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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Garden of the Mind

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics

School for American Crafts
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
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Abstract

Garden of the Mind documents my investigation of exploring drawing processes in, on, and with clay to recreate the place of my imagination. The artwork translates my perceptions as they are transcribed by drawing and transform into a ceramic object. This thesis looks into how the human spirit finds tranquility, solace, and purpose in the natural world, and ponders what it means to be truly alive. The act of drawing paired with the ceramic art object create an intersection between the places we imagine and the reality we share.

Table of Contents

Abstract ...3

Introduction ...6

Body of Document ...8

 Section I: Context ...8

 Section II: Evolution ...9

 Section III: The Body of Work ...10

Conclusion ...13

Illustrations ...14

Bibliography ...19

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. *Garden Wall*, drawing and screen print, 22" x 14", 2020

Figure 2. *Rhododendron Dreams...*, ceramic, formation of 8 panels each

Figure 3. *Rhododendron Dreams...* side view

Figure 4. Individual piece from *Rhododendron Dreams...*, ceramic, 15" x 15" x 1.5", 2021

Figure 5. *Rhododendron Dreams...* with print, ceramic panel and etching, 2021

Introduction

“Drawing is the fundamental pictorial act. To make a mark or trace a single line upon a surface immediately transforms that surface, energizes its neutrality; the graphic imposition turns the actual flatness of the ground into virtual space, translates its material reality into the fiction of imagination...” (David Rosand)

My thesis investigation is the exploration of drawing in, on, and with clay. What we conceive in our minds of what is the imagination is not easily definable. Imagination plays a role in how we understand ourselves and perceive the world. It is in our brains, our minds, and can become a location where reality shifts and suddenly one can fly. It is unique to the individual, and potentially layered with the ideas and imagery that emerge from the interplay of all of our senses. For me, the place of my imagination is tangled with many of these things but is also a starting place to find comfort and solace, and the creation of routine.

By taking my drawings and transcribing them onto ceramic objects, I believe that these forms convey the intersection between the places and things we imagine, and the reality we share with one another. Reality, however, is not black and white. Events, our perceptions and our memories, traveling through the arrow of time create layers upon layers of experience. Our being is our existence and our creation. It is where the layers of experience become central and provide a guide to making art. The graduate school experience has felt like coming full circle from how I initially pursued art. My journey began with my only knowing drawing and painting, and then expanded with the discovery that I had a knack for throwing clay on the wheel in college. The creation of this body of work has been a surprising experience of becoming fully aware of how integral drawing is to my approach with clay. And realizing drawing is the foundation to my artistic practice.

Garden of the Mind is in reference to a staple show from my childhood, Mr. Rogers Neighborhood. This metaphor made in the show was in reference to cultivating imagination. The imagery that circulates through this body of work comes from my childhood experiences; the things I have looked at as a child and continue to do so, that helps me make sense of the world. Everything comes from something specific, from a personal place and observation in life. Mr. Rogers Neighborhood is a show I would watch with my grandmother. She was a significant part

of my life and passed away just a week prior to the start of my classes in graduate school. Her passing was similar to losing a parent, as my interactions and experiences with her were a primary source of my own self-knowledge. Moving through my experience, the process of creating artwork has been in some ways a reckoning with my sense of self and a means of understanding my grief.

I catch myself every so often in thinking, I will see her when I visit my parents again, and then remember she is not there. In feeling as if I was surviving just far enough above water for air over the past couple of years, coupled with her truly being gone, I am finding I am trying to re-write the internal narrative and the artwork created here is a starting point.

Body of Document

Section I: Context

While I view much of this work to be in homage to my deceased grandmother, relevancy to the larger field aside, there are two ceramic artists that influence the artwork: Dirk Staschke and Betty Woodman. These two artists create ceramic artwork in which the object and image are one and use the vessel as an idea to create said work.

One of Dirk Staschke's current ongoing bodies of work involves the creation of shadow-box-like, three-dimensional "paintings", inspired by 16th century Dutch still-life paintings. Another ongoing body of work, with the same inspiration, is like a recreation of the still-life paintings. They pull from the same visual source, incorporating imagery of flowers in a vase. The pieces are composed of clay panels, with a sculpted ornate frame, and are "painted" with glaze (or glass). While I find both bodies of work inspirational and influential to mine, I find I am very drawn to his glaze paintings. These works challenge my perception of what clay materials can do and how one medium can directly translate to another, while creating something unlike anything else.

The subject matter of the 16th c. Dutch still life paintings are about the impermanence of life; the flowers and insects are imbued with symbolism. Examples include the combination of flowers that would not normally be in bloom at the same time, and the use of insects to convey ideas spirituality (specifically Christianity).¹ This subject matter resonates very deeply with my work; I chose the rhododendron flower being depicted as a way to think through death and grief, and included a note on the back of each tile with a dedication to my deceased grandmother.

Using imagery to convey hidden meaning while creating something beautiful in its own right, is another way to think about how one experiences and goes through life. As my own person, my imagination creates images, mashing up a history of remembered sounds and smells. The re-creation of all the sensory experiences of my past is impossible, so what is lost is also what is beautiful.

¹ "National Gallery of Art," Dutch Still Lifes and Landscapes of the 1600s, accessed April 30, 2021, https://www.nga.gov/features/slideshows/dutch-still-lifes-and-landscapes-of-the-1600s.html#slide_7, 10.

Betty Woodman has been an influential artist to me for quite some time now. Her brightly colored vases, or cylinders with flat backing slabs attached to them, are full of energy and life both from the way she constructs them and the way in which she paints on top of them. They are what come to the forefront of my mind when the term “contemporary ceramics” is used. I want to note, as I believe it is important, she shifted away from creating functional pottery and started creating the work she is known for, directly after her daughter died. Woodman herself passed away in 2018 but when interviewed during her lifetime, was not able to say much about her daughter’s suicide or articulate well whether this is where or why her work shifted.

While it is clear that Woodman took inspiration from many places, culturally, throughout history, she had a particular fondness of Minoan pottery. As part of “The Artist Project: Betty Woodman” at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, she gave a brief description and her thoughts on a Minoan coffin. “Marriage of painting and form. When you paint on something you can change your perception of what it is. It’s about the experience of being fired. A belonging and a continuum of something.”² She compellingly incorporated this “marriage of painting and form” in much of her work by visually collaging three-dimensional and two-dimensional objects. She also did this by combining and infusing the visual remnants of different cultures, and through the activity of drawing.

Section II: Evolution

My initial objective in pursuing my research was limited to thinking about how I could technically create different layers of glaze to create additional depth with slip drawings. I wanted to test brushing glazes and determine whether I would continue with high-fire cone ten reduction. This type of firing or finishing of ceramic ware, is bringing a stoneware or porcelain clay body to vitrification, or a state of being un-porous, at 2300 degrees Fahrenheit while also decreasing the amount of oxygen surrounding the pieces. For studio potters in North America,

² *Betty Woodman on a Minoan Terracotta Larnax: The Artist Project Season 1: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Artist Project* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art), accessed April 30, 2021, <http://artistproject.metmuseum.org/5/betty-woodman/>.

this is a predominantly, though not exclusive, 20th century way of creating vessel ware. This type of finishing of ceramic art, however, was also used during much earlier time, as it occurs naturally during a wood firing.

As I worked with this research and process, however, I came upon a juncture at which I was tasked to “consider the wall” and move away from throwing on the wheel. This led me to trying out different methodologies of working with clay and led me to researching and looking at artifact fresco paintings particularly those left from the roman period. My primary interests, however, lay in the surface work, or painting, on clay and not so much on the references I was pulling from history. It also led me to viewing layering as a potentially conceptually driven pursuit. The work shifted to focus almost entirely about the “image” or composition of the drawing rather than the formal qualities of pottery, separating form and function. This experimentation moved me to shift and focus on making tiles that speak to and have a relationship with the print collages. The ceramic work became more like vignettes or artifacts from my perception and memory.

During this period of experimentation and research, part of the evolution of my drawing practice included collaging different types of paper cut-out in stylized versions of floral and leaf shapes. I built layers of paper to create an abstracted image. This type of layering was similar to the way in which I approached running an etching through a press, a process with which I was also working at the time. During the printing process, parts of the etching plate may be obscured with cut-out paper which in turn creates an impression in the final print. Collaging my prints with paper to create layers led me to thinking about how my drawings could be built up, obscured, and revealed again. This layering and accumulation is what I see, perceive from nature, the obscured is where it goes to live in my mind, or imagination and the revealed is what emerges again through my drawing. This printmaking technique made the collaging happen in one plane.

Section III: The Body of Work

The drawings that I began to create on clay started from sketches, visual notes and a general idea of the layout and composition. There it then expands upon itself as I work

intuitively. My mind is almost blank, no running internal dialogue, just existing and feeling for the “reality” of the thing I am drawing. The initial slip drawing becomes the first layer, the groundwork, and then I worked reactively to the composition. Continuing to add layers, layers of more slip and glaze, of material, I am able to build depth. Each section I view as a panel. No one exactly similar to the last, that can exist independently or as a portion of a narrative or something discoverable, when presented next to the others.

The panels that I began to create, have a cushion-like volume, that challenged my idea of what a vessel can be. They potentially become a place to contain, hold my inner-world or imagination, and provide a face for the viewer, apart from the hidden interior.

By further extrapolating printmaking processes, specifically etching, I approached the clay panel as I would an etching plate. The drawing was incised into a stiffened state of the clay and then inlaid with black slip. I covered the whole drawing, obscuring the image. Once the sheen was gone from slip, I scrape it away and the drawings were revealed again. Additionally, once the pieces had been fired, part of the image is further obscured by a different slip and revealed again through a second firing process, adding additional glass. This in effect created a sense of “light” moving into parts of the drawing, where light and shadow may exist.

Rhododendron dreams: These ceramic wall tiles are intended to be seen as clay canvases, or panels. Each one has a drawing of rhododendron, none exactly the same, to implying a sense of fullness seen when viewing a rhododendron bush in full bloom. The panels were formed by molding slabs to be reminiscent of cloth, or canvas, and cut from a paper pattern similar to those used when making clothes. The drawing was done quickly and intuitively based on previous studies I had done of a rhododendron bush that has existed for the last 50 years in my living grandmother’s garden. These drawings as canvases, became reference to my deceased grandmothers desire to become a painter, and the reference of pattern making for clothes to her reality as a child, a daughter of a tailor.

On the back of each is signed, *Rhododendron dreams... In loving memory of Dorothy Wolinski*. I see this body of work more as an homage to her over a reference to the historical influences that were pulled from to create it. To that extent, the rhododendron is used for its

commonly understood meaning of beware and danger.³ I think it is safe to say, death is typically viewed as something to be afraid of. Death is potentially something that will never be fully comprehensible while still being a living, breathing, sentient human being. But in dreams, where the subconscious has full reign to utilize what we imagine, comfort can be found in seeing those dearly departed again. Human beings have celebrated the deceased throughout history and different cultures. They adorn tombs or burial sites with things they may need in the afterlife or with something beautiful to commemorate their life. These flowers have been turned into stone to stay in bloom for her.

Garden Wall: These multi-media rabbit prints were made right before lockdown from Coronavirus-19 in the early spring of 2020. They contain large flowers and a rabbit amongst them, nestled in the leaves – eating, looking back, or reaching upwards and all drawn with pencil. Embellishments of green, purple, and yellow, are added with watercolor. They are only moments of color but give a sense of space for the viewer to enter, more so than just the white, black, and grey. Lastly, a grid pattern loosely based on the “flower of life” pattern is screen-printed over it. The grid has been washed away so the print recedes and fades, leaving parts of the drawing more visible in some areas than others.

It seems almost ironic to have made this work before the forced solitude that the pandemic imposed on the larger world and our current reality. The grid that is placed over the imagery of the rabbit in its environment, is akin to a barrier. It may also be seen as similar to the boundaries we erect to limit or allow others to see into our own internal landscape. Although ultimately what emerges is not entirely up to the individual as there can be no absolute control of what is perceived or understood by others, this barrier may also provide. Or in traveling as the rabbit, the barrier provides a guide and a way to survive.

³ Old Farmer's Almanac, “Flower Meanings: The Language of Flowers,” Old Farmer's Almanac, accessed April 30, 2021, <https://www.almanac.com/flower-meanings-language-flowers>.

Conclusion

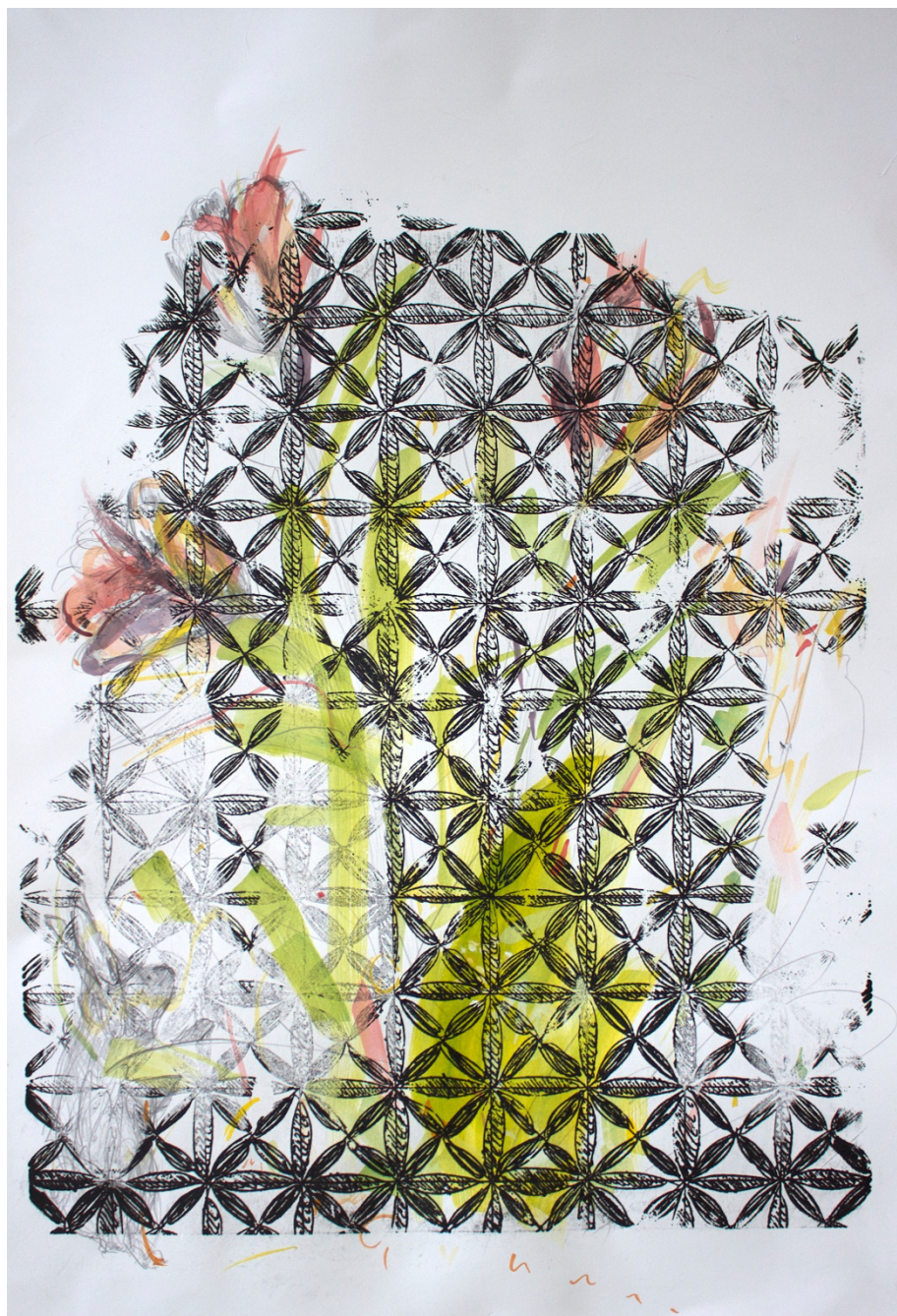
The process behind the making of this body of ceramic work became very personal. I believe that the successes in the body of work and research are found where drawing, printmaking, and the clay merged. Finding a connection with all three gave me the ability to create this work which is very meaningful and important for me. Simultaneously, the highly personal elements of the work, wrapped up in grief, and emotion, may be seen as limitations to my research. Additionally, drawing with clay, which has become a significant aspect of my practice, is in its infancy and has the potential to be greatly enhanced in future work.

Similarly, while I made the clay panels to be hung on the wall, I am documenting them here on a concrete floor in a grid formation. One of the images includes an etching among them. I enjoyed watching the light from the sun change the reflective quality the pieces, and when viewed with the print it seemed to transport the panels to a different time of day or year. The concrete made the pieces easy to view without distraction and felt, as I was looking down, as I normally would into garden. I am interested in how my work can change in context to where and how it is exhibited, and with different types of artwork.

The ways in which the work can be developed further, has become apparent in the last few of weeks of the term. I see my work moving away from a focus on the rhododendron bush and moving to embrace figurative elements with a wider range of botanical drawings. I have been drawing on smaller clay panels that are more playful and take directly from my sketchbook. Elements of my two-dimensional work, specifically collaging, are getting more incorporated by layering clay pieces on top of one another. Going forward I would like to literally draw with clay, incorporating the ephemerality of the material directly into my two-dimensional work. I am deeply interested in discovering how I can further merge drawing, printmaking, and clay.

Illustrations

Figure 1.



Garden Wall, drawing and screen print, 22" x 14", 2020

Figure 2.



Rhododendron Dreams..., ceramic, formation of 8 panels each

Figure 3.



Rhododendron Dreams... side view

Figure 4.



Individual piece from *Rhododendron Dreams...*, ceramic, 15" x 15" x 1.5", 2021

Figure 5.



Rhododendron Dreams... with print, ceramic panels with etching, 2021

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