfully displayed in her home. She is even conscientious to pair the proper bowl to each user when we sit down for a supper of quinoa chowder.

Holly Walker is soft-spoken yet full of energy, not just for her craft of 30 plus years, clay: Walker is exuberant about life. She explains how her daily walks on nearby trails inspire her solitary work. Walker’s brightly colored pots and wall pieces reflect the quiet meditation she seeks in her life and channels into her work. The oversized jars and containers portray the sensuous yet deceptively simple lines of color exhibiting a depth and layering that is indicative of the thought behind each brush stroke.

Walker earned her BFA from Ohio University and her MFA from Louisiana State University. She has taught classes at Haystack and Penland Schools of Crafts as well as The Rhode Island School of Design. In the fall of 2013 she will have work shown at the Northern Clay Center’s Exquisite Pots II: Red Handed collaborative show along with seven other invited artists. She has been featured in the book Masters Earthenware published by Lark Books as well as The Studio Potter magazine.

Holly Walker is the former Director of Watershed Center for the Ceramic Arts as well as former Director of Outreach at Penland School of Crafts. We spent the morning in her studio, basking in the warmth from the wood stove and discussing her career and inspirations.
Mary Baugh: Your original background is in painting. What spurned the transition to clay?

Holly Walker: A clay class was an accident. I actually hated it.

MB: Was it a University class?

HW: Yes, at Ohio University (Athens) where I did my undergrad in Painting. I took a ceramics class, we worked on these funky wheels that you stood up and your knee operated the wheel; I didn’t like it very much. It was very clear that the Painting department was on floor five, and Ceramics was in the basement. That was the hierarchy of the school at the time.

I did go back to clay after school. I had a friend up the road with a clay studio and she wasn’t using it. She allowed me to come in and fool around, so I did. I really liked it the second time around.

Later I moved to a house that shared a basement with a photographer. He had his dark room down there. I had set up a kick wheel in the same space and I worked in the dark, and that’s how I learned to throw. It was the direct contact with the plastic material that really drew me in, not working on the wheel. It was the relationship between my direct manipulations of the material and what happened, as opposed to painting, which is at the end of the stick. I definitely gravitate toward plastic materials, not stiff hard ones. But, the clay work began to make more sense to me, even down to the humble nature of clay. I feel very rooted to earthy things, as opposed to...I’m not what you call... MB: You are not highfalutin.

HW: No, I am not. I also do not live in the mental world. I enjoy visiting...sometimes. I am very rooted in my physical self and my physical body. It is that physical experience that moves me and generates happiness in my life. So clay is the perfect media for that. But I still don’t want to lose touch with painting. I still dabble sometimes.

MB: The pots you are making have a very painterly quality. Do you think of clay slip as slip or slip as paint? In other words, are you using slip as a technical ceramic material, or as a substitute for paint?

HW: At this point, slip is definitely slip and glaze is definitely glaze! I am really investigating the qualities of what that glassiness can do when firing just a little bit hotter or cooler. Even just a few years ago I was thinking of slip and glaze as paint materials, but now they are not. I am realizing glaze is so different than paint, and so less controllable. It is much harder to pinpoint. In paint if you want an exact color you can just buy a little jar of color. I think if I were a painter today I would be one who starts with raw materials and mushes things up and work in encaustic. I love the earth materials; I am not a paint -by -numbers or buy it pre-made kind of person. I enjoy the alchemy of materials. I don’t buy pre-made food; I buy all my raw materials. I buy or grow all my produce and I make my own meals, almost all the time. It is the same in the studio. I like being at the beginning, the middle, and the end. I like the materials to speak for themselves.

MB: When I talk with painters about clay work they don’t understand the chemistry of mixing slips/glazes. It is not as straightforward as true pigments.

HW: The mixing does not translate. I make a lot of test tiles to find the colors I want. I was at a retreat at Haystack School of Crafts last fall; it was just a few days so I was not going to work in ceramics. I took some gouaches and made some color wheels, both rectangular and circular. I had a great time just...
playing with colors. It also tells me the importance of me getting out of my studio and doing other things. I actually brought a table into my studio so I can do 2D work simultaneously.

**MB:** Are there other non-studio activities you find inform your studio work?

**HW:** Gardening, cooking, playing piano, walking and experiencing nature. When I think about gardening I always turn to Piet Oudolf; he is a European master gardener. I think his gardens are works of art in their own right.

I re-started piano lessons this past year after a very long break; it has always been a big part of my life. Now I think of it as a way to stretch my hands as well as my mind, especially as I get older. It is such a different effort to translate what is on that page into my hands. Now that I am back in the habit my body is taking over and I can play what I see again.

In my mind, if you are visually engaged it is all looking for the contrast and similarities between color and form and how we put them together. What colors cause excitement when they meet each other? Which ones dull each other out? How much of which hue do you need to balance this other hue?

I love grasses and watching them blow in the breeze and trying to figure how to capture that feeling. Often I make work about sensations of nature where before I might be inclined to capture something from nature in an abstract way on the surface of the pot. Now I am much more interested in things like, what does rain feel like? Or how it feels to be under a wave. What happens when water trickles down from these mountains? What is the geography of that? And what if it comes in a dream? And what if the dream waves go in a different direction, and what if they are under water?

**MB:** Has relocating to Vermont from North Carolina impacted your color palette? I could see your work has perhaps become brighter, maybe from living in a “greyer” part of the country?

**HW:** I think the same things influence me no matter where I live. I know for sure I need to be surrounded by beauty. When I am not, like when my studio was in my basement, I made horrible work- it was really depressing. Then, once my new studio was built, it started cheering up again. I know I need to be in beautiful surroundings. Maine, North Carolina, Vermont: I need beauty in my life and in my work.

I am reading a book about how different artists view beauty: *Notes on the Return to Beauty*. There can be many forms of beauty; I think when things are really garish they can be beautiful; I don’t always dwell on traditional beauty. There is something about beauty that arrests you when you encounter it. When I have a pot that comes out and I think it is really beautiful - it doesn’t happen a lot- I feel like beauty has soaked through my body and come out in the form of a pot. There is nothing that is more empowering than that feeling.

**MB:** Tell me about your relationship with Penland School of Crafts.

**HW:** I had a number of roles. Partially I worked in the gallery and I was the Director of Outreach. I did the Director job for 5 years, and the outreach department was new. The previous director left after writing and winning this fabulous grant and a lot of money, and the grant totally changed the Penland agenda away from their mission. So the grant was initially controversial; I had to make it a good thing. They had not been involved with the local community at all and, because of that, everyone thought Penland students ran around naked up on the hill. The changes this grant made in how Penland’s community views the school made such a difference in the life of the school. It was a wonderful thing, but it was not initially seen as so.

**MB:** How has the transition from working jobs at craft schools with a studio, to having a full-time studio practice impacted how you use your time? Has your work changed?

**HW:** My work has grown. Before it was at a continual plateau, I was doing so much other work I didn’t have time to attend to the work when it needed it. I also didn’t make enough work at times to allow the growing pains of new ideas. I think you have to make a lot of bad work to get some good work. At least I do; I’m not sure everyone has that same path. I make a lot of “dogs”, a lot in the middle, and some that are spectacular. I am always trying to reason out which is which. In order to do that, you need time to make all that work. You need time to think about it in a relaxed and
concentrated way. And so, it has made a tremendous difference. It has made me change and grow; I probably would have been making a lot of the same work without the transition.

**MB:** What inspired the move from North Carolina to Vermont?
**HW:** We moved here for my husband’s job. He needed a change and I was willing to go on an adventure. What I did not anticipate was how much I would miss my community. The clay community around Penland is amazing. I miss that terribly. But I have totally adjusted to the beauty of Vermont and its quietness, and I love the air - it feels really clean, here.

**MB:** Potters talk about the community of the field, from the sharing of techniques to community. Do you find potters to be rare within the art world?
**HW:** I think people who like community gravitate towards it, but I am sure some people are turned off by it and gravitate away from it. It seems potters are more like-minded about sharing resources and ideas and food. It could be a link there, between pots and food that does something.

**MB:** Are you a solitary studio worker, or do you like a community working space?
**HW:** I like working by myself. It is very easy here in Vermont to never see anyone. I have to work on seeing people. I do enjoy teaching, which provides me with a sense of community.

**MB:** What are your reasons for using red earthenware clay body?
**HW:** It makes me feel very simple. I work with clay and roll coils and pinch it in a manner like the very first people who ever worked with clay. I love that connection with history. And earthenware is ubiquitous: it is everywhere. I love that, too. It is probably the biggest reason I use it, as opposed to stoneware. I also appreciate the color potential. I like that how the clay still breathes even after fired, how it is still porous and not as hard as it looks. I also appreciate the journey earthenware has travelled in the process of becoming clay; it has toppled down hillsides and washed along stream beds, gathering organic materials into its body. But mostly I use earthenware because, after all these years, I am still totally intrigued by the process of working with red clay - it moves me like nothing else.

*Crenolated Jar*, 2013, Earthenware and Slip. Photo by Michael Sacca
MB: Since you cover your work with slip, do you feel you are working against the red clay or with the red?
HW: Definitely with the red. Even with the slip over it you can see the warmth of the clay. I always leave some areas exposed or use sgraffito or washy slip sections to let that warmth bleed out. The red is the body, the slip and glaze are the light and color that balance the depth and provide a richness to the body color.
MB: Who are your ceramic heroes?
HW: Historically, I am inspired by Oribe and Tang Dynasty ceramics as well as traditional Korean ceramics. I often revisit the work of Ogata Kenzan and Rosanjin Kitoaki. I also am moved by Jun Kaneko's contemporary work— in particular his drippy bleeding lines of color and simple forms.

When I was younger I lived in Jersey City for five years. During that time I visited museums and galleries every weekend. I saw a lot of Terry Winters' work as well as Philip Guston's paintings. When one of my painting friends recently told me that she thinks I'm the Philip Guston of the ceramic world, I couldn't have been more elated. Richard Diebenkorn's Ocean Park series has aided me in envisioning my surfaces as landscapes. For use of color, I look to Milton Avery and the contemporary painter Thomas Nozkowski.
MB: If you have a show coming up do you pull from the things already in your studio, or do you make new work?
HW: Never old. I make new work. What I am working on now is always “best”. Not that each piece is best, but it is what I am most interested in now. I am always the most excited by the pots I am making RIGHT NOW, and every day is a new right now.
MB: What parting wisdom for younger workers and the new generation of artists looking into a career in the arts do you have?
HW: If you want to make a living don't do what I did. But I guess when I look at my life and think about what I've done I have to say that the big times and moments of my life have been when I have allowed myself to let the world go a little bit and seek what I love, whatever that is. Surrounding myself with what I love to do has been the most important thing and also making sure I am stretched in different directions, so that I don't get tied up in one particular thing.

When I was younger and a painter in school there was this notion that if you were not struggling with life and work, then you were not making art. I didn't want to be sad and make sad work. I think allowing myself to find my own way to live, i.e.: letting the world go a little bit and doing it my own way has been my saving grace. It has kept me reasonably happy. It is how I can be 60 and still feel like a little kid. For me, living a comfortable and aesthetically pleasing and happy life is more conducive to art work than allowing mental anguish and struggle to play too large a role in life.

What I have found is that as I tread my path slowly and more deeply every day, colors, patterns and aromas surface more sharply. Ideas have the time they need to develop. Taking my time allows more engagement and clarity in life and work.

Holly Walker’s work can be viewed at hollywalkerceramics.com
Art and Life: An Interview with Karen Parisian
by Becky Coppock
When I walked into Karen Parisian’s studio in Chicago, I was immediately impressed with how Ms. Parisian’s dual professions as an artist and art therapist are integrated. “Art is a metaphor for life”, Parisians stated. Indeed art is the very essence of how Parisian works with the individuals she sees as an art therapist.

Parisian’s studio is filled with artworks that interpret the challenges of life, particularly Parisian’s personal life. One painting, *Until Then*, was inspired by her daughter’s growth and leaving for college. Parisian described the readiness and strength of her daughter, as well as the sadness of her departure. A painting entitled *Resurrection* is created on raw canvas to represent the potential of life’s changes: Parisian says this painting is “about having fun, scribbling, and letting go”. A favorite of Parisians that exemplifies the deep connection between her life as an artist and art therapist is *The Long Goodbye*, which expresses the bonds one makes in therapy and letting go once the client has reached a departure point.

Parisian talked about the losses of life, even in painting, and of the importance of altering or losing part of a painting in order for the whole piece to work. For Parisian this means that one has to step back and rethink a difficult situation, and then revisit it from a different perspective, both in art and life. Without this alternate perspective, one is so limited by the current perspective that there seems to be only one way to the end product. For Parisian, life does not work that way. Parisian found her way into art therapy when she felt like something was missing in her life. She shared that she read a book by Florence Cane, *The Artist in Each of Us*, that helped her to find what was missing. She shared, “That was all I needed”.

Parisian received her BA in Art Education at Western Michigan University and her MAAT at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Parisian is represented by the Mars Gallery in Chicago, and she has exhibited at Griffin Gallery in Chicago, and Cottage Gallery in Laguna Beach, California. Her paintings and sculptures have been used on set of the NBC-TV series, *Chicago Fire*. Parisian’s work is included in the publication, *Night of a Hundred Angels*. 
Becky Coppock: You share in your artist statement that painting has to do with extreme states of being. It may begin as a primitive impulse or a lump in the throat, a love, a loss, a crack in the sidewalk. Ultimately it creates a spark with the potential for a thousand fires.” Can you elaborate on extreme states of being and primitive impulse?

Karen Parisians: Loss and love are extreme states of being. Sometimes these states reside within us and we have no words, only feelings, which we may struggle with. The art helps to put form to those feelings. If we think too hard about it, our process can be interrupted. That’s where the primitive impulse comes in. It has to be real and genuine and come from deep inside. Often our thoughts and expectations get in the way of that. We may fear what comes out on the paper or canvas. We are always judging. That can be scary at times. When we have something important to communicate or say, it is not always apparent in words but it hits us deep in extreme ways that we don’t always have access to. Art allows us to explore that, sometimes without even realizing we are doing so. On the other hand, when something apparent strikes us head-on - a loss, a trauma - we are often driven to find ways to work through it, and art can help that.

BC: Your paintings seem to incorporate symbolism, abstract figuration, and spiritualism. Do you plan out what color, materials, and associated symbols you are going to work with in your paintings?

KP: I try to pre-plan, but often have to relinquish to the process and allow the flow to happen. It’s always a delicate balance between structure, elements, balance, the intellect, and the instinct and the drive. The circle for me is symbolic of the universe. The moon connects us no matter where we are standing.

BC: Your two art pieces, Sacrifice or Offering and Two Figures, appear to have been influenced by Picasso and by Matisse cut-outs. Can you talk about the visual language or imagery of these pieces?

KP: Sacrifice and Offering has to do with the plight of the artist. What do we sacrifice to be an artist? Money, time: is it a selfish act? Self-absorbing? Or is it an offering, a way to connect with other people through the visual language? Are we giving ourselves in a very personal way or are we seeking attention and approval? I like to think we are offering something up to the universe and that we perhaps sacrifice ourselves, at times, to do so. It takes risk, it takes time, it takes commitment, and we have to believe in what we are doing as artists. We have a vision, we have spirit, and that shows up for me in the figurative form representing humanity, and often the woman figure and her spiritual nature.

The influence of Picasso and Matisse are present as the basic shapes and form, to help simplify and represent what I am trying to express. I don’t like to get caught up in details.

BC: You speak about how primitive cultures have influenced your work and their rituals and rites of passage speak to the core nature of being. Can you share how the rites of passage and development have been reflected in your work? Why is this important in your work?

KP: From cave paintings to graffiti, man has found a need to express themselves on the walls that surround them. From the beginning of time there has been a need to make a mark and express what is going on within and around. I think this speaks to the core nature of our being, the need to express and communicate and place a mark. We see this developmentally in people, too. From the young scribble drawing, to the tad pole figures, the radial suns, to houses and trees and beyond. Ceremony and ritual are about acknowledging and celebrating life and the passage of time. Primitive cultures inherently do this. Moving from life to death is the biggest and scariest rite of passage we face. It is also the one that bonds us eternally with one another, because it is then that we exist in pure spirit with one another. My painting Until Then is about that. It was painted after my mother passed away.

BC: Would you say your symbolic work is emotionally based, purely metaphor, or narrative? Why? And can you identify and describe a painting as an example?
Above: Karen Parisian in her studio with the painting, *Resurrection*, Photo by Becky Coppock

Below: *Sacrifice or Offering* acrylic on canvas, 2011, Courtesy of Mars Gallery
KP: *Salvation* is all three: it represents humanity and our need for connection. Some of the metaphor is in the bold line work and the way the lines flow into each other to show our inter-dependency when it comes to living our lives and the hardships we may face. Another painter and friend of mine said it reminded him of a slave ship. He saw the central figure as though it was praying. And he mentioned that it reminded him of *Amazing Grace*. I named it *Salvation* after that discussion. This is how the art goes beyond me and becomes about connecting with other people, their insights, thoughts, and opinions.

BC: What is art therapy? How do you answer that question?
KP: There is a quote I recently came across that says, “Life beats down and crushes the soul, and art reminds us that we have one”. I like to explain art therapy in that sense. Art serves a purpose that helps us give visual form and meaning to the difficulties we face. The art therapist helps the person find that form and voice, and gives the individual support, comfort, and encouragement in the process.

BC: What part of your practice as an art therapist has affected your artwork? Can you describe in more detail an example of this effect?
KP: Responding to the deep emotions of another person through art is a powerful way to communicate. In session, this visual response can provide empathy and allow the other person to be seen and heard. Creating an image that reflects their feelings - depression, fear, anxiety, vulnerability - is an important part of art therapy. As far as my own personal impact of their stories and what it is like to hold those stories and work with them as they work through them: *Origins of Tears* is a painting I did in response to a student who was working through rape from a family member. This is a piece about experience and turmoil. The experience of being devoured, and her turmoil and her trauma can help her understand where her sorrow begins. The experiences and depth of the art therapy work elicits a need to respond and connect with others artistically, and evokes deep thought and emotion, which gets translated in my own process of creating.

BC: Is there any difference between “art therapy” work and “art gallery” work?
KP: Most interesting work - and the work that tends to sell - is the work that has the most emotion, spirit and meaning. If you are authentic with your work it is usually received well by others and, ultimately, they want to have some of it.

BC: How does being a working artist affect what you bring to art therapy? Can you give some specific examples?
KP: Understanding the process of painting, what it can stir up, what it can unfold for us, and how to reflect on the process as well as the result is all really important. Feeling stuck is something we all face as artists. This can be a metaphor in itself when working with someone. How do we get unstuck, emotionally, or in our art, or both? When and how do we take risks? What will happen if we let go of what we know and try something new? Sometimes I have a student work with their non-dominant hand to take a risk and step out of their comfort zone. Or the idea of loss: at times we have to remove parts of a painting to make it work as a whole. We have to let go of something we may like, in order for something else to happen. Do we hang on to the one section because we like it, even though it’s not working with the rest of the piece? Those are the painting questions. Those are the life questions.

BC: Do you ever struggle with the voices of your art therapy clients and how to keep their voices from entering into your personal artwork? Or do you let these voices become a part of your personal artwork?
KP: I hope it will be fuel for the work and, mostly, it is. We all struggle, we are all human and that in itself connects us.

BC: How have Carl Jung’s archetypes influenced your art and your work as an art therapist? Which of the archetypes have been most helpful?
KP: The symbolism of archetypes to represent parts of the psyche can be helpful in therapy. Creating images of these different parts and labeling them as “I am the one who” protects, judges, rejoices…can be one way to think about these various archetypes. Learning to balance and live with the shadow self is also a powerful, helpful archetype. Accepting all parts of self and managing their size and relationship to us is important work. Visualizing the “inner critic” and then balancing...
out the message of this voice can be important work.

**BC:** In your artist statement you share that you find inspiration in the modern masters. What do you pull from the masters you admire? Who are your influences artistically?

**KP:** The flow, the shapes the balance and the symbolism are what attracts me. With Matisse, the bold color and form attracts me. With DeKooning, the expressive line helps me to let go and get out of my head. Working with large brushes and being free is a great experience...I have to remind myself to do that and not be afraid. My influences are Paul Klee and Jackson Pollock. Paul Klee: I appreciate his whimsical and being unafraid. Jackson Pollock: I love his spontaneity of line and movement. Then there is Picasso, both his blue period and Cubism, and his ability to be evocative with both. And Kathe Kollwitz: her beauty and depth of emotion.

**BC:** You describe your painting process as “relating to layering and textures relating to raw essentials and at time minimalistic purities”. Can you share what you mean by minimalistic purities?

**KP:** Taking complex visuals and breaking them down to color, form, texture: the essentials, or what is underneath, without all the dressing we put on. These are the things that make us vulnerable in real life. We need to let go of pretenses, and get more comfortable with being real.

**BC:** How long does it generally take to complete a painting? Include the conceptual and planning time, studies, and the painting process.

**KP:** This is actually a hard question. I paint and remove, add and subtract, and this could take a week to a month, depending on size and how the process unfolds. Some come together more quickly and others I labor over until all elements feel balanced and cohesive.

**BC:** What do you find might influence your work, aesthetic issues and content? What drives your work to evolve or change?

**KP:** I am actually asking myself this same question right now: What’s next? I’m not sure, but I’m sure it will happen if I let it. I can’t let myself get in the way, I just have to paint and see...

**BC:** How does being sponsored by a gallery help you? Do you have any advice for other art therapists interested in showing work in the fine art gallery scene?

**KP:** Just be real. Do what inspires you and what makes sense to you. The rest will fall into place. If your work is truly personal then maybe it’s not necessary to put in the public eye. If you are feeling that you would like to share it, then by all means I think people will relate and connect to the work.

Karen Parisian shared the following quote from Rilke’s *Letters To A Young Poet*, which describes how she feels about the art process: “Things aren’t all so tangible and sayable as people would usually have us believe; most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered, and more unsayable than all other things are works of art, those mysterious existences, whose life endures besides our own small, transitory life.”

Karen Parisian’s artwork can be viewed at karenparisian.com, and at marsgallery.com.
Two Figures
acrylic on canvas
2010, Courtesy of Mars Gallery
Sage Encounter: an Interview with Sculptor James Surls

by Hans Videll
James Surls is a sculptor based in Carbondale, Colorado. His works have been displayed at MoMA, the Guggenheim, and the Whitney Museum of American Art, where they twice appeared in the Whitney *Biennial Exhibition*. Surls is known for his intellectually challenging and visually compelling sculptures, drawings and prints. His anthropomorphic forms are energetic and direct, leaving room for the viewer to discover the poetic vision he has created. His work integrates organic and primal qualities with sophisticated imagery and content. He is best known for his large, unpainted wooden sculptures that have images burnt into them, and to which he often adds bent steel wires.

James Surls earned a BS from Sam Houston State University and an MFA from the Cranbrook Academy of Art. The Dallas Museum of Art, the El Paso Museum of Art, the Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art (at the University of Oklahoma), the Meadows Museum (at Southern Methodist University, Dallas), the Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and the Smithsonian American Art Museum are among the public collections holding work by Surls. In 2009, five Surls bronze-and-steel bouquets were installed on Park Avenue by the New York City Parks Public Art Program. A James Surls museum is in the planning stage in his adopted hometown of Carbondale.

I interviewed Mr. Surls in the office of his Carbondale studio. While we talked, his studio assistant, Tai Pomaro, diligently welded his most recent sculpture for its permanent installation in St. Louis.
Hans Videll: Your work has been called accessible. How important is it for you that your work to be accessible?

James Surls: Well the whole nature of arts is accessibility. You are trying to make other people conscious of your thoughts, your perception, and your realities. How can you do that if it is not accessible? Accessibility is everything: it’s the transfer. It’s going from the intangible to the tangible, or from the tangible, passed on to someone else, who in turn will pass it on to someone else. The arts will answer questions for a spectator, but for something to be accessible you have to get to know what you’re trying to have access to, or what’s trying to project to you. Art cannot evade the question. If someone says “art, what are you?”, the artwork has to tell them. It has to say what it means. In other words, there has to be a conversation between the spectator and art.

HV: I see that a lot in the symbols that you use. I notice, for instance, your use of the eye quite often.

JS: The first thing you as a baby were cognizant of was your mother’s eyes, and it’s not just an old saying that they’re deep as wells: they really are. The eyes have it, and I wanted my art to look at me; pure and simple. I wanted to give it some sort of life. And I thought I discovered something until I realized the universality of that goes back far into human history.

HV: You have developed a visual vocabulary with the symbols that you use. Is there something that you tap into within the Jungian realm in terms of trying to convey your message?

JS: Yes. I have quite a few atheist buddies who think Jung was just full of shit, and really almost get gnarly at the concept that Jung projected. I, on the other hand, embrace it totally. I’m willing to go with it as the concept. I’m willing to accept the concept of being able to cross over to another dimension.

HV: Are you projecting archetypical imagery in your conveyance?

JS: Well, I don’t know if I am or not, to tell you the truth. To be a master of something you have to not be able to think about it. You really have to be able to just simply do it. Now, what is the difference between doing and thinking about it? If I’m going to walk, and I say, ‘Now I will move my right foot, and take a step’, then take that step. ‘Now I will move my right leg’, and take a step. Well, you would be very slow and very clumsy, and not really be able to do anything as it related to a ballet, for instance. You simply know how to walk. No one has to tell you, here’s the way you walk. We all do that, but we all step into another mental arena called daydreaming. If you are willing to give it credence then it’s real. You know if you’re willing to swim in that psychological pool, then you get to swim in that pool. If you’re saying, ‘this is bullshit, no way’, well, then you don’t. I’m saying this is as a matter of perception and belief, and I put it in the realm of concept. It’s a great concept.

HV: Joseph Campbell called the footstep you’re speaking of as “the wisdom consciousness of the body.” Are you drawing from that when you are creating a piece?

JS: I think everybody draws from that, to tell you the truth. It’s unimaginable to me that they don’t. It’s totally imaginable to me that I do. You know there is such thing as body knowing. And your body just knows. But what happens if you don’t listen to it? If you’re asking me if I’m willing to go down a Jungian road, the answer is yes. If you’re asking me if I practice a conscious system of order, as compared to Jung: the answer is no.

HV: I know there was a lot of response from the Modernist movement from Jung. Would you consider yourself in that camp in any form?

JS: Well, I would consider myself as being in the pool. Was Duchamp in the pool? I would say so. Was Joseph Cornell in the pool? I would say so. That guy can take up the marble and drop it in a shot glass, and take you to the edge of the universe. He was as deep in the pool as you’re going to get. Where is the “there” in “out there”? For artists it’s in here (points to his head). You can go as far in as you can go out. An artist is incredible at internal visualizing.

HV: That’s imagining the infinitesimally small as well as the infinitesimally large.

JS: You asked earlier about a symbol. One of the symbols that I use is a prism. I use it in drawings and sculpture. In sculpture it inevitably manifests itself as a three-dimensional drawing. It’s an elongated triangular shape. Now a prism bends light, and light can be measured. There’s something called the red shift. The red shift measures the
speed of the outer edge of the solar system. It does it by bending light through a prism. So light, at that point of bend which is measured; is the littlest thing I can think of. Is it a wave? Is it a particle? What exactly is it? Whenever it is, it is registering how fast the universe is expanding. That is a big leap. So to make that jump physically in the prism with something that is measured scientifically, then you also can make it psychologically. You can make it as a concept. If you are willing to swim in the concept, then you get to be Joseph Cornell.

HV: You said previously that drawing was as close to the human psyche as one can get in terms of response time. In other words, the time of conception to creation...

JS: When I draw, I have a blank piece of paper and pencil. As a pencil, I can make a mark. Does it take a second to make a mark, or maybe five seconds, or maybe ten seconds or maybe sixty seconds. Sixty seconds is a long time to be making a mark. I can go from here to Russia in sixty seconds. The whole time element is really compressed down into that moment. And that’s what I mean when I say drawing, as I see it, as I practice it, is in essence haiku. It’s that instant hit, on meaning, on concept, on visuals. It could be a poem, or it could be drawn. The difference between the drawing and the poem is very little. You can extend that five seconds, sixty seconds out to a year. I compress it; I love direct hits. I like going directly to Plan A. Look at the drawings; and all the sudden it starts to make more sense, what I’m saying, because you can see in the drawing something that has been compressed down to three or four seconds.

HV: Three or four seconds for the drawing, and then a year for the sculpture.

JS: A long time. Some of them take months and months and months before you can even start physically working on them. That’s what the big commissions are. Man, you are dealing with city councils. You are dealing with bylaws. And you are dealing with all the potholders in town who are pissed because someone’s gonna spend some money on art. It’s like running a gauntlet.

HV: Do you find more public venues for your work now? For instance, the library at the University of Wyoming: my understanding is that was the highest traffic area…
JS: The most highly trafficked area in Wyoming. It’s installed at the library at the University of Wyoming, so every student at the University will eventually pass within its physical proximity.

HV: In 2003 you had an exhibition at Meadows Museum at SMU, where you once taught. At that point you said you were ready for such a show, and previous to that point you weren’t. How did you know you were ready?

JS: In 1974, I had been going back and forth between New Mexico and Dallas, teaching for SMU. In the latter part of ’73, I wrote in my sketchbook that I was going to do a major exhibition in a major museum within one year. There was a commitment that I made to myself. I had no museum. I had no director, curator, or anyone who expressed any interest in that. So it was visualized. I made it up, and then I get ready for it. A year after I did that, Jim Harrifast, director of the Contemporary Art Museum of Houston, walked in the studio and looked around for ten minutes and he said, “You’re ready, you wanna do a show?” I said, “Yes, when?” He said, “In two months”. I said, “Oh shit.” If you’re not ready, you’re not gonna get to do the show. So I know what ready is, I’m very aware of ready. At SMU in 2003, they came and asked me to do the show. I said, “Well, great, when do you want to do it?” “We want to open in eleven months.” I was very cognizant of the space and was very aware of what the space was; of what it looked like, but I did not have a show for that space.

I wanted to do a show but I wanted to do a great show. I told the director at SMU that I needed a way to live for a year; and the people at the Meadows Museum really pulled through. I got enough money to live on for a year from the deal I negotiated with them. Now I have a year; actually, I had ten and a half months to get it installed.

HV: Tell me how you met your studio assistant, Tai Pomaro.

JS: I met Tai at Anderson ranch in 1997. As it turns out we had a lot of mutual friends. He grew up in and around and about Dallas and Arkansas. He lived in that creative strata of Dallas, so there were a bunch of mutual friends who are of different ages; his parents are about my age.

HV: Is that when you incorporated more metal into your work?

JS: Well I’d been doing that all for a long time, if you go back and look
there was. The metal got integrated fairly quickly and as a matter of fact I can go out here and show you pieces that have metal in them that were made before that. But here's the thing: Tai can weld tin foil to a train track. He is a master at welding. At least it looks beautiful, there's no reason to think that it is not a full good weld.

HV: Is there any incorporation of his aesthetic into your work?
JS: What constitutes aesthetic? The bend? The flow? The answer probably is yes. Although it’s my concept, my idea, if we were tweaking things, moving things around, yes, he will comment on it, he will say something. If I agree with it, I’ll do it.

HV: Is there anything about William Blake that influences and informs your work?
JS: I just can’t imagine any artist on the planet not appreciating William Blake. Or, I can’t imagine a poet on the planet not appreciating William Blake. Once you can go into the grain of sand and see the universe, you’re there: you’re in the pool. He was deep into the pool. It’s really amazing, as a concept that all things are possible. If all things are possible and you are willing to accept that they are not, then you are putting certain limitations on yourself. If they are, and you believe it, then you get to go swimming in the pool. For instance, Blake could draw the whole universe. I can draw the universe. I do it all the time. I draw other worlds, other cosmic realities.

HV: I would like to touch on that. The idea of quantum physics is that we live in a world, a universe of possibilities. Mathematicians and physicists are trying to articulate this in their language. Try to express themselves mathematically as opposed to artists, who are trying to express themselves visually…

JS: There’s got to be a starting point in the literary and scientific world. The Greeks did incredible things. The mathematics of human development from one point to two points to three points, which is a plane. So a parallel thinking of art and science is very real.

HV: I want to touch back on drawing, specifically celestial phenomenon. What are you trying to convey in your drawing? I see constellations.
JS: I prefer to think of it as drawing forever. What does forever look like? I’ve made drawing called Parts per 1,000,000,000. And that’s the title of the drawing. And I’ve made a drawing called The One Part Per 1,000,000,000. One part per 1,000,000 is a big part if you compare it to one part per 1,000,000,000.

HV: I know you have an affinity for basswood. Have you explored the use of some of the local species?
JS: Yes, I get wood from the upper ends of lakes. These are reservoir lakes so they drop and rise on an annual basis. There is a lot of swift water that comes out of the mountains and collects in reservoirs. There can be a time in the spring when the spring runoff is occurring where a stream becomes a raging torrent. And under those circumstances inevitably there will be things washed up; then I go up and collect pieces.

HV: What did steel allow you to do that wood didn’t?
JS: In the beginning, I used vines as I now use steel. I would have a vine connected to something protruding or projecting out, or cantilevered out and there would be a wooden component on the end. I would look at it (steel) connecting component A and component B. I had to have a physical line just to hold it up. And at some point the cantilevering effect, or the stress factor in a vine - which are strong, by the way - overloaded the system, physically. It was hard for me to keep them from breaking. Question then becomes, what can I use in its stead?

HV: It seems to me that scale brings about a new set of challenges.
JS: Yes. Particularly if you look at them as challenges. Here’s the way I get around it: if I make a model of something that’s going to be 10 foot by 10 foot by 18 foot high; when we blow it up Tai and I will do our best to make that enlargement accurate. But if instead of 18 foot it turns out to be 18 and a half-foot, I say just say, ‘perfect.’ I have a tolerance level that I’m willing to work with. If you narrow that tolerance level down, it’s hard.

HV: What is your relationship to folk art? I’m not sure I really understand what it is. You hear the term thrown around in music and I’ve contemplated it. Sometimes I hear it thrown around in a derogatory fashion.
JS: What is the difference between art and science? Let’s use that as a starting point. I think a definition of art would be that you feel it. You
really feel this. What’s the definition of science? Well, you study this. You are taking all of the facts that you can muster, all the data that you can pull together; and you’re looking at an analytical sense of all the analytical data and you try to come to a conclusion that you can prove. Well, is there a separation between feeling it, and studying it? Classical music is studied and learned. That’s what Juilliard is for. There are a lot of institutions that are devoted to concert pianists. How much time on task can be put into the study of the craft? They are mastering the craft. They can read music, they can read notes, and they are cognizant all the way through in a scientific sense of its reality. But why wouldn’t they feel it? Does science and art meld? I would say it does. The front door opens, and you’re formally welcomed inside. But what if you did not have a propensity for that intellectual endeavor, and you are left standing out in the yard? Would you ever get in? There is a key, and that’s where folk art comes in. It’s a key to the front door, or at least the key to the back door, but you’ll get in.

Religions are built on singular belief. In the Dalai Lama’s world all things are possible within the realm of singular belief. It is the absolute focus on a particular system. And folk artists do that. They don’t need permission. They don’t get a degree. If they don’t have a canvas, they will tear the boards off the hog pen and they will use it as their canvas. If they don’t have any paint, they will go behind the paint store, rummaging through the garbage, pulling out all the old latex paint cans. They’ll scrape from the bottom of the can, and they’ll get old brushes and start painting. And the painting is so honest, and so from the heart, and so free. They are unencumbered. It just comes out, and you don’t need a degree to do it. Singular belief is a powerful thing.

**HV:** Appreciate that, because it is that overwhelming desire that got me into music.

**JS:** You know many musicians never went to Juilliard? You know how many musicians just picked up a guitar?

**HV:** I agree, you can have all the training and still not have the key. But the key comes first, and the scientific back door is sort of the folk trip.

**JS:** If you’re in the cathedral, you can be introduced through the front door in a formal march, or you could crawl into the bathroom window. **HV:** Well, I guess the difference between folk art and high art would be the training, the classical understanding, but it doesn’t work if you don’t have the call.

**JS:** It’s nice to be able to draw. It is nice to be able to paint. It is nice to have the technical training.

**HV:** What was the impact of the Whitney Biennial on your career?

**JS:** When I was about twenty-three/twenty-four years old I went from Cranbrook to Buffalo, New York. There was an artist named Duayne Hatchett, who was about twice as old as I was at the time. He got into the *Whitney Biennial*, and they referred to him as an up-and-coming artist. I thought, ‘Shit fire, are you kidding me? I’ve got another twenty-three years before I even get to be up-and-coming?’ None of this stuff matters. Being in the *Whitney Biennial* is wonderful, but it doesn’t entitle you to anything. It doesn’t give you anything. All these things, to me, is like pouring water on a duck. I like to flit around in the water, but I’m still here, I’m still making sculpture, I’m still doing all the same stuff that I did beforehand. Let’s say that in 1957, Bill DeKooning got $1,000,000. He’d still have to get up and go paint. You have to walk back into the studio the next morning, you’d have to pull out the same paint brush, and still have to go from a system of order - which was a blank canvas - to chaos, and then bring it back into order.

**HV:** It’s not the means, nor is it the end. Did it open any doors for you?

**JS:** Something opens those doors. I just don’t think that any one of those things will open the door. I am not complaining, belittling, or making light of the *Whitney Biennial*. I loved it. I want to be in a third one, though, that’s the whole point. Now, instead of wanting to be in the *Whitney Biennial*, I want the whole damn museum.

James Surls’ work can be viewed at jamessurls.com.
Left: Unknown
Date created unknown
Steel, Wood
Photo by H.C. Videll

Right: Snake Eyes
Date created unknown
Steel, Wood
Photo by H.C. Videll
Electricity and Meaning: Odili Donald Odita

By Kristoffer S. Bach
Odili Donald Odita is an internationally acclaimed artist. He was born in Enugu, Nigeria in 1966. At a young age his family was forced to flee Nigeria due to civil war, and they immigrated to the United States. Odita creates non-objective paintings that focus on color, geometric form, and angular pattern. They are created on paper, stretched canvas, or directly painted on a wall as a permanent installation. His paintings have been exhibited internationally, and are included in the permanent collections of major U.S. museums, such as the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the New Orleans Museum of Art. He has participated in more than 100 group shows and over 30 solo exhibitions, including the 52nd Venice Biennial in 2007 and the 2013 Armory Show in New York. Critical reviews of his work have been published in significant professional journals and publications, including ArtForum and Art in America. Odita is represented by the Jack Shainman Gallery in New York, and the Michael Stevenson Gallery in Cape Town, South Africa.

Odili Donald Odita has a BFA from Ohio State University and a MFA in Painting from Bennington College. He currently lives and works in Philadelphia, and is an Associate Professor of Painting and Drawing at Tyler School of Art, Temple University. I spoke with him in his Philadelphia studio.
Kristoffer S. Bach: What have you found to be your most challenging artistic endeavor?

Odili Donald Odita: The most challenging part of any artistic practice is the need to find continuity and to find ways to grow, which is a pleasure as much as a difficulty. In that sense it’s not work. There are individual projects I have, of wall installation projects or for exhibitions that may be coming up, that seem to be a hardship or difficult, but that’s just part of the process. The need, the will to create the work is the big story. So, I look at art as the sense of what I’m trying to do with my work, finding ways to continually tap into that source; my source.

KSB: What would you say is your most significant influence or inspiration?

ODO: Obviously, my father. He was an artist and an art historian, and working with him as a little kid as a studio assistant in his studio, which was the house. That was a great influence on me. The books he had in the house, the African art throughout the house… Another great influence was shopping with my mother, going to flea markets or garage sales looking for all sorts of trappings from all over the world.

KSB: How would you describe your artistic practice and your studio process?

ODO: It’s very careful. I may not seem like a very serious person; however, I am. It’s a very careful process, because it’s one that I’m working through a lot of different things. I’m always amazed at artists who have a very voluminous production. I’m envious of that because I paint slowly. It takes me a while to paint paintings. The considerations I have of color, of composition, for the meaning of my work, it’s something I take very seriously. I need to really engage with all that in a really full way. When I believe in what I’m doing when I do it, it makes it very real for me. When you paint that way it becomes very real for others, as well. So my process is slow, but it’s because I’m considering so many different things while I’m making what I am making.

KSB: What is your process for beginning a new work, and also bringing it to fruition?

ODO: Basically, I look at a lot of old work, and I look at what I’ve completed prior to when I start. I’m usually moving forward in the sense of trying to advance or enhance what I’ve discovered. Or I pursue a question that was brought up in work prior. So that’s basically the start. I may have a question about color or a question about its placement, or a question about pattern and design. When I have a question about painting I just try to push that forward in the new work.

KSB: When beginning a new painting, does the work evolve organically, or does each decision inform those that follow?

ODO: Yeah, the second one. It’s an organic process in the way I make a painting. But definitely prior work informs the future work, and it grows that way. It’s not about, ‘Oh, I’ll paint birds today and fish tomorrow.’ It’s a continuity, it’s a dialogue.

KSB: Would you say that painting is a responsive, intuitive process for you and your work?

ODO: I think so, in the sense that intuition is a higher knowledge. I’ve been painting a long time now. There are people who have painted much longer than I have, but I feel that I can trust that time and my experience with this process and its progress. I definitely like that sensitivity, that sense of time and history of what I’ve gone through.

KSB: What restrictions do you place on yourself when you paint?

ODO: There’s obviously a lot. You can’t have everything and the kitchen sink and make something out of that. I mean that in the sense that you have to focus, at a certain point, on certain things. In dealing with painting and its history, its western history and its total history, is to acknowledge certain limitations that exist within the canvas. When I’m painting on a canvas, I’m acknowledging in my way my understanding of those limitations. I’ve recently been looking at abstraction and practitioners of early abstract art made here in the U.S. and in Canada, specifically. It’s interesting to think, to contemplate the heavy, serious limitations that those artists put on themselves to discover something new. It’s exciting for me to learn that, to engage that, to understand that reality, to understand the necessity to enforce serious limitations to get to something new.

I look at painting as a tradition of continuity, and I see us today
benefiting from those prior discoveries. We're benefiting from those prior experiences and processes. We, as painters today, can take that information, that story further. It's not about taking it further in a linear sense, but taking it further in a holistic sense. What are we going to do with our paintings, and our belief systems, and ourselves now, considering what has happened before? How are we going to take our paintings forward? How are we going to take ourselves forward? So, that tradition is really what emboldens my work, emboldens my own process, my own ideas.

KSB: What is your process for determining when a work is finished?
ODO: I have certain steps that assist me in evaluating the paintings. For example: the entire painting or shapes have been designed to compose space. But that's not the end in itself. I have to see what works visually, conceptually, emotionally, and then I continue to make changes on the material in a painting that I have brought to a certain level of completion, until it is complete. Completion is something that I can't determine when or how. I've made work that I would say is complete, I come back to it again and I say it's incomplete. At some point you stop and realize that you're not going to resolve your own future. You look at the work; you accept it for what it is now. Tomorrow you'll see it as unfinished, because you're growing into the next stage. The painting is not necessarily a postcard; it's the culmination of experience in one form. Let's say that it's going to be finished when you realize or accept that this is who you are now.

KSB: I notice that you have some smaller works on paper rather than canvas or installations on walls. Do you conceive your smaller works as studies, or are they works in and of themselves?
ODO: They're works in and of themselves, and they're different. Smaller work is not bigger work. I found a long time ago that you can't just shrink a work down and just have a smaller work, because it's all about space and how you're going to engage in space. If you have a smaller piece, it's just a smaller space, but it's a different experience of that smaller space. It's literally a smaller space, but it can actually be bigger when you understand how to make that smaller space bigger than a larger painting. It's fascinating. Paper is something else altogether; drawing is a totally different experience. It's about speed and process as well, and how the material can speed the process.

KSB: How so?
ODO: In the sense that you're drawing something in ten seconds, or five minutes, or half an hour. Then you get to a certain level of proficiency; maybe a half an hour one day and then two minutes the next. It's interesting how that time plus the material will dictate the experience, versus when you're working on a canvas. You have scale, but you also have material that's different from drawing material. Paint on paper is different from paint on canvas. Maybe you're going to use gouache on paper, but then you'll use acrylic or oil on canvas. Or you may use charcoal on canvas versus charcoal on paper. Charcoal on paper moves differently than it does on canvas. Those so-called little things are not little: they become
Installation view of Heaven’s Gate, 2012
Wall Painting, Permanent Installation at and Commissioned by the SCAD Museum of Art, Savannah.
Photo by Matthew McCully.
Image courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery.

Abstraction and non-objectivity is not my point at all, because I’m always deriving from the world. If I’m going to think about blue, I think about blue. One might say, blue has no connotation to the world of things and people, but it does. Let’s say the sky is blue, or I’m in a blue mood today, or I’d say I beat someone black and blue. It becomes a phenomenon that’s conceptual, emotional, and real in the sense that that piece of paper on the floor is blue. It exists in all these different strata. These terminologies of representational versus abstraction are the limiting quotients. When, in fact, you have the possibility of form becoming essence, essence becoming thought, thought becoming feeling. I like that way that something can make those transitions, with respect to the sphere of abstraction versus representation, where things become things, words become things. I don’t want to

major realities to what it is you’re constructing and how you physically, mentally, and emotionally experience that construction.
KSB: Can you explain your transition from naturalistic painting to non-objective painting?
ODO: Well, first of all, let’s just say I don’t think I’ve ever left the essence of a certain kind of naturalistic perspective on the world. But I don’t want to make pictures of things. I don’t want to make paintings that are pictures of things. I’m really not interested in that sort of reality, that particular type of objectification, which falls into a certain kind of legalism, which falls into a certain kind of illusionism, which is a certain type of fakeness and not realism. I’m interested in abstraction, in that it helps me engage my meaning and my concepts and my materials in a very physical, real way.
be living in that sense. The problem is really not abstract images versus representational images, the way that we might engage those concepts.

KSB: You talked a little bit about your tools and your materials. With what do you create, and why? How do these choices dictate your work?

ODO: With wall paintings, for example, I’m using acrylic latex-based, polymer-based paint. With work on canvas, I’m using acrylic paint, of course. I have tape and all these other things. I’m brushing the paint on. The material is very specific to the form and to the concept and to the work that I make, very much so. I really believe in materiality and concepts and ideas coming and being engaged in the materiality. Materiality engages my body, too. My body works the material, whatever the material may be, in specific ways. Whether it’s paper and gouache, or I’m brushing the acrylic paint on canvas. There are specific reasons why I would want to brush on a canvas versus rolling the paint on the canvas.

KSB: Talk about how you arrived to use what seems to be primarily acrylic versus traditional oil.

ODO: I did use oil, and then I switched over to house paints when I was in undergraduate school. Only because it was economy, and again it was the way I was painting. I wanted the drippy paint. I wanted fast painting. I wanted bulk paint. I wanted a massive amount of paint, because I was using a lot of paint. That shaped my process and shaped my practice, working with a mishmash of mis-tinted paint. Because I had access to all these colors, before I understood about mixing my own colors. I learned to mix from those paints as well, understanding the subtractive nature of pigment through that material, because that’s extremely subtractive. It goes to grey very fast, because those paints don’t actually have very much pigment compared to the acrylic paints that you buy in an art store.

KSB: The qualities of the pigment are very different.

ODO: Yes, exactly. I mean, if you get into my wall paintings now, I’m using a much higher-grade paint which is very pigment rich, and I experience it in the cost of the paint, as well. But, back then, I was really motivated by all those things that helped me to make more and more work. I don’t have any sensibility of one type of paint is better than the other or because one is more traditional, it’s better. There are reasons why oil paint is used, what it does, how it exists. There are good reasons for it, there are good reasons to use it, and there are good reasons to continue to use it for those people who have those reasons. That’s not in this work that I make. There’s a different experience that is in need of a different kind of paint. So that’s why I use acrylic paint.

KSB: Speaking of color, could you discuss the importance of color, form, and pattern in your work?

ODO: Well, I have engaged with African art through my father’s experience and through my own experience growing up around it. Being that I’m Nigerian, it’s important to me to reflect on that reality. I was born in Nigeria but stripped from the place because of the civil war. That’s very important to me to reflect on in my practice. So that comes through in the way that I design my spaces and compose my spaces. I’m interested in a lot of different things that deal with textile and pattern and structures and space and rhythm and so forth.

KSB: Are you using color to invent space, and how do you determine your compositions?

ODO: Color is trying to re-form space, but at the same time I’m using drawing, the design, and the patterns, to modify those kinds of structures in space. So it works hand in hand. Drawing with color is not singularly one or the other, but how they exist together. It’s one of the essential [paragons] of painting.

KSB: Is your use of color conscious, intentional, and systematic?

ODO: It’s all of those. I’m definitely conscious of the systematic nature of color, and the theoretical nature of color. For instance, color theory. But you can’t work out of that solely when you’re working in art. It becomes boring and academic and pretty much overly scientific. But what makes art beautiful is the way that it reaches this creative, open-ended place of possibility.

KSB: Could you talk a little bit about your own system for color, or is that top secret?

ODO: It’s not that it’s top secret. It’s that everybody comes with their own way of working. And really, the way of working that everybody has, it has to come from your own life and your own experience. I don’t think you can apply one’s method for yourself in that respect, because it would be, in a way, false. It would be going back towards that
formulaic kind of structure of painting in the painted space. There's no school of thought in any sense. You come to this thing called painting and you have the rules that you build your foundation. But to take painting to another stratosphere, you imbue the work with your own understanding of the world in the process, and that's what makes the work original.

**KSB:** That makes sense. Could you talk more about the evolution of color in your work?

**ODO:** Really, it's just comic books. I love comics and the color in them and the color of the covers and so forth. It's interesting now to look at them and to see how they fade, how the older comics deteriorate and lose their color, and so forth. But back then, it was a really brilliant experience to see them and read those and experience that. Also, seeing paintings: when I started to really see the fire of color in paintings; that was a powerful experience.

**KSB:** Do you consider yourself a colorist?

**ODO:** I do, but I consider everybody a colorist in the sense that everybody has a color sensibility. I went to art school where, when people were called colorists, they were seen as masters where they told other people how to use color. I think that's really silly. Everybody has a sensitivity to color in their own way, even if it may not be as interesting as another person's. Color is just the way you see the world. You don't have to use bright colors to be a colorist.

**KSB:** What issues are important to you in your use of color?

**ODO:** Well, I want to convey mood, emotion, thought, concepts that I have, concepts that deal with space, and that deal with a certain sense of beingness. Questions I have about beingness and how one encounters space, confronts it, and what ways we might engage that confrontation with space. That is what's really very interesting to me when I'm working with color and paint.

**KSB:** From what sources do you draw your imagery?

**ODO:** That source is coming from a lot of different things. Not only my experience as an African in America. Textiles, sculpture, traditional African art, but also experiences I have with people, other artists, artwork, being motivated by their artwork… other artists’ experience, by their revelations and their understanding of the world, motivated by trying to engage in my work, from minor, miniscule things I do. You know… just everything.

**KSB:** It seems to me that some of your work has some symbolic elements and content, or at least forms and color have personal significance. Would you consider yourself a formalist?

**ODO:** Your question is intriguing, because I’m definitely formally grounded. But this (motioning to three new paintings in progress) is a very conceptual project, and it’s a very emotional project for me. It’s not systemic in the sense that I’m just going about it like an automaton. I do like the experience of being directed. I like that focus. I like that system of working. I can't let go of the other things as well, that's a part of who I am, my thoughts. And how my thoughts are motivated by my feelings, my considerations of things. It's very important to engage the work on levels that go beyond just formality. I conceptualize form. I think about form in relation to the world, structure and color as in structure in organizing societies, or organizing people. What is the meaning of that? What is the action and outcome of that?

**KSB:** How are you using formal, non-objective elements in systematic ways? Your work is non-objective in that it’s not, as you said, objectifying an object and copying it. Perhaps that’s more abstract. From what you told me, your work is based in your observations of the world around you. You bring that in, and it’s almost transmuted into the work that you make. Your use of color and line and gesture and movement, design elements, that type of thing: what is your system, of employing those in your work?

**ODO:** There is a certain process I have in bringing all these elements together. For example, making drawings into paintings and making lines and bringing lines together. But I'm trying to create something when I'm bringing those lines together. It's not just simply, 'Oh, that's a cool element.' The design itself is not just a symbol. It's not just a graphic. The graphic has to come to mean something and feel something. But that feeling is not a thing. It's an essence. I'm trying to get to an essence of a sensibility, of emotion. So that it's not, 'Oh, that's a city skyline.' Or, 'That's a star.' It's about getting to the complicated, through simple means; getting to a complicated state of being or state of place.

**KSB:** Could you discuss the process of developing a personal visual
vocabulary?
ODO: That has come over time. With everything you’re doing, you’re building your voice. It’s something that, for me, has occurred over time, in the sense of building upon my experiences and building upon my discoveries in the work. It could be a material discovery. It could be a design, composition discovery. Discovery could be something that accidentally happened in that painting, a mistake that opened up the door for a new work. I can’t underscore how important drawing is. We don’t draw enough, and we don’t appreciate how valuable drawing is. My simple drawings for these paintings allow me to experience different possibilities and that enhances my process inasmuch as the practice itself.

KSB: What difficulties have you had in that process of developing your own way of working, your own visual vocabulary?
ODO: The difficulty I create by not being open to possibility. There are a lot of times that I make stuff, and it’s just sitting there for months, maybe years. Then I come back to it, because I continually try to look back again to see what I didn’t see in making those things. That’s the difficulty: being able to sift through without being bogged down by everything. Being able to put away, push aside those things that are not of importance at a moment, to focus on what is important. But if there’s any difficulty, it’s just not being able to see. I come back to a drawing that’s older, and I’ll see it, and I’ll say, ‘Whoa. I understand that now,’ or ‘I can accept that now.’ I love going back to other art and saying, ‘Wow, I didn’t see that before,’ because then it’s new again.

KSB: Could you talk about your personal aesthetic and what you find visually interesting and appealing?
ODO: Personally, I love grace. I like simplicity. I like things that are direct, experiential. There’s a force in that directness, a clarity. I like things that get to an essential situation, if it’s emotional, conceptual, and visual.

KSB: How do you communicate that to a viewer through a painting? If you have an essence you’re going for, once you capture it, you know it. How does one do that?
ODO: You’re asking a very complicated question. But you have to work to a place where you believe in what it is you’re doing. That takes time and experience. Some people can do it earlier than others, and some people do it better than others. But it’s an understanding of yourself, like how a parent knows how to speak to their kid in terrible times and get through to their kid. That’s an essential experience, that’s essential intuitive knowledge. You bring that kind of experience to a painting. When you have a problem, you can resolve it, because you have prior experience, you have prior knowledge that you’re bringing to the moment now, with electricity and meaning.

Odili Donald Odita’s work can be viewed at odilidonaldodita.com

Nomad, 2012, Acrylic on Canvas, 90 x 80 inches
Photo courtesy of Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg
Collaboration Through Contrast: an Interview with Katie Parker and Guy Michael Davis

by Marge Gormley
Katie Parker and Guy Michael Davis are collaborative ceramic artists who live and work in Cincinnati, Ohio. They manipulate historic objects and ceramic molds to construct pieces that question authenticity and comment on cultural appropriation. They design unique objects and site-specific installations, often incorporating 3D printing technologies. Their installations combine diverse methods and materials, including ceramic tile and sculpture, screen printing, and cut paper forms, among other materials. In 2011, Ceramics Monthly named Davis and Parker among the top ten emerging artists. Recently they have had exhibitions at the Taft Museum of Art in Cincinnati, and the Belger Arts Center and Red Star Studios in Kansas City, Missouri. Katie and Guy Michael (known to friends as Mike) are currently working on a number of big projects with Cincinnati’s historic Rookwood Pottery, a venerable hand-made production studio that dates back to the 1880s. These collaborative pieces will be exhibited this May at the Contemporary Art Center in Cincinnati, and at the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York. I met with them on a sunny spring day at their studios at the University of Cincinnati, and their temporary studio at Rookwood Pottery in the historic Over-the-Rhine neighborhood.
Marge Gormley: You seem to have many processes that you work through when developing new body of work. How do you begin the process of thinking about a show that’s coming up? What are the first steps for you?

Guy Michael Davis: A lot of it has to do with responding to the space in some way or another. Usually there is some kind of kernel that sticks out from our visit that we respond to. For example, the visit to the Taft Museum was full blown, incestual Taft. We made Alphonso Taft. We made it to fit in the Taft, we copied imagery from the Taft, and it was like some kind of grotesque celebration of the Taft. It was developed to the point where people were going through and didn’t know that it was a contemporary art exhibition, like it had been there for fifty years or longer. It was so integrated and homogenized with everything else in there that it was like a stage. Instead of using pedestals we used pieces from the collection. When curators say, ‘we want you to respond to the museum’ , we say ‘okay, well, what can we get away with? What do you have, and how far can we go?’ The Taft show was exciting for them to think outside of the box.

Katie Parker: Also it is about responding to the space and the person who is curating it, or curating us, and taking some of the information and deciding where to go from there. When we did the show in Kansas City we responded to Dick Belger, whose space it was, and his collection of Tiffany lamps, decorative art, ceramics, guns, his interest in architecture, modern designs. We used that to start our process.

MG: What are your initial expectations with your work? Do you have the end result figured out before you begin?

KP: Sometimes. Or a loose sketch; more and more Mike has been making really nice sketches after we propose something, or are offered a show. Then it’s about trying to follow through with that original idea. It’s kind of exciting because, in the end, the photos do end up looking like the drawings.

MG: (looking at the drawings) Yes, I feel like I can pick this piece out because it’s parts of things that I have seen before, like the show at the Taft Museum.

GMD: Yep. Sometimes in a museum, they want to know what you’re doing. They want to pretty much know what you’re doing well in advance, but unforeseen things happen and things get modified. For example, this last piece we had a screen-printed oval and there was a frame to the piece and there were some calculations that didn’t work out and it had gaps on the top and bottom. At one point we were thinking, does this thing need to be trashed and completely re-done? But, those errors lent themselves to creative liberty. In fact, it ended up better than we preconceived, because we had to make some decisions based on some flaws. That unforeseen something made us solve some problems.

KP: But also, we really enjoy coming up with the ideas and running with it. Most things we start fresh. We are not shipping the same stuff over and over, and just packing it down in the basement. That initial idea, it’s you make the molds, I do this, you do this, I will do that, and we will come back together in a month and get this process going.

MG: It seems like when you have those challenges it spurs new thinking?

KP: Yes, because we spend a lot of time up to that point. As you know, nothing is fast in ceramics. It’s a month: that’s nothing in the ceramic process.

GMD: It’s fast enough yet nothing moves. But, we keep our feet in more than one field. We keep a dialogue in both the design world and the fine arts. One day we will have a museum show and then the next day we will have a design show with the same piece.

KP: We are always hitting these different avenues, not being sure how to sell it, or reproduce it, or if we want to reproduce it. The pieces that we are making for the International Contemporary Furniture Fair with Rookwood Pottery is nothing that they (Rookwood) make, so they are letting us take artistic freedom with their brand, and letting us put it out to the world to see if anyone responds to it. Also, they are allowing us this to see how it can be developed further, if they are finding it interesting. We would not want to make another mantelpiece, but we could show someone in the factory how to do this, and keep coming up with new ideas, and keep coming back to the factory.

MG: You have talked about these objects from Rookwood and the historical component that you incorporate into your installations. Before you hit this goldmine of historical objects, what role did
The Living Room Fireplace
International
Contemporary Furniture Fair in NY
May 2013,
Collaboration with Terence Hammonds
for Rookwood Pottery.
Photo courtesy of Katie Parker and Guy
Michael Davis
Hy-Que Monkey, Ready to Die,
installation detail,
Red Star/Belger Art Center,
Kansas City, 2012,
Ceramic and Mixed Media
Photo courtesy of Guy Michael Davis and Katie Parker
Chairman Mao, Alfonzo Taft came from this idea that we can manipulate something that is iconic, undeniably ART, and we can riff off that, and we can tweak it. Everyone assumes that a bust is art and, regardless of what you do know, that is IT. There is humor and sarcasm to that, you know? But I am also a collector of animals. I am from Oklahoma, and we had rabbits, pigeons, and snakes. I had a menagerie in my backyard…I have probably collected and captured every species of animal in Oklahoma. So it goes back to growing up.

**KP:** Before we had these treasures to work with, we had had a studio residency in Germany in 2008. We went to the Dresden Porcelain Factory with two other artists and we were given four different molds: a pug, a rooster, a swan, and a duck. These molds were some of the first pieces molded for porcelain in the west. They were just gorgeous and they had these amazing, grotesque faces. After working with those, being able to take something that had a value, that had a purpose, and that we could change, distort, make new, based on the things we were into: that started us going on that track. It’s so easy to take something that has history embedded in it and then riff off that; take the object it into something greater and larger. From there we started looking for objects that have that thing; this grotesque face, or some kind of history or backstory that we can manipulate and change.

**GMD:** Dresden Porcelain totally fits our aesthetic: its grotesqueness, a darkness that has a stylistically sinister feel. We are constantly looking for things that hold that, particularly in these Mannerist sculptures from the early Dresden Porcelain.

**KP:** Our work is different than the history of American figurines and porcelain, where everything is soft and rounded and cute. We are trying to find things that have some kind of character to them, some kind of edge.

At the University of Cincinnati we have this amazing rapid prototyping center, so we are able to take these objects, have them 3-D scanned, then blow them up or shrink them down and fit them to our liking. We never have something in mind, but when we find it we know it’s the thing. This ceramic dog head (pointing out a sculpture) is from a Nymphenburg sculpture from the late 1800s, and the dog’s head is as big as my thumb, but then blown up to make it larger.

Mike was always doing taxidermy, then 3-D scanning the taxidermy. We then make a mold of it so the mold isn’t filled with hair. The thing we were looking for and the way we were getting to it merged together.

**MG:** I noticed that quite a few of your works are animals. Have you stuck with animals for any particular reason?

**GMD:** Yes, the conversation around the busts. Vladimir Lenin,
KP: Or, “Ohh, can't turn that in.”

GMD: It's hard to remove yourself from the authorship and it's hard to give something up when you feel like it is yours. On the other hand, it's the most amazing thing. With the fireplace we are currently working on at Rookwood, it is all of ours and yet it is none of ours. And we can objectively look at this thing and be questioning the choices and no one's feelings are hurt. You can just constantly critique this weird object that no one really solely owns, until it gets completely and continually refined. I love that.

MG: I know you have both had an artist residency in China. How was that experience for your work?

KP: It was great. Mike had brought this Texas horn toad and I brought a bear head (ceramic pieces) and we showed up without any expectations of what was going to happen and what it was going to be like. Once we got there it was great. We were able to have molds made of these objects and we were able to have some cups lathed to match work, and make lithophanes from them. But, to be able to have some of the work farmed out for you, and to come back to the studio and your molds are made for you... I don't even know what to do. To have someone load the kiln for you, or glaze your work, was handy.

GMD: It's not like disgustingly outsourcing your work. It's more like getting help to do the things that you can confidently do, but to save time. I don't need to prove to myself or to anyone that I can do any of this. You know, my back is killing me and I don't need to make a giant mold. I know these guys can do it just as well as I can, so I can have someone helping me do this type of labor while I am in my studio, and just work that way.

KP: And, just the weeks of quiet time! With no one disturbing you, you can just sit and work. We had some transfers made of our drawing and decals. We were able to use all sorts of different processes. I sat slowly, china painting and listening to books on tape and listening to music. It was so nice that no one could get to us. We were in China, unreachable, untouchable. And everyone in Jingdezhen China at the pottery workshop, where we were, was in a school-like atmosphere, because everyone was doing something. And as soon as someone would come back with something made or done, or with a mold they found, everyone would be like, ‘Oh, cool, where did you get that?’ And then you could take off of that new information and do your own thing. It seemed like the longer you stayed the more and more things you would find and pick up. We made a ton of work while we were there, and brought it back in backpacks because we couldn’t afford a crate. Most of that work went to the show in Kansas City.

GMD: I was fascinated with the fact that everyone that you see is doing something with a purpose. If you would see someone in a café sitting at the table, you couldn’t dismiss them. They are someone who has traveled halfway around the world to find this place, to do something specific. Also, the fact is that this place leveled the playing field of ability. Everyone can make the same caliber of work. There was no one person who was better. Better comes in ideas, not in the ability to make something. You could have someone with a forty-year career and you could have an undergraduate student, and the quality of work is exactly the same. It’s about who has the better idea and who uses that space and time the best.

Guy Michael Davis and Katie Parkers collaborative work can be viewed at futureretrieval.com. Their individual blogs can be found at guymichaeldavis.blogspot.com, and katiesnewwork.blogspot.com
Top: **Still[ed] Life**, installation image, Taft Museum of Art, Cincinnati, 2012, Ceramic and Mixed Media, Photo courtesy of Guy Michael Davis and Katie Parker

*Bottom Right: Alphonso Taft, Sevres*, from the Taft Museum of Art, 2012, Ceramic and Mixed Media, Photo courtesy of Guy Michael Davis and Katie Parker

*Bottom Left: The Living Room Fireplace* detail

Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, 2013, Ceramic, Photo courtesy of Guy Michael Davis and Katie Parker
Exploring Chaos and Fragility: an Interview with Linda Sormin

by Tracy Teagarden
Linda Sormin is a Toronto-based artist who teaches ceramics at Sheridan School of Craft and Design. She studied ceramics at Andrews University, Sheridan School of Craft & Design, and Alfred University, where she earned an MFA in 2003.

Linda Sormin’s clay-based sculptures and installations, which often incorporate found or donated objects, explore societal issues of consumption, waste, and survival. Her works are visually chaotic, physically intricate, delicate and colorful. Comprised of thinly pinched coils and found objects, her works interpret collected stories of personal histories, and explore contemporary conflicts. Ms. Sormin has exhibited nationally and internationally. Recent solo exhibitions include the Jane Hartsook Gallery in New York City, a commissioned work for the West Norway Museum of Decorative Art in Bergen Norway, the Denver Art Museum, and gl Holtegaard in Denmark.

I spoke with Ms. Sormin about her work in a coffee shop in Oakville, a suburb of Toronto.
Tracy Teagarden: What are your thoughts or feelings about the fragility of your pieces?

Linda Sormin: I’ve been curious for a long time about the fragility of human existence: how vulnerable in the world we are as people, physically. In other ways, as well: I worked in humanitarian aid and development in Asia for three and a half years. During that experience I learned more about issues and strategies of human survival. At the core of this kind of learning is continuous consideration of the tentative nature of our living in the world.

TT: When do you consider your work to be complete? Is it ever complete? Is it always an ongoing process?

LS: It’s very ongoing: going to the work in the studio and then moving away from it, and going back and having conversations with people. The work changes as it comes along with me in what I’m doing. Last year, I was in Norway for a period of nine weeks. At the end of the nine weeks you have to be “done”, but the work hopefully isn’t done; hopefully it’s open-ended enough to continue to interact with the people who come into the space and continue to ask questions about the geographical region, or of participants in the work.

I revisit the work continuously too, even after it’s been removed from the site: the images and the writing about it continue to be a living thing. Recently, I wrote a piece for a research group in the UK called Ceramics in the Expanded Field [www.ceramics-in-the-expanded-field.com]. Even though the work is down I’m still grappling with how it came into being, what it might mean.

TT: How do these installations relate to the space they are being installed in?

LS: Well, the piece in Norway responded to a group of Buddhas in the space. They were Sui, Tang and Song dynasty marble Buddhas, along with a lot of ceramic collections, and ceramic artifacts in this space in the museum. I responded to these found ready-mades by building structures that wrapped around them and drew on their iconic presence for chemistry. For example, the closeness to precious works like the Tang dynasty camel or horse: there is a charge created by building close to objects like these. If it’s a big public space, I’m interested in how I can bring a different kind of movement through the space. How can I invite people closer, or open up a kind of tenderness in relationship to the space that isn’t there without the work? Other times, if the space is heavy with meaning from past lives or past interactions then I’m reflecting on those in the forms and the objects that I bring into the space. So, in the Denver Art Museum, I was really interested in the mining industry there, and what kinds of objects the miners were using. One of the technicians helping with the installation loaned me his father’s miner’s hardhat. Including things that are meaningful and personal from people’s personal stories is important. Gathering objects to reflect and respond to the people who have held them and/or who have owned them…

TT: When you install your work how much is planned out? Do you install intuitively, or do you already have an idea of how the work will fit together in the space?

LS: It’s been different for different installations. It is a combination of purposes. When I went into the West Norway Museum of Decorative Arts I was invited to make a large installation in the middle of the main hall, which was very grand and traditional European (style), very public and central. When I went in to that space, I didn’t feel a connection to it. I walked into another part of the museum, where I saw this lineup of the Tang and Song dynasty Buddhas. They seemed culturally stranded, and the objects seemed out of place. These figures were arranged in a way that invited a certain kind of adoration - I’m curious about and drawn to that kind of “paying attention” to things. I requested that the museum allow me to work with those objects. I asked questions like: Do I want the work to be in the spotlight – at the center of things – or do I want the work to be contingent upon things that already exist in the space, responding to narratives and problematic structures that open themselves up as possible ways of telling stories?

TT: Is a piece ever broken? Or do pieces just get recycled back into new work?

LS: Sometimes they’re broken and then they get recycled back into the work. The process of building and un-building is cyclical and something that naturally happens. It doesn’t always feel good. When I was a grad student at Alfred I was making very fragile pieces, and trying to make them in an unsentimental way as much as possible. If
Ephraim Wood, 2010
Photo courtesy of Lucy Lacoste Gallery, Concord, MA.
17”H x 37”W x 26” D
something was soaring or was buoyant or fragile I wanted it to be fully that, and not worry about the preciousness of the final object. But after several months of trying to not involve my “feelings” in the work - when a piece would fall on the ground and I wouldn’t feel anything at all - then I realized that something important had been lost from that process. I’m invested in making objects that are articulate and extraordinary and exquisite, materially, visually, and formally; and in terms of conceptual approach. But if I’m so far removed from it that, if it falls and breaks and doesn’t have any impact on me, then I feel that I’m not pushing toward the edge of what I’m trying to do. I strive to work in ways that are risky for me, and for objects. If an object has value to me then, in that sense, broken pieces have intensified significance. Something I care about has fractured; something’s been lost. Collecting these shards and knitting them back into new works is a significant gesture for me.

TT: When you’re making your pieces and you’re pinching coils together, how fast are you working? Because you say that your heart isn’t in that piece when it breaks, is it because of the speed that you work, or the idea that these pieces are fragile and they could break, that you are removing yourself from that?

LS: When that piece broke at Alfred, and I didn’t feel much, I shoved the shards aside. I was working pretty fast, yes, but also not with the awareness I’m investing in each piece since then. That was a real turning point for me: when I realized I wanted to feel that heightened sensitivity around making things. But I do work fast. I pinch pretty quickly. I feel alert at this speed of what’s happening. With each pinch, I am measuring time with material and gesture. A form can gather information and unfold information. Objects in the making contract and expand with my intentions, and that slowness and quickness is meaningful. When I lose a piece now, I really do feel it. That doesn’t mean I won’t take the parts and try to transform them into something else, but I am ambitious for each component. I’m pinching a whole linear element that unfolds over several hours, several days, but I make more than one at the same time. The amount of output that I’m trying to explore and the speed I’m trying to embody in the work has a lot to do with the modes of high production. In 2000, I went to China
and visited the studios and workshops in Jingdezhen, where people are making ceramics at such a great volume, without preciousness. I was really impressed by that. I would watch the potters work all day long and how much came out of that: quick and unfussy, and the lack of self-consciousness was very important to me. So, I’m hoping to work in ways that aren’t precious or overly self-conscious, but still be highly aware and sensitive to what’s happening.

TT: How did you learn to install your work? Was it a trial and error process? Do you always use assistants to help you install?
LS: I learned it like I learn most things: by groping through the process, stumbling through what to do next, and how to do it. I tend to work with what’s at hand: found material, found space, found companions, helpers, assistants, collaborators- whichever category people fall in. The people I encounter during those times are central to how the work can unfold. Often I’ll come in with my own vision for how things should expand and grow physically in the space but, often, personal stories from other people - and the way they might touch material when you allow other hands into the work - that kind of collaboration becomes really beautifully layered.

TT: When I look at your work it’s hard to see obvious influences. Where do you get your inspiration? Who influences you?
LS: Some of my favorite sculptors have been Ólafur Eliasson, Gabriel Orozco, Janet Cardiff and Jessica Stockholder: artists working in intelligent, insightful, and critical ways, but also very materially exciting ways. The colleagues that I had when I was in school have continued to inspire and influence me.  I’ve been encouraged by their investment and commitment to shaping their ideas through ceramics. My students and colleagues influence me as well.

TT: When you receive donated broken ceramic forms, are they incorporated into the piece immediately? If so, how? Do you fire the objects right into your pieces? Or do you put them away for the next project?
LS: I do both. Sometimes, if I’m installing right then, it goes directly in. Someone might hand it to me and I stick it right in and incorporate it. I place the raw material (i.e. clay) and build around it, and other times they travel with me in boxes. They stay on a shelf and wait for the right moment to enter the conversation.

TT: When you do receive something, is it always a ceramic material? And, if you don’t have a chance to fire it into the piece, how are you incorporating it into your sculpture or installation?
LS: They’re not all ceramic. Like I mentioned before, museum objects are often lent to me, and the museum technician in Denver lent me his father’s hardhat from the mines. It brought so much meaning to the piece. So, in that case, I’m suspending pieces into the installation and then using raw clay, not over the wires and materials but through the object, using raw clay pinched as interstitial tissue to connect parts of the story to each other, formally. Things are often suspended or sometimes half-buried in rubble. Sometimes they are underneath structures and sometimes they are transformed. Often, when people loan me something or give me something I have their permission to break it, to transform it. I can shove it into Egyptian paste. Or I fire things together with glaze, if I can connect things that way. I prefer clay body and glaze interface as part of a very traditional language of how we bring form together in ceramics. If it’s something that’s of a different material: metal, part of a car door, or a fender, then it’s fired with the piece or shoved together in some way.

TT: Do you ever reject objects that have been donated to you?
LS: I’m sure I have. I can’t think of anything off the top of my head. If something is too big to take away or lift and there is no one to help, then I can’t take it, but I don’t think that’s ever been offered to me. If it’s not what I need at the time, I try to transform it by fracturing it or combining it with something else.

TT: Your works are very colorful. What is the role of color in your pieces?
LS: I think, like any visual artist, I’m looking for some colors to push and pull in the work and to emphasize something coming out at you. More than color, the glaze quality is what I’m very interested in. Whether a piece is low-fired, nail polish, girly-girl, trashy, or sparkly: that kind of low-brow fun could be right beside something like a classic cone 10 copper red, or a shino1, or something “revered” like a

1 Shino: A glaze used in ceramics ranging in color from white to orange
wood-fired component. The skin of my ceramics is a way to explore taste and how taste reflects our values in culture.

**TT:** Do you do multiple firing using all these different components of glaze on the objects?

**LS:** Yes! For sure. Some of my pieces can go through nine or more firings. So, I often down fire, or I’ll start with a high fire and then I’ll fire down. Bare earthenware might resonate with the history and narrative of the Terracotta Warriors. Clay bodies can be invitations to experience history for a moment, in addition to expressing something contemporary or what we, at this point, feel is contemporary: it’s exciting for me.

**TT:** Your sculptures require an armature. When pinching your coils into place, what kind of armature are you using? Does the armature become a part of the piece?

**LS:** Yes! It’s often a part of the body of the piece. Often, extruded coils create a skeleton for the work. It could be a part of the architecture that is now part of the piece. So, at the Denver Art Museum there was a very large wall that went beyond thirty feet. I only built up to twenty or so feet and the piece leaned away twenty degrees, so that becomes not just armature, but part of the physical stance of the work.

**TT:** What led you to use coils and chaotic forms in your work?

**LS:** Well, I started here at Sheridan as a thrower. I really love the throwing process and in 2000, I was a summer apprentice with Timothy Smith, a potter here in Ontario. I was very deeply invested in the vessel and walls and containment and the breath of a vessel. When I started to play with my understanding of pots I tried to turn things a bit inside out. I was curious about what could be an alternative to a wall; would it be an open latticework? What is the difference between closed volumes of breath and open spaces? I still see some of these grid forms as ways to hold and contain things.

Ceramics has a tendency towards addressing chaos in ways that other ways of making don’t. We all learn there is an element of not being able to control the wheel or, when something is drying, there is always this effort to try to keep things under control. And yet we invite processes which make that completely impossible, whether that spinning wheel or the speed of how you extrude something, or the helper. There is so much you can’t control. The way that the fire affects the piece… the whole practice is a way for me to reflect on letting go of control and also, maybe not embracing chaos, but just struggling with what we do with chaos in contemporary life and contemporary reality.

**TT:** I read the article *Metaphysical Materiality* written by your former professor, Linda Sikora. It’s amazing that she was so invested in what you were doing that she actually wrote about your work.

**LS:** That was in 2009, six years after I graduated. I was really moved that she was able to connect with the work that was being made in the UK, and grateful that she took the time to think about it. When I make work there is always hope that someone will want to understand or think about it. That kind of conversation is what propels me. When a colleague takes the time to reflect and to analyze and engage with the things I am engaged with; it means a lot to have that kind of conversation.

**TT:** Your work is very complex. How are you able to maintain visual clarity? How do you ensure there is order in the work when it seems so complicated?

**LS:** I don’t think I ensure there is order. Do you see that there is order? (laughs) I’m not trying to control the work visually to establish some kind of clarity. The nature of contemporary living makes it obvious to me…I want to reflect the realities of contemporary life. Things aren’t always in focus; they’re not always in proportion. So, when things are out of proportion or overextended it reflects in the kind of living that we’re experiencing.

**TT:** Is chaos an aesthetic in your work? What is it about that busy, chaotic aesthetic that you find appealing?

**LS:** Hmm… I’m not finding chaos appealing. (laughs) I find that it’s something we confront and I’m hoping viewers will confront through material and through the way that ceramic structures and the found elements fling themselves through the space. That kind of physical

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2 Fire Down: This process involves multiple firings. It usually starts with the first firing of the highest temperature, and each firing thereafter consists of lower and lower temperatures.
encounter is something that I want to invite. If parts of the work are chaotic then they are clustering and contracting in ways that set up another space in the installation to offer an explosion of material and meaning.

**TT:** Why is there a fascination with installation? It seems like fewer people are making traditional sculpture and are more focused on installation art. What are your thoughts on this?

**LS:** Installation might be what we’ve been calling it for fifty years, but ceramicists have always been engaged in the environment and in interactivity and in relational modes of being. Ceramics have been Terracotta Warriors – clay armies buried in the ground. Is that an installation? Or is that environmental work? Ceramics has always been an active part of something else: dishes in a kitchen move and invite use and play and contemplation, burial pots across so many cultures offer portals to the afterlife… Ceramics has always traditionally and historically been alive in these ways. But also, in the ’60s, people were doing land art, so I’m not sure if installation is becoming hot now, or not.

**TT:** Would you rather create installations or are you content creating object-based works?
LS: I don’t have a preference. I’m interested in how material and space might be transformative and provocative, and if that’s in a thing I can hold in my hand, or crawl through or put in my mouth, then that’s a valid mode of inquiry. As a contemporary artist I feel fortunate to have all of these possibilities open to me.

TT: How do you decide a piece would work better as a sculpture or as part of an installation?

LS: It’s an interesting question because it asks why I start making a piece. There are many different reasons why I would grab material and start forming it. The question can be what shape might an idea take, or how big or small, or how light or soft, or how thin or thick might this idea be? How might it lean or hover? How might it behave? How might this idea, or motion, or the sense of something, or this intuition about something behave in space?

TT: So, you create work and then decide if this is going to be part of an installation? Is that something you think about beforehand?

LS: (laughs) I don’t think I’m usually thinking about what to call it beforehand. It usually starts with clay that’s available, or clay that I find or am drawn to at the moment. More recently I’ve been starting with what might the skin be like. As artists we have to keep asking ourselves questions. I have to keep asking myself, how do I stay alert? What keeps me surprised and infuriated, and noticing the things that get under my skin, and what’s worth making work about?

TT: In your installation, Roaming Tales, visitors had to bend their bodies through the space to experience the installation and the video components. Was the manipulation of their bodies something that you found interesting?

LS: I wanted to experience what it felt like to be viewing ceramics from below and from above and to share that with other bodies in the space. That piece was at the Surrey Art Gallery. The stories that were being told through the videos were stories of young people who were dealing with really difficult situations in the areas they lived, and that was overlaid and overlapped and layered with objects that they made with me. Having the moving images and the stories being told by these people brought a range of diverse voices into the work that resonated with the different textures and positioning of objects in the space. I wanted to invite the viewers to play, to experience something different with their bodies through this physical, gestural, textural and audible storytelling. Not all the storytelling was through language; some of it was through sound. There was sound of participants breaking ceramics in the space and arguing about what they should do next in their collaboration with each other, or relaying personal stories of difficult things that they’ve experienced. That tension and difficulty was knotted up in forms as well as in the ways that the stories overlapped with each other. That sound takes up more space than some of the objects that are more ephemeral and more transitory than the presence and textures of the video – the moving images.

TT: It seems like ceramic artists are more interdisciplinary now than before. You seem to do this as well within your work. Why is that important?

LS: When I’m in the frame of mind of making, in the act of making, I don’t really have these words [interdisciplinary] in mind. I see what’s around me. I see what’s available. It’s a very basic human way of using the resources around. A lot of it comes from picking through secondhand stores and making use of scarce resources, dumpster diving. There is still this curiosity about what people throw away, how objects inflect the lives that they previously had. To survive as humans we need a diversity of all kinds of problem solving. I’m interested in unfamiliar ways of coming up with solutions for contemporary problems.

TT: You said in your artist statement that nothing is trash; pretty much everything can be re-used. So, using these objects found by dumpster diving: do you know where these objects are going to go within the piece, or is it intuitive?

LS: It’s very intuitive. It’s a feeling, a response to that object, an excitement about this phrase or chapter from someone else’s story that I can roll into mine. It’s very much about collecting stories.
Linda Sormin in her office at the Sheridan School of Craft and Design. Photo by Tracy Teagarden

Linda Sormin’s images can be viewed online at lindasormin.com.
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