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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
School of Art
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS in Fine Arts Studio

Empirical

by

Brianne Nelson

November 27, 2017

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Abstract

This thesis discusses the relationship between presence and void in relation to two pieces being found within one. A product of my upbringing, the monotony and multiples gave me the opportunity to continue my pattern of processing personal emotions through the artistic process. Very physically and conceptually fluid, the pieces are all visually singular with ties to architecture or city planning as well as influences from other artists that work with positive and negative.

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A restless child

I have always been restless. When I was an unfocused, brutal child from the plains of Western Kansas, my family determined that I was a handful during my first birthday, when I was gifted beads on a wire maze. Quickly scrutinizing the toy, I realized the beads were not meant to actually come off the wire, but I was determined to get those beads. A foot on the base and a quick yank on the wires did the trick. I am why we can't have nice things.

Fast forward a few years: in an effort to keep me busy, the matriarchs in my family have decided to pass their love of craft on to me. Great Grandma Griffin attempts to get me to sit down at a sewing machine in order to make a pillowcase for the world's smallest pillow. Great Aunt Lois teaches me to crochet, and I make an obscenely long chain of yarn that entangles the cats. Honestly, these people never learn.

My Grandpa Larry decided to take matters into his own hands, putting me to work at the aluminum factory he runs and the small farm he owns, which houses a motley gang of animals. After stacks of catalogs were assembled and a six foot pile of dirt was moved "over there... because I said so," it was time to get to work on the factory floor. Following a minor accident—removing sharp edges from things (obviously) was not for me—I was eventually moved to Shipping and Receiving. It was here that I first started dabbling in sculpture. I would arrange the nuts and bolts into small cities, patterns, and robots. This obviously was not terribly productive, so I was put to work packaging product in as tight of a network as possible, flipping and shifting before I could seal products in a tight layer of plastic. Problem solving worked.

Nearly a decade after my last summer at the factory, I was reintroduced to sculpture. The sound of the hammer striking the anvil, the heat radiating off the cupola, and the stink of melted aluminum in sand molds reactivated the senses from my childhood.

They're really quite influential

While my individual thesis pieces have their own influences and references, as a whole they are all influenced by the same three artists.

Julius Schmidt is an artist synonymous with cast iron and the building of resin-bonded sand molds. Schmidt learned to utilize resin-bonded sand in the casting process in order to achieve more controllable, instantaneous results; however, working completely in the negative could at times obscure the potential outcome of the process. Schmidt's sculptures draw from multiple influences: ancient artifacts and architecture, human and insect anatomy, and the work of Brancusi, to name a few. His earlier work consisted of more vertical, column-like pieces; later in his career, after experiencing personal difficulties, he created more volumetric work. Like Schmidt, I assemble a mold using resin-bonded sand pieces, and like Schmidt I find it quite difficult to build without referencing some sort of architecture or structure.

Much like Julius Schmidt, Richard Deacon is an artist who "sculpts" the negative or the void of his pieces, not necessarily in the literal sense, but in the sense that he thinks mainly of how the external forms of his pieces will change as viewers circle the piece. Deacon manipulates and restructures materials in order to investigate the relationship between volume and space. He does very little to hide his process; the pieces are very honest and raw by leaving every mark made while manipulating the materials as well as leaving the connection for each piece untouched and open for the viewers to see. Rachel Whiteread is another artist whose work investigates the void; however, she works mainly with the substitution method. Whiteread's work entails casting the negative space around domestic objects. These everyday objects can easily be recognized by viewers and are meant to coerce the viewer into finding personal

meaning within the piece. She believes the meaning behind the objects lies in the spaces between them. Like these artists, my personal meaning lies within the presence/void relationship.

Sculptor Eduardo Chillida is one of my favorite and most influential artists. Chillida fabricated massive, open air sculptures that he'd place on cliffs and all throughout the Spanish countryside. The pieces would reach out into space, almost as if they would be manipulating the very energy around them. He described his process as a very fluid, physical, and emotional experience. Chillida thought that with every manipulation of a piece, its underlying concept would also change; every piece was thus a cycle of constant reactions and changes of concept. Similarly, every adjustment of my daily mood led to my adjusting the composition of my pieces until the construction of the voids was complete. The unveiling of the solid was a truly personal experience as I came to terms with my own inadequacies and the pressure that I put upon myself.

Pieces of my very soul

Being alone and isolated while building these molds, I see the pieces as very private and ambiguous. Time spent moving my hands in an almost-monotonous activity gave my mind time to wander, time to reflect and dwell on feelings and memories from events in my past and present; processing emotions through active process, so to say. Sorting and arranging the pieces brings me back to my time in the factory: I am problem solving externally and internally. Every piece placed has another piece that must fit and react accordingly. It is a constant flip and flop of the positive and negative, as if I am working on two pieces at once.

I see the sculptures as almost representations of myself, my "soul" so to speak. Each work has an active, tumultuous "eruption" zone, evidence of the event that gave birth to the piece; this forms a façade across one side of otherwise very complicated, quiet insides that require a great deal of time to get to know and appreciate. Each piece also has a strong

foundation side directly opposite the eruption, a necessary footing from which to put the pieces together.

Ruum is the first piece in the group, almost a gateway or looking glass to the rest of the series. A very tight, claustrophobic piece, *Ruum* is made from leftover sand mold pieces cut into various criss-crossing shapes to create very intimate pass-throughs that require one to get up close and navigate. I referenced both ancient and modern architecture in this piece: the mold contained a section of cantilevers as seen in Frank Lloyd Wright's Boynton house, only tightly packed together and crossing direction with each layer of sand, leaving behind a radiator-like pattern. A section consisting of tight columns of sand referencing the throne room at Persepolis also existed within the mold, producing large pass-throughs that go through the entire piece and serve as openings to the rest of the series. The piece is displayed so the highest point is near eye level, roughly fifty-five inches tall. Viewers are meant to get up close and bend at the waist, or squat down in order to investigate the piece in a manner in which it was constructed.

Flop is the second piece in the dialogue, a very small, open piece compared to its sisters within the series. Balanced precariously atop a tall, slender pedestal, the tense piece symbolizes what I equate to failure: weeks of work spent in an attempt to (eventually) quicken the overall process that eventually led to the failure of the mold and a massive loss of time. The mold was built from multiples of the same limited shapes and loosely references Le Corbusier's *Unité d'Habitation*. Sand pieces wrap around as if the building had been folded into a teardrop shape to meet end to end, giving the piece its triangular shape. The back and forth, notched appearance of the two appendages relates to the "cut in" balconies seen on either side of the actual building. The casting straddles what would have been a representation of the central hallway going

through the building, with a very active, aggressive-looking eruption from the piece being buried during the casting process. It almost seems as if it is going to run off the pedestal.

UA523 is the final, largest casting in the series, the best of both worlds and the anchor piece. Built from large, sculpted pieces of sand and displayed low to the ground, the piece alludes to the separation of a landscape of rolling hills as seen from the window of an airplane. Viewers are meant to circle the piece, similar to the way an airplane arcs over a landscape during its journey. The piece seems to change as the viewer moves, but one is also invited to get close and investigate hidden nooks and large pass-throughs. The manipulation of the audience and the manner in which the piece almost reaches out towards space ties this work most closely with Chillida and Deacon.

The end of it all

Making this work was both physically and emotionally exhausting. Any single movement or placement of a piece would affect the finished casting, the part of the work that viewers would actually see, similar to how one private event or thought affects your outside appearance and how others see your day-to-day facade. The ambiguity and abstraction of the work means many viewers do not share the same feelings while experiencing the series, but instead must investigate their own feelings while observing the pieces themselves, searching for meaning while discovering the forms within the piece.



1. *The Dialogue*, 2017



2. Ruum, 2017



3. Ruum (Foundation), 2017



4. Flop, 2017



5. Flop (Side View)



6. *UA523, 2017*



7. UA523 (*Foundation*), 2017



8. *UA523 (Eruption detail)*, 2017

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