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## Dilemma

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# **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

Master of Fine Arts

In Ceramics

Dilemma

by Yeliz Okdem Ates

May 15th, 2016

#### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

I would first like to thank to my thesis advisors Prof. Jane Shellenbarger, Prof. Robin Cass and Prof. Peter Pincus. The door to my advisers' office was always open whenever I ran into a trouble spot or had a question about my research.

I would never have been able to finish my dissertation without the guidance of my committee members, help from friends, and support from my family and husband.

I would also like to thank Metin Tunalı who helped me making pedestals and I really appreciate his support and help. I also would thank Ali Karabulut and Ali Karahan for all their support and help.

I would also like to thank my mother and younger brother. They were always supporting me and encouraging me with their best wishes.

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#### **Abstract**

I am currently exploring ways to express the spiritual essence of the space between life and death afterlife. As an artist I have always been interested in nature and animals, however birds have an intense personal connection to me. Of personal interest is the common childhood hobby of folding paper into abstract and stylized forms. This inspiration for the work comes from traditional origami, a technique I will modify through ceramic sculpture. Some of my previous works are also related to origami. I used plaster slabs to make models and molds. I find that the stylization of folding paper in that work has influenced the way I perceive and render clay, my current investigation. In continuation of that research, I will use plaster as a material to create sheets, models, molds, and perhaps finished objects.

I will focus on installation. My thesis will concentrate on how site-specific space and placement can inspire an interactive engagement with viewers. Creating sculpture through installation allows me to include shadow and its aesthetic implications. I will also focus on color and light. What are shadows? Can we literally see them or can we also feel them? Do they have colors? How do shadows differ from reflection?

The form of the parts and their relationship to the whole creates meaningful contrast. In that context, I am influenced by nature, religion and dreams. I admire nature because it is highly organized and think it is a logical reference for space and placement. Nearly all religions have a belief system about the afterlife. Buddhism believes in reincarnation, which means people are reborn as animals, as humans, or as plants, depending on how they lived their life. While I am Muslim, and follow a different afterlife belief system, I enjoy dreaming of my father, who passed away when I was two. I always dream he is flying around me like a bird and still alive, reincarnated in animal form. I believe he is my shadow and that someday I will meet him and I can hug him really tightly.

#### **Thesis Source and Research**

My work is about life and afterlife for my father, who passed away when I was two years old. I do not remember him, but I always dream that he is around me and watches me. Many of my influences are derived from my childhood experiences. For example, when I was very young my mother worked in a factory all day and due the fact that I was alone at home during the day she did not allow me go outside by myself. Therefore, every day she was telling me "if you go outside without telling me, birds will tell me whatever you do.' This affected me greatly, making me dream about my father as a bird, flying around me. I watch birds almost every minute while I am outside.

Then, I started to study fine art at high school in a ceramics major. I was taking art history classes. During my high school period I started to learn about Turkish mythology; after that birds became remarkable to me. In the history, according to Turks customs and beliefs birds are blessed creatures and God sends birds to people as his managers. Therefore, Turks believe the birds are auspicious living creatures and they are beneficial to humans. In addition, Turks believe that birds represent people's souls after death. It is a common idea amongst ancient Turks that souls fly as birds to the Sky God after people have passed away. Thereafter birds started to have a personal connection to me because of this belief of bringing my father back to life and into my life in some ways.

I have been influenced by Kristen Morgin, Richard Sweeney, Gerardo Hacer and mythological and real life stories during my research process. Kristen Morgin is a ceramist and sculptor. She uses unfired clay to make sculpture, supported by wood and wire armatures (figure 1 and 2). Her sculptures are alive and the surfaces take people inside. I think that her sculptures tell different stories from life experiences. Kristen Morgin says that "I'm envious of their nostalgia and I have a desire to be close to something I'm not even near" (figure 3). The author Catherine Wagley says that "Morgin has evoked the nuances and textures of vintage children's toys, an army of cellos, an old Fiat, and, most recently, a collection of antique books and games.

Yet, despite their exquisite detail, Morgin's sculptures look as though they have been salvaged from the ruins of a wrecked ocean liner and might crumble at any moment. It's this uncanny tension between careful craft and impending disintegration that makes her approach to ceramics, and sculpture in general, so compelling." Her sculptures look as if danger was present. I wanted to my work to feel vulnerable because life is all about risk and danger. The other interesting thing about her sculptures is that they seem to be transformed by the passage of time. For example, her Cellos look different than 2001 right now. Kristen Morgin describes that "They originally came out of extraordinary sorrow, but they don't feel that sorrowful anymore." I wanted to my sculpture to be transformed through the firing, painting and making process.



Figure 1: Cello #3 Kristen Morgin, 2004 61 x 21 x 28 Inches Unfired Clay, wire, wood



Figure 2: Cello #3 detail Unfired Clay, wire, wood



Figure 3: Captain America Kristen Morgin, 2005 Life size Unfired Clay, wire, wood

Richard Sweeney, is a paper sculpture artist in England. His medium is paper and he creates beautiful and ornate sculptures, ranging from realistic figures to abstract elements (figure 4). He says that "I use paper modelling as a means to generate form. I place the emphasis on the creation of form through hands on material exploration, something paper lends itself to perfectly." I admire how his sculptures combine geometry, rigid lines and the organic gentle softness. Therefore, I want to use this technique as a sculpting method which plays on the fragile, yet malleable nature of clay.



Figure 4: Untitled Richard Sweeney, 2013 12 x 12 x 21 cm. Paper, adhesive



Figure 5: Vortex 1 Richard Sweeney, 2012 45 x 30 x 25 cm. Paper, adhesive

Gerardo Hacer is a metal sculptor. He uses an innovative technique folding metal to achieve appearance origami and creates perfect and geometric surfaces on his sculptures (figure 6). He creates large scale forms, mostly animal figures (figure 7). Hacer describes his childhood as an important part of his art. His family was riven by drugs and crime and he grew up mostly in foster homes, using origami as a form of escape and healing. He says that "Like the dynamic, formative process hidden by my seemingly simple designs, each sculpture's existence aims to elicit a response about the viewer's relationship to their formative process: childhood." I also wanted relief from my childhood healings and acceptance of them as they are.

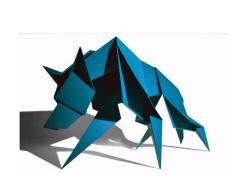


Figure 6: Coyote Stalking Gerardo Hacer, 2009 28 x 13 x 16 inches. Metal, welded, folded and painted



Figure 7: Pegasus Gerardo Hacer, 2009 39 x 27 x 39 inches. Metal, welded, folded and painted

There is a specific myth almost all cultures have, with some little differences. There is a kind of bird which is the biggest and the strongest in many cultures' mythology. However, in the Turkish mythology two kinds of birds are significantly important for me. One of them name is 'Zümrüd-ü Anka' which is called a Phoenix in English and the other one is 'Umay' which has no name in English. Umay is a blessed bird which protects children. Therefore, I dream my father is flying around me and protecting me. Zumrud-u Anka has deep personal meaning for me because of my father going the Great Divide Way. At this point I would like to explain a little bit about how my father passed away. He was working in the big oil factory and one day one of the oil boilers blew up and then my father flew into the air and fell down on the ground. Nobody could tell who he was because his body was badly burned, but he was still alive and they took him to hospital. My uncle figured out that he was my father from his teeth. It is really similar with the Phoenix myth. In the myth, the Phoenix was a very beautiful and strong bird which had a really long life in the history. He was the king of birds. One day the Phoenix felt that he would die. After this he decided to live in a tree and waited to burn to death. According to the story the Phoenix passed away with a fire. However, he came back into the world from his ashes as a crumpet bird. According to the story he became reborn while he was burning out. I think that in life each ending makes new and better beginnings. Whenever people are at an ending, they sometimes think everything is over and they think that they have reached a deadlock, but I believe there is always a solution and new beginning. Thinking about this idea is less painful than thinking about my father burning out and never coming back. It is pretty much a depressive idea to think he does not exist anymore, so I choose to think he came back into world in another form.

The other significant reason to believe that my father was reborn in another form is because of religion. Almost all religions have some ideas about life after death in some different ways. For instance, The Quran says that death is inevitable and cannot be delayed nor advanced (Nisa 78, Enam 61). It also says that the time of death has been predetermined for everyone

and that when a person passes away in this world, only his physical body dies and decays in the ground. His soul, which is his essence, feelings, memories and senses, are transferred into another ghostlike body (Ali-Imran 185). After death, the soul cannot be reincarnated. This ghostlike body lives in another dimension, the unseen world, which is beyond our human senses and knowledge (Mu'minin, 99-100). On the other hand, Buddhism says people have more than one life. It says that people come into the world many times in other forms depending on their living styles and personalities. Although I am Muslim, I prefer to believe in rebirth and reincarnation just because it makes me peaceful. The idea of death always terrifies humans. However, I believe afterlife is more peaceful and less painful but is still worth living. Therefore, I would like to make people feel that all the hard things about life, such as moments like getting older, all the decisions we made with their pros and cons, even death, are realities of life. These hardships are what make us human beings. Without death, existence is not meaningful anymore so humans need to accept it and learn to take all the life experiences as they come.

After I started to study my thesis I began to see human being's experiences are similar but at the same time different and it is a grand dilemma for me. In this world everything is just about dilemma. Dilemma is a suffering most of the time which could be a good thing sometimes, however my question is: How long does the suffering last? I think that the answer is silence. Howard Zinn, a historiographer and writer, says that "Silence is my medium. Nothing lost in translation. In silence I assimilate the mingled emotions that now Ord has ever touched. In every act describing myself, have I constructed a cage from which I will long to escape? (The Letter from a Death)." Each person gets similar issues but at different time periods, and they are dealing with these problems in different ways. Some people are predetermined and make sharp and exact decisions and never move outside their lines. Also they do not easily accept others into their lives. However, other people are more relaxed and enjoy life for what it is. In the end all of these people are the same because they are all human. The difference lies in how they maintain their lives. With this in mind, I started to think about origami.

The art of making paper from pulp originated in China in the year 102A.D. Paper then became more available to the masses. The secret of making paper was kept in China for several hundred years and finally made its way through Korea and into Japan. In Japan, at one-time origami was taught in schools but today, children are generally taught origami at home. Perhaps the most well-known origami model is the crane. It has become the international symbol of peace. In Japan every child eventually learns to make the crane. Eleanor Corer is credited with popularizing the crane with her book, "Sadako and 1,000 Paper Cranes." This book, which is widely available, tells the story of a young girl who was exposed to the radiation from the atomic bomb that the U.S., dropped which helped to end World War Two. After a few years Sadako develops leukemia. Sadako's friend comes to see her in the hospital with an origami crane. Her friend introduces to Sadako that the crane is a symbol of health and that if Sadako could make 1,000 cranes she will recover well. Her illness was a result of war, Sadako wanted to spread her message of peace as she folds her cranes. Soon she has folded hundreds of cranes. Her health improved and she was allowed to come back home. However, when her illness returns and her strength weakens, sadly, she isn't able to complete her project. With less than 700 cranes are completed, Sadako lapses into a coma and dies. When her classmates realize that she had not been able to complete her dream they all decide to learn how to fold the crane. Soon the 1,000 cranes are completed. In japan cranes represent peace and I think this is another reason I decided to use as an object folded birds and stylized cranes.

Origami includes rigid lines, material transmission and geometric surfaces. Charles A. Riley, a modern Western philosopher and writer, says that, "Disjunction from life develops a taste for geometry. We begin to see world in fixed forms, frozen lines, rigid contours (The Saints of Modern Art p.13)." This, to me, sounds like just being human. We are still human but we can easily be transformed by culture, environment, other people and life experiences not only in

terms of soul and personality, but also physically. For example, when I came to the USA, I had a hard time adapting to the environment and the culture. I felt that I was being changed a lot by the new environment. This alteration of on my personality hurts me because I feel as if I am losing myself. I struggled a lot and I decided to put this inner conflict into my works. This is only one experience in my life, but it changed me significantly. This is why I believe that each experience touches our lives, our souls, our bodies and our personalities.

### **Critical Analysis**

I decided to make sculpture for my thesis to show my emotions of struggle and frustration and yet being still alive. I tried to explore material transmission and relationships between materials and my process. I am a perfectionist so I use to work with smooth surfaces, clean lines and minimalist features. However, life is never perfect. Therefore, I decided to overcome my perfectionism and it was a big struggle for me. During the process I felt so heartbroken because my work looked completely different, almost as if they were not mine. In fact, they were exactly who I am. However, my material, which is clay, did not respond the way I expected, just like in life. Whatever I tried, my material kept cracking so all the rigid lines became to disconnected from one another. I felt in myself an immobility. Charles A. Riley also said, "Immobility, strikes me. Immobility makes me think of vast spaces that contain movements that do not stop, movements that have no end (Saints of Modern Art pg. 39)." Then I tried listening to the response of my materials. I followed the movements. I started to think about how I would add the material's responses into my work to create meaningful connections between human beings and the clay. I tested different surfaces emphasizing human experiences and features. Aging, dying and offenses, all of them are the reality of human life. However, all of these things create new beginnings and make people stronger. I tried many different ways to fold clay, such as making slabs and attaching them together and coil building, but none of them worked. Eventually I found out a way to literally fold the clay. I made a huge slab of clay and I made texture on both sides with different materials such as newspaper, small rocks, exc. Then I covered both sides with aluminum foil and I literally folded the clay like a paper. For the larger works, I made a support out of foam and I fired my clay when it was wet to encourage natural cracking. I also made a mold out of drywall and poured plaster into that mold. Then I got my actual sculpture out of plaster.

Folding clay is really interesting and works well without any cutting, attaching clay or using molds. I used many different materials to create my thesis show: metal, plaster and different types of clay. I explored material transmission in a better way. I also used many

different materials to create textures. All these transmissions of textures were not simply about the appearance of my works, but also the effect it could have on viewers. For example, I used translucent porcelain clay which looks like paper. For other sculptures, I used paper, fabric and rocks to create unusual surfaces. These textured surfaces created stone or leather-like appearances. I choose the oxide wash for some of my sculptures to get that material transmission. Clay would no longer look like clay. I mix oxide and water and then I put on my piece like a water painting and I wipe it off from the surface. This technique creates a deep sense of textures by itself. I also utilize an opportunity of natural kiln effects and clay transmissions with different temperatures.

In addition, my metal sculpture had rigid lines and clean surfaces before I fired it.

Then I fired in a big gas kiln to 1965 degrees Fahrenheit, which is around a cone 04 temperature. This caused the metal to do exactly what clay does naturally. It was a hard process for me and it was really huge risk to take just a couple days before my show. However, I prefer to take risks and see the results. I am glad that I used this opportunity and got paid back by taking this risk. My plaster piece looks similar to wood through the application of paint. These material transformations remind me of connections between life experiences, relationships, and human beings. I started to think about how each moment in our lives affects us and is literally creating who we are, although we do not recognize that there is always a fresh start.

Shadows, small gaps and holes are the other elements in my sculptures. I believe that my father is my shadow, I am always with him really close to him but cannot touch him. Therefore, I wanted to try to get an interaction with shadow through small gaps and holes. Each object has a shadow, have you ever thought about how you have never touched your shadow. Do they have color or are they just plays of light? The definition of shadow is that a dark shape that appears on a surface when someone or something moves between the surface and a source of light. A shadow is a space where light from a light source is blocked by an opaque object. It occupies all of the three-dimensional volume behind an object with light in front of it. The cross section of a shadow is a

two-dimensional silhouette, or reverse projection of the object blocking the light. In this case I try to create an interaction between actual piece, space and viewers by shadow. I also try to make incredibly light sculptures to get an interaction with movements in the air. I used some small holes on some of my sculpture because holes are an interaction between inside and outside. For example, people have nose holes, ear holes, mouth and eyes holes and perhaps all of the holes are giving us an opportunity to have a relationship between outside and inside. Barbara Hepworth says that holes are not gaps, they are connection between inside and outside. She also says that "Time is the Hole where we begin and end; the womb, the birth canal, the grave in the ground, and it is the Whole where our lives are played out. Yet, human beings have always defied time; we vanish but we leave something of ourselves behind, and art is the best of what we leave behind." While I was making these holes I thought it could get potentially empathy between viewers and sculptures. When I setup my sculptures, I leave a small gap between two pieces, because I think it allows the people to think about why it is almost touching but not touching. I leave that gap because I think that there is a small amount time between life and death. I feel that we are always close to death and we never know when we will die. Thinking about this closeness of death creates a fear on people. I also stress fear and depression by creating different surfaces and color range. I also try to make people feel peace and life in my sculptures. I use white, black, orange and different textures. Textures tell us a lot about aging, life experiences, exhaustion, peace and perhaps death. Although they strike people with cracks, dark colors, and tired textures they were still beautiful. I try to express that fear, death and aging are just life, and we need to look favorably on all these things.

I think these pieces are full of life and emotion. The juxtaposition between soft, gentle folds and rigid sharp creases really speaks to an emotional state of being torn. I make sculptures that capture my life experiences. I think all people have some similar struggles and experiences in their lives. I believe people understand my content and can find a piece of themselves in my sculptures. My works are about my struggles, but also about how those struggles helped shape

me and allow me to start a new. I hope when people see my sculptures they can relate to that feeling of struggle, but I also hope it makes them realize that they can grow and change and start a new just like me.

#### Conclusion

#### **Body of work**

"Your fantasy" These piece is made out of metal structure and it was highly fabricated. It looked static before I fired in a kiln. The name is your fantasy because I tried to make this piece many times out of clay in a large scale but I could not achieve it. After that I got a suggestion by my committee members to make out of metal and they instinctively said that "kill your darlings and fire in the kiln". At the beginning I could not take risk but eventually I took that risk. Therefore, its name is your fantasy. This piece criticizes the gap between our assumptions and expectations about worldly events and the way that those events actually turn out. This gap can be deemed an important foundation on which new findings are based since surprises can make people aware of their own ignorance.

"Without you I and II" I made this piece out of porcelain clay. I used a technique literally folding the clay and then I fired until cone 10 temperature in the oxidation kiln atmosphere. I cracked in the middle of the piece and I wrapped it with wires. I hung it from its neck. This pieces represents loneliness. Even though, I could have people around me throughout the day or even be in a lifelong marriage, and yet still experience a deep, pervasive loneliness. I have felt so lonely without my dad during my childhood period and I still feel incomplete and broken without him.

"Moment I, Moment II, Moment III, Moment IV" These pieces are made out of translucent porcelain clay. They represent instant mood swings of human being. Everybody has mood swings and they are a natural part of most people's lives. We get happy, we get sad. We have a period of feeling freedom, and then later in the same day, we feel tired, lethargic, beaten down and in a cage. This pieces have smooth lines which flew into the air on the other hand one of them has sharp edges and clean lines to represent exact decisions. They are translucence because mood swings are passive between people. It could go in another direction.

"What do you know about me? Nothing" I made this piece out of plaster and it looks like wood. This piece represents nothing is actually how it looks. Some people look like tough and hard to get into their life from outside appearance or before you get close them. Some people look like they are easy to deal with but actually they are not. In addition, some situations are in similar. They could look like really bad but the result of situation could be awesome. I think material transmission show us that life is not what it seems.

"Vuslat" This piece is made out of translucent porcelain clay. It criticizes gravity and space between environment and the piece. The lightness of piece creates a beautiful circulation between environment and itself. The holes on the piece create relationship through the viewers. Shadow of piece bigger than piece because I believe we are the footprint of our parents. The actual piece represents the beings in this world and the shadow represents those who have passed away in this world. Vuslat means converge to someone or something. I believe we will come together one day. It is close but not yet.

"Evening of Life" This work represents time and experiences. When you get older your life experiences makes marks on your body and soul. This piece of sculpture is highly textured o and it shows movements of life and experiences. It represents pleasures, duties and anxieties which passed away in our life long time.

"Still Alive I, II, III, IV, V, VI" These works of art represent that it is important to realize this is a new or old chapter in your life. Human needs to acknowledge our loss and not get stuck in the past. These sculptures are made out of clay and the technique is folding clay. These works got broken in many pieces but in the show they were standing on pedestal, hanging on the wall and roof and to show how they are strong and standing against all the odds. The pieces accepted all the cracks and all the external factors as it is, but it is still alive.

### **Implication on the Future**

Through working with this theme, I began to realize that I have been trying to over control all life conditions, myself and my sculptures. I think that I wanted to instinctively stay in the safe area. However, there is a fact that life conditions and human beings cannot have that much control and you are not able to control everything around you. Clay is a material which does not like over touching, over forcing but at the same time it is the most exclusive material in the process. Clay makes you always surprised by the kiln environment as a metaphor for lives. I think that I will focus on creating depth in work critical of relationships between my material responses and being human. Perhaps, I will also research different material responses.

Furthermore, my goal is to become a significantly creative and inspirational artist in this field.

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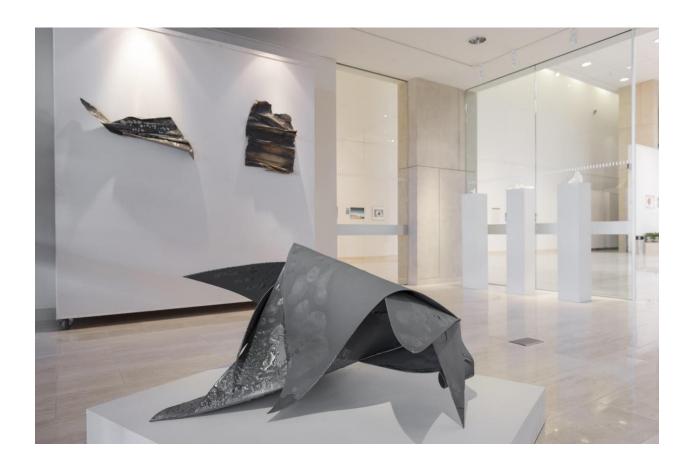
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## **Documentation of the Works**

Title: Your Fantasy

Dimension: W37"x D48"x H32"

Media: Welded and Fired Metal,



Title: Without you I

Dimension: W14"x D5"x H37"

Media: Translucence porcelain clay and wrapped wire



Title: Without you II

Dimension: W42" x D20" x H37"







Title: Moment I

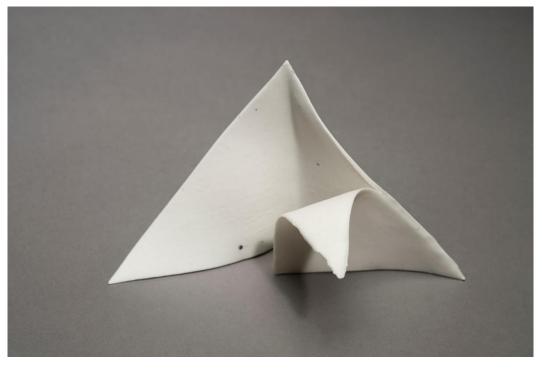
Dimension: W6"x D3"x H4"



Title: Moment II

Dimension: W7" x D3" x H5"





Title: Moment III

Dimension: W8" x D2"x H8"





Title: Moment IV

Dimension: W10" x D2" x H3"

Media: Translucence porcelain clay, hand building

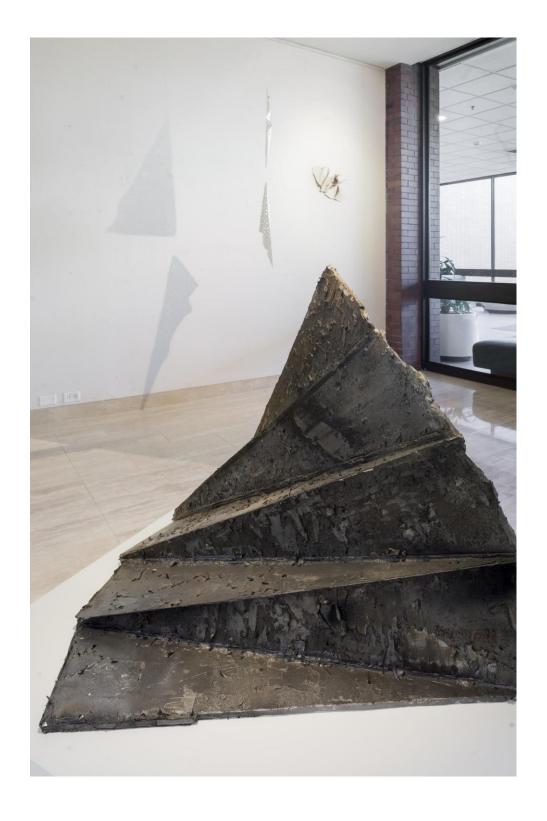




Title: What do you know about me? "Nothing"

Dimension: W42" D52" H37"

Media: Plaster, paper, painted with room temperature patinas



Title: Vuslat

Dimension: W17" x D4" x H27"









Title: Evening of Life

Dimension: W35" x D20" x H57"

Media: Low temperature, folded and fired white stoneware clay, oxide wash







Title: Still Alive I

Dimension: W37" x D6" x H17"

Media: Low temperature white stoneware clay, folded and fired, oxide wash







Title: Still Alive II

Dimension: W47" x D25" x H57"

Media: High temperature, folded, fired, white stoneware satin clay, attached with leather wire



Title: Still Alive III

Dimension: W17" x D3" x H35"

Media: High temperature, folded and fired white stoneware satin clay, oxide wash







Title: Still Alive IV

Dimension: W15" H37"

Media: High temperature, folded and fired white stoneware satin clay, oxide wash







Title: Still Alive V

Dimension: W33" x D10" x H17"

Media: High temperature, folded and fired white stoneware satin clay, folded and fired Metal,

oxide wash



Title: Still Alive VI

Dimension: W20" x D8" x H10"

Media: Porcelain clay, hand building and over fired





