

Rochester Institute of Technology

## RIT Digital Institutional Repository

---

Theses

---

5-26-2015

### The Long Walk

Joe Columbia  
jc6748@rit.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Columbia, Joe, "The Long Walk" (2015). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact [repository@rit.edu](mailto:repository@rit.edu).

Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
School for American Crafts  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
  
Masters of Fine Arts Ceramics

The Long Walk

By Joe Columbia

May 26, 2015

Thesis Title: The Long Walk

Student Name: Joe Columbia

Final Approvals:

Chief Advisor: Jane Shellenbarger \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Associate Advisor: Leonard Urso \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Associate Advisor: Peter Pincus \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Chairperson: Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **Abstract**

The “Long Walk” is the concept for my body of work consisting of a group of items that tell a visual story about life and metaphorical transcendence. There are common processes used to make the work with changes in materials, surface, and form that give each sub body of work its individual character and meaning.

The vessels I created are based on historical research of funerary urns modified in design, and material to explore what makes a vessel transcend its utilitarian design and become a metaphor for life. Ultimately this exploration led me to look within myself for the answer of how to shape a metaphor for life. I began to understand that it was necessary to provide the viewer a visual content in which they could connect on a personal level.

I had to search for this content in my own inner being for an understanding of art forms that could create a connection with other people. For me, if the content is trivial then no one is going to take it seriously so it had to be very personal in scope. The topics for my thesis exploration had to have real world substance in order for me to create any relevant visual content for my audience. My recollections of the death of my father and my reactions to the continued fight of a friend against breast cancer are examples of topics used to create content my audience can relate to in a personal way.

Rather than focusing on beauty or decoration that has been consistently relegated to the craft art movement, I want my work to draw meaning from this world. The desire to have my art be seen as transcendent from utilitarian to metaphorical representations of life is important to give my work relevance. As an object maker I don't want people to recognize any similarity between my work and other contemporary ceramic artists. For

myself I always find an exhibition boring when I see work that looks like it's a recycled idea from the rest of the crowd in today's galleries.

Cultural references in funerary vessels are easily recognized by the public even between eastern and western societies. The recognition of these items is easily achieved but the creation of transcendence in the finished work requires an interaction between visual character of the vessel and the emotional tension that evolves during its creation. To accomplish the perception of transcendence I developed new clay forming processes and material combination that interact to create a personality in the finished art. The work titled "For Lisa" is the best example of this interaction of process and materials to influence the audience. Using an extremely translucent porcelain clay body for its light transmitting qualities and employing my coiling into mold process I created a vessel based installation that exhibits a profound statement of life and death that is focused on the reality women face when fighting breast cancer.

## History

I began studying art that I responded too in much the same way I intended people to respond to my work. I have always had a fascination with Jomon ceramics from early



Japanese history. The Jomon works while constructed out of impure earthenware materials using the most basic techniques have a primitive primal character that I find captivating. The visual impact of these vessels provokes my imagination with the possible reasons for their creation. They could be ceremonial vessels for

some pagan ritual or they could be a decorative container for grain. What allows them to transcend being a utilitarian object is their ability to provoke our imagination allowing us to create alternate possibilities of use.

People have different life experiences that influence how we see the world around us, how we respond to its daily influences. What I see in a pot will be different than what others see to some degree. Creating the potential for the viewer to interact on an emotional level with my work is the key to creating a metaphor for life in ceramic material. The use of this potential is best described in my own work through how I have allowed textures and colors to give enough visual information for people's imagination to



create shapes and patterns that change the meaning of the work to a personal scope according to their life experiences.

During my research into Jomon ceramics I realized that the core of my reactions to the work was its construction using coiling techniques and how the coiling creates an impression of a living organic structure. These vessels remind me of trees climbing over the ruins of ancient temples covered in designs but they are asymmetric, flowing with the form of the vessel like hair or skin on a living entity.

Building on the realization that I was responding to primitive building processes, textures and decoration I began looking at other cultural references for source material. Early Japanese, African, East Asian, and Neolithic European cultures have rich histories in ceramic art and my work has been influenced through this research. These cultures valued objects for their natural qualities, perfection was not their goal they valued a harmony with nature. Their work was an extension of how they viewed the world around

them, simple and functional was a reflection of their lives. These objects have surface designs that are part of the whole vessel adding visual content and expression but it is not the only important aspect. One of the references I studied that influenced my way of seeing my own work were the prehistoric European wares, particularly the Celtic and Gaullist work.



Prehistoric European ceramics are simple earthen ware forms built much like Jomon ware. The use of hand building techniques creates an asymmetric shape unlike what can be achieved on a pottery wheel. This imperfect shape along with simple yet elegant design adds life and warmth to the work showing a connection between the maker and material. That connection between maker and material and how it relates to the intent and meaning of the piece was what I wanted to explore.

I chose the primitive, primal quality garnered from hand building and how it can show the hand of the maker while still being elegant to construct my vessels. Hand building however is time consuming. I needed to find a way to create a high volume of work for exploration while still use the coiling techniques I wanted to use presented a challenge. I worked with open face molds but I was not sure it would work on the scale I needed for this work. My research inspired experimental exploration with process.

## Sources

Much of my research was based on the study of historical cultural works of long forgotten craftsmen, but the works of a few modern artists served as an inspiration. Studying the writings and works of Auguste Rodin, Daniel Rhodes, and Shoji Hamada

has provided me with insight into my own work. Each of these great people has



influenced my work in a different way.

While reading the book “Rodin Eros and Creativity” I was struck by how Rodin used fragments of a sculptural subject to convey the same impact as a completely resolved sculpture of the whole subject. I immediately understood I didn’t need a real functional urn but just a

representation of the vessel to carry the same weight conceptually. I didn’t need a complete representation of the urn either, just a loose representation of containment. This realization contributed immensely to my entire body of thesis work.

In Daniel Rhodes book “Pottery Form” he writes about hand building techniques in relation to creating vessels. I was enlightened by his section on hand building during the creation of this body of work. I began to think of my vessels as if they were growing organic representation of humans, evolving with each addition of clay, this allowed me to establish a personal relationship to each piece of work I made for this exhibit.

*Coiling is in a sense the opposite of throwing, for in throwing the pot grows and flowers out from an original compact and formless mass. Coiled pieces on the other hand take shape from multitudinous additions, each one of which is relatively low in the scale of importance to the end result. There can be no sudden twists or swellings, no quick changes as in wheel work—all must be arrived at deliberately. The coiled piece develops on its growing edge...here, as each coil is laid on, the form moves into the future. Below is history, above is unrealized potential.—{Rhodes, Daniel. Pottery Form. Chiltons, 1976 pg. 176}*

Shoji Hamada’s influence on my work has been profound. Hamada used only a few materials in his glazes; natural ash from organic sources, impure local ground stone and one thing I found intriguing, ground magnetic iron. I was interested in how he used organic ash in conjunction with only a few other materials to create a wide range of glaze possibilities. I was able to create a few combinations of materials that served as the



basis for most of the surfaces on my body of work in keeping with the simplicity I found enlightening in Hamada's work.

## **Critical Process**

I believe good form is the starting point of any vessel and this body of work echoes that belief. A well designed object needs no glaze, surface texture or any adornment to connect with the mind of the viewer. My goal is to establish a set of forms based on the urn that could be hand built in a way similar to the art of the historical cultures I had studied but would retain the minimalist style I adhere to in my work.

Evolution of my vision for my work and what it could be is part of the solution to achieve transcendence. I started my investigation throwing vessels on the wheel with known recognizable urn designs from my research. Varying size and shape each vessel was finished in its entirety. I was not successful in creating any objects that would serve as a basis for my work. These objects lacked any individuality I was seeking for my work, they looked like work that could be found in any craft fair. I continued to research historical vessels and only found ancient works appropriate for my thesis. The ancient vessels I studied due to design and condition appealed to me because they had a life like a story that my imagination could supply. This was what I wanted in my work, the ability to let the audience participate in the work on a personal level. At this point I decided to start over on my investigation deliberately destroying all the previous work so it would not influence my new directions of experimentation. In keeping with my new research into ancient vessels I adapted the methods of construction that the artisans used in the past. I incorporated the use ancient hand building techniques to create the main body of the

vessels. These hand building techniques allowed me to create vessels that look like they came from antiquity giving an expression of a life story I was seeking. Combining the main body structures with elements thrown on the wheel allowed me to create a hybrid composition that showed a life in the body but due to the hard edges of the thrown elements which resemble the harsh cold lines of a mausoleum I am able to bring a statement of life and death into my interpretation of the urn. These hybrid compositions are the basis for my thesis body of work.

Manipulation of the visual impact and expression through textures, designs and color on the exterior of the objects was also important to solidify the intent of my work. As a starting point I created a small cup mold so I could make some quick cups to test the reactions of people to the experimental surface treatments. I just pushed clay into the mold so I could make several items for testing. What came out of the molds was interesting and reminded me of Chinese paintings of mountain landscapes. Keeping the marks made by pressing and pushing the clay into the mold gave the cups a similar contour but each was an individual having its own character much like people because of the crevices and canyons randomly created by the forming process. This early work allowed me to understand a process that would establish an abstract visual language that could appeal on a universal level. The viewer could react to the visual and tactile context of the work on a personal level according to their life experiences. Building on my understanding of what created focused content into the individual pieces gave me the working knowledge I needed to start pushing towards the goal of my thesis to establish a body of work that transcends its utilitarian nature becoming a metaphor for life.

In order to create the body of work according to the schedule imposed I needed to

develop processes that allowed my continued exploration into combinations of form and surface while staying on a tight production schedule. Using molds was the only solution that would allow a large volume of production that would facilitate more experimentation. By having more pieces to experiment with I was able to modify colors, textures and molding processes to improve the visual communication of the work.

Slip casting in the molds did not create a suitable vessel for my purposes; the forms were sterile lacking the quality of life I was trying to achieve. I used hand building techniques with molds in the past and thought this process might be suitable for this body of work. I worked through these techniques I had previously used then began to adapt them through trial and error building my language of surface. The result was a vessel construction where the walls on the exterior of the vessel were lined and textured by the clay pressing process creating a rich visual texture but a smooth tactile surface. The interiors were left raw from the pressing process showing all the hand marks of the vessel's creation. By allowing the interior and exterior surfaces to remain natural and raw the contrast between them began to make a statement. As my work is based on making my objects a metaphor for life I intended the contrast between inner and exterior surfaces to be analogous of people. Each person has similar physical appearance but each has individual experiences that make them who they are today. Allowing the exterior to show the textures of construction which reminds me of how people are in real life having scars, lines, colors and marks of living. The interior of my objects remain raw from creation which reflects how a person is in their internal struggles through life and is the true view of a person. The perception of my ceramics is changed by altering surface relationships. Smooth on one side, raw on the other creates contrast that provides a

language to understand my objects just as color creates perception in paintings. Artist throughout history have relied on this basic concept I just began to understand.

How to employ my new found understanding required a continued investigation into these molding processes. The resulting vessels created were exciting but I realized I needed to exaggerate the process of the work to further exploit the line and texture qualities created using this process. I knew from my past experience that glazes tend to cover up the details I was trying to create so I began researching slips and terra sigillata application. My experience with using sigillata in soda firing to accent textures lead me to believe I could use these to breathe life to my new vessels. First working with green ware applications then using the same materials on bisque ware I was able to arrive at the proper application process to activate the details giving the vessels lines that resemble aged skin I desired.

Depending on the desired effect; one material applied on the green ware can be used to create a totally different surface than the same material applied on bisque only through several hundred tests was I able to establish the process of applications I wanted to use for my thesis work. The exterior details are a direct result of my research into Hamada's use of only a few glaze materials to create a complete body of work. Using a limited palette of glazes and slips allowed the understanding of their interactions and limitations to come quickly. I found that the glazed and slips if used in non-traditional ways created a variety of spontaneous textured earthy colored skins on the vessels. I can create smooth metallic surfaces that mimic cast iron, aggressive highly active surfaces like boiling lava, and the calm look of wet stone. I use whatever combination of materials I need that complement the meaning of the object.

When I began to realize just how much testing was going to be required I devised a plan to use the test vessels in the thesis show. The installation “Homeless” was part of the outcome from my testing. Using molds also allowed me to cut pieces from multiple molded sections and recombine them to create whole new shapes while still maintaining a unity of purpose. Most of the final body of work for the thesis exhibition was created using only four molds. These molded pieces were used in combination with thrown elements to create composite forms related to the original urn shapes.

Where ever possible I left molding marks intact to encourage the audience to see how these objects evolved. The marks look almost like scars people get on our bodies during the course of our lives. When I realized that the compositions I was creating grew like people from formless mass into an object that exists in the now I was able to really feel the processes I had created.

## The Work

### The Long Walk

The “Long Walk” is a tribute to my father and his death from terminal cancer. His



story of how he wished to follow the traditions of Alaskan natives in the Long Walk is the basis of this work. He was raised in the Alaskan territories and was more native than western in his beliefs on life. It is the tradition of some Alaskan natives to take the long walk when they are no longer a benefit to their tribe. Old age, sickness or disability if an individual deems themselves a burden on the tribe they take a long walk far out on the sea ice sit down and go to sleep. Death by hypothermia is non-violent and the body passes back to the world

it came from naturally. Unfortunately my father was not able to take this long walk, he was only able to use tools at hand to finish his journey in his way.

This composition consists of two pieces made by coiling into open molds using porcelain clays. I used two mold sections from a larger vertical form luted top to top to create a narrow elliptical shape. There is a glass cast representation of my fathers’ carving



of him and my mother mounted to the top of this vessel. For this composition I used a layering of glazes and slips to establish an exterior to convey imagery of native blankets

used in Alaska relating back to the icy cold. A second vessel represents the ice that he would have traversed during his long walk. This vessel was also constructed in the same mold using the same coil process but a much whiter porcelain body was used to better relate its intent to be seen as ice.

## Homeless

Using a standardized mold but varying loading processes, textures and surface treatments I was able to make each related piece in the installation unique. While each is an individual form the presentation and standard shape unifies the group as a unified concept. The intent of this work was to represent the homeless in our society as a body and show that each of these individuals is a human being. These people may not fit into the norms of society but they are human beings and each has a life story. My intent was to create a body of work that revealed these people as one group shaped as standard



forms yet allowing the process of creating the object to manifest individuality. This installation was successful in that it drew attention to itself stimulating the audience to question its intent. I succeeded in getting people to understand the individuality of each piece in the grouping but was not in bringing the homeless content forward in understanding.





## **Sun and Moon**

This installation is my interpretation of the duality of emotions we all experience. Eastern society calls it Ying and Yang the forces of light and dark we all contain and must be held in balance in order for people to survive. I chose the title the Sun and Moon because like the balance of ying and yang so does all life on our planet depend on the balance of night and day.

Two vessels were created using the processes I developed for this body of work. The Sun is a non-functional representation of an urn with an effigy of the Sun as a finial. The Moon is a functional urn with an Obsidian glass representation of a black Moon as a finial. These two vessels were very successful in relating to the original intended meaning of Ying and Yang.

## The Good Life



My intention with this object was to create an urn with analogous attributes making it more human in stature. The proportions of this piece give it a formal profile that is similar to a soldier standing at attention. I have been told all my life that if we work hard we can have a good life, this piece was my interpretation of what the good life looks like today. A little gold luster, lightly colored exterior that is heavily lined and showing marks of a long life are meant to convey a life lived without extravagance but not sterility.

## Humans



These hand built vessels are constructed using traditional native coiling techniques found in the southern US. Each of these vessels was constructed to be analogues of any human that is on their journey through life. I realized that we are all on our own Long Walk every day we are alive. These vessels are meant to represent each of us and how our emotions are hidden from view only known to ourselves; the exteriors of these vessels represent the inner emotions we all feel. Events in our daily lives affect each of us in different ways but to the world we show a

façade not exposing our inner emotions to each other. Since I can only draw these inner feelings from myself this representation on the surfaces is autobiographical in nature revealing more of my inner self in this body of work. It is that revelation of self that gives these vessels a connection to the public the universal theme relates to the visual language of the work because we all feel similar emotional experiences in our lives.



### **For Lisa**

The work on “For Lisa” was a total evolution of ideas and materials. Working with different types of clay allowed me to target a specific light effect. Changing methods of making the work in molds allowed me to create an ethereal representation of a woman’s breasts but infused with a warning of death through the use of fragmentation. This installation was the culmination of the research into what statements of transcendence could be made in clay. With this work came a realization that by using the correct combination of materials, concept and installation the transcendence of a vessel can be achieved.

## Bibliography

The Tokyo National Museum, *Pageant of Japanese Art: "Ceramics & Metalwork"*, 1958.

Swan, Peter C. *The Art of Japan: From the Jomon to the Tokugawa Period*, Greystone Press/ New York, 1966

Peterson, Susan. *Shoji Hamada A Potter's Way and Work*. The American Ceramics Society, 2004.

Crone, Rainer and Salzmann, Siegfried. *Rodin: Eros and Creativity*, Prestel, 1997.

Rhodes, Daniel. *Pottery Forms*, Chilton, 1976.

Yanagi, Soetsu. *The Unknown Craftsman*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. Kodansha, 2013.

Linduff, Katheryn. Schultz, Bernard. And Wilkins, David. *Art Past and Art Present*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Abrams, 1997.

Charleston, Robert J. *World Ceramics: An Illustrated history*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Hamlyn, 1997.

