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Rochester Institute of Technology

**A Thesis Submitted to The Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts**

Residence of Memory

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May 1, 2002

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Residence of Memory

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Residence of Memory

Initially I chose the subject of cinerary vessels because I wanted to concentrate on a subject that was meaningful to me but also had a greater overall significance. I am somewhat uncomfortable with the subject of death and dying, as many people are. From an early age, the experiences and stigmas surrounding this topic formed in me an eerie perception of death and burial rituals. Several significant events occurred during my formative years that contributed to this perception.

When I was very young, a great aunt of mine passed away. Although I did not know her very well, my parents insisted I attend the wake and funeral service. Today the most vivid memory I have of my great aunt is of the funeral home where the smell of roses permeated the room and still triggers the images of her lying in a casket.

Another event that took place was the murder of a neighbor and close family friend. Although I was quite young, I remember the day clearly as one of fear and despair. The top story on the six o'clock news that night was about the murder of our friend. The images of emergency workers trying to resuscitate this dear family man and then lifting him into an ambulance, pervaded the TV screen and permeated my mind. The next time I saw him was at the funeral parlor. Like my old aunt, he laid there pale and lifeless. Again, roses infused this tragic event with a pungent fragrance.

My father died suddenly and unexpectedly at the young age of fifty-three. Dad had a stroke so severe that it rendered him brain dead. He was kept alive for several days via "life" support systems. Our family was faced with the disheartening task of permitting the disconnection of the "life" sustaining assistance that merely kept him breathing. There was no question in my mind that I was amidst another tragedy that would result in death... this time of most important person in my life. The funeral parlor scenario was nothing but the same. My dad, while alive, embraced life with a vivacity unmatched by

most. He now lay in an open casket, inanimate and spiritless. And the smells of roses, acting as a trigger, remind my heart that death had once again entered.

Lastly, when I was a sophomore in high school a close school friend of mine was killed in a car accident. I lost another friend the same way the next year. Both times however, the funeral practices were slightly different than before. The caskets of my friends remained closed. This experience proved much more endurable to me.

I thought through the exploration of the subject of death I could become more at ease with the topic. It is clear to me that I am not comfortable with the traditional Catholic funeral practices and burial customs. Even though I grew up in a Catholic family enriched with a belief system steeped in spirituality and the belief in an after life, I know these traditional burial rituals are not for me. Statistically, because of the immemorial custom of incineration in most Asian countries, cremation is at present the most widespread funerary practice in the world. The United States, however, shows an aversion for the practice of cremation, I think in part because Catholicism forbade cremation until 1964. Americans have grown accustomed to the ancient Egyptian practice of embalming. I am looking for something else. So I embarked on a quest that would investigate the history of funerary vessels and specifically practice of cremation. Through the following paper I will attempt to describe the findings of that quest, a journey that led to a satisfying finale.

My original intent was to create vessels that dealt with the physical remains of an individual's body after cremation, and my proposal read,

“Cinerary vessels have played a notable role throughout history. Most often these vessels were created for individuals of great importance. The consequence of this was the creation of vessels that were quite beautiful and interesting objects unto themselves. Historically these vessels suggest a belief in an afterlife that added to their importance and provocative nature. In recent years there seems to be some resurgence in the interest in funerary vessels, however the objects that are being created are less interesting. It is my intention to investigate this renewed interest in funerary containers. I propose to create ceramic vessels that reference cinerary containers intended for display rather than internment. It is important that these vessels evoke a universal understanding of what they represent. I plan to explore issues associated with form, symbolism, surface treatment and presentation, to transform what could be considered nothing more than lidded jars into dynamic cinerary vessels.”

Throughout my thesis implementation, the work has evolved from this initial proposal to a body of work, which more clearly conveys my intentions and beliefs.

My first attempts at creating cinerary vessels dealt with form and function.

“The Ossuaries of ancient Jerusalem’s’ dimensions were determined by its contents: length by the body’s longest bones; with by pelvis and skull; height by the total amount of bones, with the skull usually placed on top.”¹

The primary utilitarian concern for me was what size vessels is needed to accommodate the cremated remains of an average size person? In my research I found that this volume would be approximately 64 ounces by volume of ash. This resolved the issue of scale for the moment. Next I started thinking about formal issues. Usually when we concern ourselves with issues of form and utility it seems “form follows function”. In this instance, however, that was not the case because their function was containment of a fluid material. The material would conform to the shape of the vessel. These vessels did not need to pour a liquid like a pitcher or house a body like an Egyptian sarcophagus. Their “function” was something more. The form that these vessels would take was open to my own interpretation

I furthered this exploration with a desire to create pieces that were innovative in form. Many different forms were explored in this early investigative stage. The common thread between all of these vessels was that they all had lids and were meant to contain ashes. Jars, lidded containers, urns, burial urns, funerary urns, reliquaries and eternal homes were all appellations that at one time or another were assigned to this work. I was attempting to execute a body of work that would reference the history of the traditional burial urn while provoking an impression that these vessels are something more and should not be buried, but displayed. The earliest vessels were created from low-fire terra cotta clay that acted as an important metaphor representing the ground from which we come. When pit-fired the clay conveyed an illusion of a relic or artifact. The conical

shape of the vessel is a simple abstraction symbolic of the human figure. The surface of the clay body is burnished with a terra sigillata prior to the firing that further advances the anthropologic impression. Continual research of traditionally excepted forms that reference burial or ritual vessels was the anchor that guided me through this exploration of a form.

As the work progressed, I rejected the traditional idea of a monument or tomb marking a person's final resting-place. I thought that those kinds of memorials were too intrusive, that they somehow imposed the memory of a person's death rather than any memory of their life. In addition, the traditional Greek urn symbolized death to me, and therefore, I rejected this form as well. My focus now became to create objects that were more precious and personal. Here, the issue of scale again came into question. As I considered what something precious would look like, I pictured something smaller in size. I began to realize that these vessels did not necessarily need to contain all of the ash of an individual, but could perhaps start working as a device for recall. It would function much like a token or souvenir purchased in a distant land or on a special vacation, to trigger the recall of memory much like our senses of touch, smell, sound, taste and sight. For me memory had become the key. When I thought about my deceased loved ones and friends, what I most often recalled was some fond memory of them. After a lot of reflection and consideration, I soon realized that it was not physical remains (the ash) that I was interested in preserving. I came to realize that it was the memories of the once living spirit that I was most interested in preserving. I chose the vessel format because it addresses the issue of containment. I perceived containment as an important component of preservation. I was interested in creating a space/place where memories could reside, a vessel that was not intrusive. I wanted to create a vessel that I could go to when the

mood struck me. Most important to me was to create a vessel that could be held in a meditative way to reflect on and remember an individual's once living spirit. The outer vessels are metaphors for tombs, vaults, and perhaps altars that support the ritual ideal.

I started working with an abstraction of a seed, which represented and acted as a metaphor for the beginning of life, a new spiritual afterlife. Because the scale of the objects was now very important to the expression of the idea, the smaller seed-like shapes were appropriate. Much of the architecture of a traditional vessel can be recognized to represent parts of a human body. For example, a neck, foot, and belly can refer to parts of a vessel as well as parts of a body. In this work it was important for me to eliminate all recognizable parts of the vessel that would refer to a physical body. What remains is the spirit of the vessel or the living body. I decided these vessels did not need to function as containers holding ash, but as reliquaries holding memories. Therefore I chose seed-like forms to represent the vessel and to encapsulate the memory of the living spirit that once inhabited a body. I was no longer concerned with the body only the memory of the spirit that once inhabited that body...seed...shell.

Since I eliminated all recognizable references to the physical body, the pieces seemed awkward just lying on their sides. Stability was an issue that I rectified by creating pedestals. I wanted the pieces to appear as though they were lying in a slightly horizontal or resting position. The first base was carved from marble. The reliquary was positioned in the base to convey a sense of comfortable rest. While I investigated many more forms for the reliquaries and bases, the work began to resemble time capsules rather than cinerary vessels. There seemed to be harmony throughout that rapidly growing aesthetic, however, the pieces lacked any recognizable clues to traditional cinerary ritual.

It was not until I saw an example of a Korean cinerary vessel that my direction became clearer.

The piece that I am referring to was a stone incased funerary urn of the Unified Shilla Period (7th century) Kyongiu region, Korea. Presented was a small round lacquered box resting inside a slightly larger, thick walled, round lidded vessel made completely of stone. This vessel had all the components that solidify my idea. There was a small vessel representing preciousness. The outside vessel supported the idea of preciousness of the other in two ways. First, they juxtaposed one another in size. The larger vessel dominated the smaller, softer, and more precious inner vessel. Secondly the larger stone vessel offers, or works as armor, protecting the smaller vessel. That was what I was looking for; a vessel within a vessel, an outer vault that would act as protection for an inner more precious vessel.

This thesis exhibition, *Residence of Memory*, is a single body of work consisting of nine pieces divided into three distinct parts. Each of the nine pieces supports the common theme, preservation of memory. Time, erosion, and catastrophe are the ambient factors, which the three groups symbolize. These are all factors that would affect a clear recollection of memory. The bronze patina vessels represent the passage of time. These vessels surfaces are a direct reference to the bronze vessels of the Shang and Zhou periods (c. 1523- 256 BC) of China, while maintaining a freshness of form that is familiar today. Without any historical connection the rough coral like textures of reliquaries 2,3 and 4, reference erosion of memory. The two Raku-fired stoneware pieces represent catastrophe.

“If in non-European Civilizations cremation is often bound up with fire worship, while in the ancient Greco-Roman world corpses were burned both for reasons of hygiene and as a protection against the desecration of graves, cremation in the modern world belongs rather to our functionalism. It may even be regarded as the ultimate consequence of that functionalism. If the deceased is now merely a man who has ceased to function, what is the point of “freezing” considerable areas of ground in order to interpose corpses that one no longer believes will rise again, or “come back,” or be transformed into any thing useful?”²

Lastly the small inner pieces juxtaposing the outer protective vessel represent a “Relic”⁵ defined as... rel·ic (rĕl'ĭk) *noun*

1. Something that has survived the passage of time, especially an object or a custom whose original culture has disappeared:
2. Something cherished for its age or historic interest.
3. An object kept for its association with the past; a memento.
4. An object of religious veneration, especially a piece of the body or a personal item of a saint.³

Influences on my work whether they are direct, indirect, conscious, subconscious, contemporary or historical are amplified by my life experiences and studies in cultural anthropology and art history. My favorite subject in school other than art was world history and the study of ancient cultures. I have been interested in the South and Central American cultures of the Incas and the Maya respectively. But it is the Ancient Egyptian cultures and their artifacts that most intrigue me. When I wasn't in school, I could most often be found in the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery. I loved studying the permanent collection of Egyptian Artifacts. It was there that I first became aware of Canopic jars. I remember the chills that ran through my body as I read that in the process of mummification ... the liver, lungs, stomach and intestines were removed from the body. The organs were then treated as small mummies, wrapped in linen bandages and placed in four covered jars made of wood or stone. It became traditional to decorate the lids of the jars with the heads of the sons of Horus (the four protectors of the dead) who ensured the organs would be preserved for eternity. The intrigue for me was that these organs were treated with such extraordinary care. Preservation is the issue here, However, not the preservation of an entire body. Rather, the individual parts are of more significance. This became a key understanding of what I was ultimately trying to accomplish. I want to preserve a part of an individual, but not a physical part.

“A gruesome name describes a gruesome thing, as in the case of *sarcophagus*, a term for a stone coffin, often a decorated one, that is located above ground. The word comes to us from Latin and Greek, having been derived in Greek from *sarx*, “flesh,” and *phagein*, “to eat.” The Greek word *sarkophagos* meant “eating flesh,” and in the phrase *lithos* (“stone”) *sarcophagos* denoted a limestone that was

thought to decompose the flesh of corpses placed in it. The Greek term used by itself as a noun then came to mean “coffin.” The term was carried over into Latin, where *sarcophagus* was used in the phrase *lapis* (“stone”) *sarcophagus*, referring to the same stone as in Greek. *Sarcophagus* used as a noun in Latin meant “coffin of any material.”³

The term *sarcophagus* is now often used when describing the outer (shrine) coffin of a mummified Egyptian. Egyptians also employed an inner coffin (to protect the mummified body) referred to as an anthropoid, because of its human shape.

Most recently I have been interested in the works of Hans Cooper, and Adrian Saxe. Coper's vessels of the 1960s were interesting to me because of their simplicity of form and elegant symmetry. I was also attracted to the surfaces that seemed to be in opposition to themselves. Coper employed the use of white and black burnished and scratched slips that were smooth yet rough. These rich satin matte surfaces seemed to possess a feeling of age that is reminiscent of an artifact.

"Han's work is timeless, with roots in the far past and in anonymous or folk art, yet it belongs to its own time and contains the rolled-up experience of the twentieth century."⁴

I drew additional meaning from Coper's vessels because he was able to create work that was small but appeared to be monumental. I valued this idea because I did not want my vessels to be large and intrusive. Rather, I wanted to create an object that could easily be held in the hand.

Conscious of a need to explore and exploit the feeling of preciousness in my own work, I examined the work of Adrian Saxe.

"Saxe situates his vessels within four distinct, yet thoroughly interconnected frameworks, each mediating our encounters with his work, each given material form by the artist as an intrinsic element of finished design: 1) a *formal* context, elaborated primarily in terms of vessel/base relationships that play with discrepancies in material, shape and function; 2) a *transnational* context, in which Saxe juxtaposes symbols and materials drawn from different periods and national cultures, emphasizing the cross-cultural nature of contemporary artistic production; 3) a specifically *evaluative* context, in which the material of the vessel as art work, as objects to be collected, is emphasized through

“inappropriate” combinations of precious and debased materials; and 4) a *personal* context, evident in his most recent work, which depends on the incorporation of objects that invite conjecture regarding the connections between the designs of the vessels and the life of the artist.”⁵

Though I find it difficult to make a direct correlation to a single contemporary influence on my work, the work of Ron Nagle has had a positive impact on a more profound level.

“In the early 1960s, Nagle began to work in very small scale. Working small presents some particular difficulties, which Nagle clearly understood. He realized that small-scale pieces can’t occupy much of the visual field, so he needed to think about each work’s surrounding, defining environment. That which is not the cup activates the cup, contains it, frames it and separates it from the world outside. Ken Price’s boxes are exquisitely crafted, and inspired Nagle’s use of finely made cases or boxes. Nagle also points to the Japanese example. To display a precious tea bowl its owner would ceremoniously remove the vessel from its box and unwrap it for the visitor. In such pieces as *Tahoe Cup* (1969) and others of the late ‘60s and ‘70s. Nagle used vacuum-formed plastic cases to give a modern twist to this ancient ritual.”

Nagle makes vessels that function, as I would like my vessels to function. He makes vessels about cups yet they do not function as cups. I am creating vessels that reference cinerary containers although they are too small to hold all of the ash of even the smallest individual. Unlike any traditional funerary container, I am not interested in the preservation of the physical remains of an individual. I am interested in the preservation of the memory of the living spirit of an individual. Memory has no size. Sometimes

memory is small. Sometimes memory is infinitely large; however, its volume cannot be measured. I want these vessels to function as a trigger for memory, much like roses, as they remind me of some unpleasant experiences I had as a child.

Leo Tolstoy once wrote:

“to evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced and, having evoked it in oneself then by means of movements, lines, colours, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling-this is the activity of art.”⁶

My current work comes close to reflecting the sentiments of Tolstoy, but somehow falls a bit short of this objective. This may be because attitudes and the stigmas that surround death and dying are changing our in society. People in America are only now beginning to consider the practice of cremation as an acceptable burial ritual. In addition, we more often hear people refer to funerals as “celebrations of life”. As popular culture continue to focus on happy memories of an individuals living spirit rather than the sadness that surrounds their death, triggers for these memories may become more apparent.

Tolstoy extrapolates his statement to say, “The stronger the infection the better the art.”⁶ Although, this body of work exhibits a strong intuitive connection of the past to the present, it is clear I need to strive to connect venerated ceramic traditions with more contemporary issues and sensibilities of art today. This initial body of work begins that task. By continuing to explore surface, color, composition, forms, new and old, and expanding my own understanding and beliefs about initiating triggers of memory, my art and experiences may someday evoke that “stronger infection”

Technical Information

The two largest vessels are wheel thrown /corrected, Raku-fired stoneware. Their inner vessels are wheel thrown porcelain glazed fired to cone 10.

Stoneware body:

Goldart-	140
AP Green-	120
OM#4-	80
Redart-	20
Custer Feldspar-	20
Ocmulgee-	20
Grog-	15

The three outer vessels that have the coral like surface are all cast from Hydrostone. The color comes from the addition of natural pigments to the Hydrostone while mixing, Red iron oxide, and yellow ocher burnt umber etc.. The inner vessels are pinched from a mixture of alumina hydrate, kaolin and fireclay, partially filled with salt then sager-fired to cone 10.

Salt Body:

Equal Part of,
Alumina Hydrate
EPK
Hawthorne Bond

The three vessels with the bronze patina are all low-fire white earthenware. The surface was first glazed with a cone 02 commercial bronze glaze. The patina was applied with a spray bottle to a torch-heated surface cooled and sealed with clear acrylic. The inner vessels are pinched from a mixture of alumina hydrate; kaolin and fireclay, partially filled with salt then sager-fired to cone 10.

White Earthenware:

Hawthorne Bond-	35
Foundry Hill Cream-	25
OM#4-	15
Talc-	10
Spodumene-	5
Grog-	5-10

Presentation

I created an intimate space that was sensitive to the subject. I chose the arrangement that I did to expose the three themes of Time, Erosion, and Catastrophe, all of which adversely affect the preservation of memory.

Works Cited

¹University of Haifa, *Purity Broke Out in Israel* (1994) pg. 33.

²Michel Ragon, *The Spaces of Death*, University of Virginia (1983) pg. 271.

³Microsoft Bookshelf 2000

⁴Tony Birks, *Hans Coper*, Harper and Row, New York (1983) pg. 66.

⁵Martha Drexler Lynn, *The Clay Art of Adrian Saxe*, Thames and Hudson/Los Angeles County Museum of Art (1994) pg. 122.

⁶Leo Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, translated by Louise and Aylmer Maude, London:Oxford University Press, (1930), pg. 171.

Slide Descriptions

- | | | | |
|---|--|---|--|
| <p>1. Reliquary #7
13"H x 8"W
Cone 02
Bronze Glaze
Cupric Nitrate
Patina</p> | <p>2. Detail
Reliquary #7
13"H x 8"W
Cone 02
Bronze Glaze
Cupric Nitrate
Patina</p> | <p>3. Reliquary #8
15"H x 13"W
Cone 02
Bronze Glaze
Cupric Nitrate
Patina</p> | <p>4. Detail
Reliquary #8
15"H x 13"W
Cone 02
Bronze Glaze
Cupric Nitrate
Patina</p> |
| <p>5. Reliquary #9
13"H x 12"W
Cone 02
Bronze Glaze
Cupric Nitrate
Patina</p> | <p>6. Detail
Reliquary #9
13"H x 12"W
Cone 02
Bronze Glaze
Cupric Nitrate
Patina</p> | <p>7. Reliquary #11
31"H x 12"W
Raku Fired
Stoneware</p> | <p>8. Detail
Reliquary #11
31"H x 12"W
Raku Fired
Stoneware</p> |
| <p>9. Reliquary #10
25"H x 10"W
Raku Fired
Stoneware</p> | <p>10. Detail
Reliquary #10
25"H x 10"W
Raku Fired
Stoneware</p> | <p>11. Reliquary #1
7"H x 5"W
Aggregate
Concrete</p> | <p>12. Detail
Reliquary #1
7"H x 5"W
Aggregate
Concrete</p> |
| <p>13. Reliquary #3
8"H x 6"W
Orange
Hydrostone</p> | <p>14. Detail
Reliquary #3
8"H x 6"W
Orange
Hydrostone</p> | <p>15. Reliquary #5
6"H x 7"W
Yellow
Hydrostone</p> | <p>16. Detail
Reliquary #5
6"H x 7"W
Yellow
Hydrostone</p> |
| <p>17. Reliquary #4
8"H x 6"W
Red
Hydrostone</p> | <p>18. Detail
Reliquary #4
8"H x 6"W
Red
Hydrostone</p> | <p>19. Reliquary #6
7"H x 5"W
Black
Hydrostone</p> | <p>20. Detail
Reliquary #6
7"H x 5"W
Black
Hydrostone</p> |

Slide Descriptions

- | | | | |
|---|--|--|---|
| <p>21. Capsule
Reliquary #10
3"Hx4"Wx9"L
Cone 02
Bronze Glaze
Cupric Nitrate
Patina</p> | <p>22. Detail
Capsule
Reliquary
3"Hx4"Wx9"L
Cone 02
Bronze Glaze
Cupric Nitrate
Patina</p> | <p>23. Seed
Reliquary and
Base
5"Hx5"W
Raku Fired
Earthenware</p> | <p>24. Pod Reliquary
and Base
6"Hx10"W
Cone 04
Cupric Nitrate
Patina
Red
Hydrostone</p> |
| <p>25. Seed
Reliquary
4"Hx6"Wx9"L
Raku Fired
Earthenware</p> | <p>26. Detail
Seed
Reliquary
4"Hx6"Wx9"L
Raku Fired
Earthenware</p> | <p>27. Cinerary
Vessel #10
5"Hx12"W
Cone 04
Cupric and
Ferric Patina</p> | <p>28. Capsule
Reliquary #1
3"Hx4"Wx8"L
Cone 02
Bronze Glaze
Cupric Nitrate
Patina</p> |
| | <p>29. Scarab
Reliquary
3"Hx10"W
Raku Fired
Earthenware</p> | <p>30. Cinerary
Vessel #1
4"Hx15"W
Pit Fired
Red
Earthenware</p> | |



