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### Loaf

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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

Loaf

C. Michael Johnson  
May 1999

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## Introduction

Loaf is both a metaphor and a process. It is the continued analysis of a system of information. I examined bread, specifically a loaf of bread. To examine this visual element I had to look at it in terms of several specific metaphors, or interpretations that would inherently surface. First, bread is a staple food item. It is the basic element in most people's diet. Second, bread is a religious symbol. In the western culture, bread can represent the body of Christ. Finally bread is a metaphor for life and reproduction. It is the classic bun in the oven. I have borrowed from these connotations, together with explorations of



fig. 1 Installation View

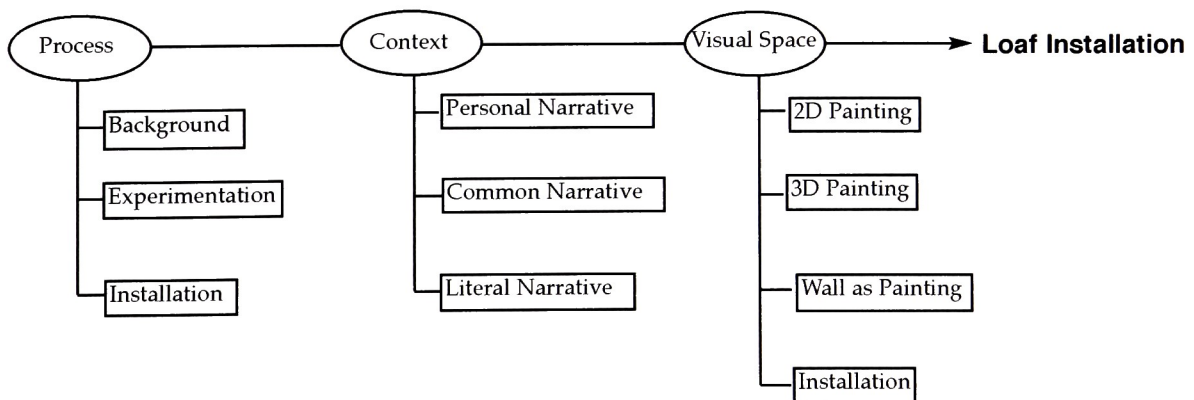


fig. 2 Process Diagram



context and process, and I have constructed a visual system that suggests an order and arrangement to these ideas. To further push the metaphor, I have used process as a visible part of the final product.

My exploration has covered many facets. Process is the major component of the installation. By exploring how I was able to connect the elements through an exploration of space and through an allusion to the personal narrative, I was able to examine the specific relationship that I had with the information. The pieces of the system relate to each other chronologically, literally and metaphorically; this logical arrangement reflects the visible process within the process of Loaf.

### Historical Perspective

One possible explanation for the discovery of unleavened bread may have happened when ancient peoples discovered that a piece of grain paste heated on the hot coals of the fire developed an appetizing crust.<sup>1</sup> There are flat breads in most cultures; there is the Mexican *tortilla*, the Scottish *oatcake*, the Indian *chapati*, the Chinese *pao ping*, the American Indian *johnny cake*, and the Ethiopian *injera*. Breadmaking was the first step in beermaking, another staple for early cultures. It was discovered when people began leaving the raw grain to sprout, in an effort to aid digestion. Also, bread made from sprouted grain, that was dried and pounded stayed fresher longer. These discoveries and dependencies on bread and bread products dictated the boundaries of some cultures. Regional borders were aligned with areas of wheat growing.<sup>2</sup> The grain diet kept people tied to the land, thus aligning communities and boundaries. Additionally bread has the inherent need for storage. People had to store the seeds, have something to carry the seeds in, and they needed the facilities to harvest and process the grain. This new necessity for collection changed the nomad into a community citizen.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tannahill, 63

<sup>2</sup> Tannahill, 55

<sup>3</sup> Tannahill, 25

Historically, food and dietary practices became symbolic of religion. There are certain rules or guidelines concerning preparation of food, what food can be eaten, and how it is eaten. Since food has always been one of the scarcest and most essential possessions, it became associated with religious rituals and customs. Cultures began offering gifts of food or abstaining from food in order to appease the gods and ensure that there is always plenty<sup>4</sup>. These rituals took on many forms. Hunting cultures produced images to ensure good hunting and the return of the herds. Agriculturists participated in ceremonies at planting time to ensure a good harvest. Ceremonies at harvest time ensured success at next seasons harvest. The importance of food and food production tools even appears as a reason for placing these items in the tombs of ancient cultures.

Roman Catholics observe certain days of fasting, and avoid eating meat on Friday in remembrance of Christ's sacrificial crucifixion. The Friday ban was abolished in 1966, so now this ban only affects Fridays during Lent<sup>5</sup>. Protestants celebrate the communion. Bread is used to represent the body of Christ; and wine, or juice, represents the blood of Christ. Judaism observes kosher dietary laws which define what can be eaten, how they should be prepared, and what foods can be eaten together. Islam has specific times for feasting and fasting. They also have laws governing proper foods and the proper preparation. Hinduism has specific guidelines relative to the specific castes. The Hindi people generally range from strict vegetarians to partial vegetarians. Buddhism forbids the killing and eating of live creatures. They observe specific feasts and fasts, which sometimes vary by region. Though the laws change from religion to religion, there is a clear precedence of ritual and custom<sup>6</sup>.

### **Personal Background**

To examine this installation I must explain what factors went into developing the space. I am not interested in flat paintings on a wall, or objects simply plopped into an available space. I feel that the space should be related to the work, or in this situation, manipulating the space explicitly for the work.

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<sup>4</sup> McIntosh, 166

<sup>5</sup> McIntosh, 162

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Prior to constructing the thesis elements, my paintings evolved until they occupied more than two-dimensional space. If anything, they were sculptures forced upon the wall. The paintings incorporated small sculptural elements on the masonite panels. The paintings become entities, not just panels. The next phase of evolution was to get rid of the panel structure. I began constructing sculptural elements that attached directly to the wall. From this I was able to envision painting that wasn't just a panel, or wasn't just a mural on the wall, but an installation. The next conclusion that I reached was that painting could be a combination of all of these elements. Visual design directly on the wall can interact

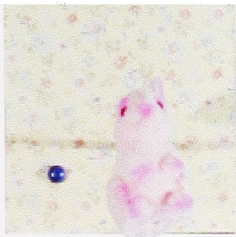


fig. 3 Rabbit



fig. 4 Wheelbarrow

with elements attached to the wall. This propelled me to create paintings on a painted wall, which forced me to give scale, site, and placement more consideration. As I began to adapt scale, I explored the affect on the viewer when scale relationships become exaggerated.

It plays on perception, or general lack of perception<sup>7</sup>. It also intrudes into the viewer's space, causing a new interaction with the artwork. Again I'm adding my experiments and experiences to evolve a whole system. Perhaps mixing the right elements, the right space, and creating a previously unthought of perspective is the ultimate system and visualization of process that I'm exploring. The eventual realization of this culminated with the production of two-dimensional paintings, three-dimensional wall pieces, freestanding sculptures, and a shell (background) to hold all of the pieces together. I began shaping these elements like the ingredients of bread; baked to form a loaf.

### Loaf Installation

The final installation consists of four major elements: the painted wall, a series of small paintings, wall sculptures, and freestanding sculptures. They all reference the construction of bread. They examine ritual, science, and practical meanings behind this construction.

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<sup>7</sup> Bloomer, 126

## Painted Panels



fig. 5 Installation View

The wall consisted of seven painted panels. They were composed of a background pattern, a body of text, and several diagrams. This construction is both the recipe and the end result combined into one. I have documented the entire process, but the process continues. It is like a yeast that

continues to grow as it is used up. The process is just as much the product as the final installation. This emphasis on process addresses the element of time in regards to the idea of the loaf. I have illustrated and alluded to the obvious mixing and baking of bread. There are references to all stages.

## Pattern

The solid pattern of loaves reminds us that there is an end result. They are simplified silhouettes of loaves. These are in several (3-4) sizes, and fairly abundant. Again, to focus initial understanding, the pattern is a dark gray on a flat black ground. This subtle color scheme activates the simple shapes and isolates the images. This isolation immediately commands attention as the pattern addresses the ideas of the duality of feast and famine. Quantity references the life/death element of the food, because in this instance bread is the basic sustainer. They change in scale, referencing size and amount. It is important that the repetition allows a redundancy. It is all part of the whole. The background pattern is of various silhouettes of loaves of bread. These silhouettes are the final results of the process. Everything is based on the idea of eventually forming a complete loaf of bread. They vary in scale as they visually affect the



initial understanding and perspective of the importance of a system based on repeated images of bread and breadmaking. It is important that the background is part of the wall, this emphasizes the interconnectedness of images and ideas. They are further recognized as a grouping of images, in a pseudo-scientific arrangement, rather than a group of paintings. This large ground acts as a shell, an idea that is referenced again throughout the installation.

### Latex Skins



fig. 6 Bread Casts

The latex skins are rubber latex casts of loaves of bread. They were formed by painting liquid rubber onto baked bread, and then discarding the bread to leave the semi-transparent skins. These forms play an ambiguous role in this process timeline.

They could be a shell that bread will eventually fill, or the discarded skin, like the husk from grain seeds. Their limp presentation suggests death and discarding. The skins are placed on the perpendicular wall, away from the main elements of the installation. This becomes the trophy wall, and the skins become mounted trophies. Again the timeline is referencing the process—grain is planted, harvested, milled, mixed, allowed to rise, baked, and consumed. This process directly parallels the common narrative of people. It is representative of our life cycle.

### Diagrams

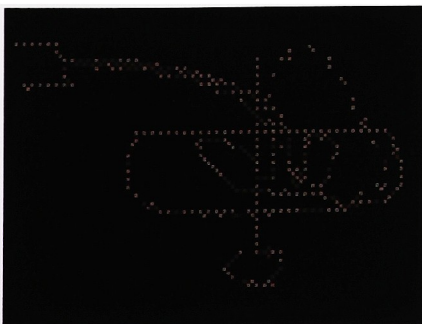


fig. 7 Diagram Detail

The diagrams lend a sterile and scientific atmosphere to the information. The background is more readily placed into the chronological scheme. It addresses the mixing process. These line drawings represent three different mixers (industrial mixers) and their mixing patterns. Addressing this variation in mixing is

important, because we, as people, may not all follow the same path, but we (perhaps) aspire to an eventual result. The mixing can be read as a time of preparation and study, thus setting the stage for various results.

### Text



fig. 8 Installation Detail

I am interested in examining the process. It is not as important that this system be perfectly refined, the conclusion was based on following each step to see how a complete installation was realized. This documentation becomes a recipe, thus another redundant element concerning the initial metaphor of bread and cooking. It is an exploration with variables on various levels.

The installation has a large panel of text describing the dough and bread formation. It breaks the process up into three separate phases that describe some of the scientific actions and reactions that occur in breadmaking. This puts a logical and scientific spin on the installation, like the diagrams. It transforms the simple idea of cooking into a world of measurements and weights.

The first phase of dough formation involves the moistening of the flour particles. During the first phase the most important material variables are the surface properties of the flour particles, with regard to shape, size, and absorption properties, and the properties of the water, salt, and other additives and their temperature. The process variable is the rate of shear or shear gradient, which is the differential of speed with respect to time, and is determined by the weight and geometry of the mixing elements.

The resultant swelling of 75% of the protein gives a volume increase of 2-3 times, and 10-15% of the total flour weight is transformed into a hydrogel. The starch absorbs water, the

undamaged fraction taking up 30% of its own weight, resulting in a volume increase of about 75%, and the damaged fraction binding 20-40% more water than the undamaged fraction. The swelling ability of the starch fractions is more rapid than that of the proteins. The influence of the water solubles reduces the turning moment of the mixer where as the limited protein, and starch swelling both result in increases in the turning moment. Solubility and swelling depend on both raw materials and mixing parameters. Dough temperature depends on the temperature of the raw materials, the mechanical energy absorbed during mixing, and the frictional heat energy dissipated through the dough.

Finally, enzymic degradation reactions begin to manifest themselves, and dough consistency starts to fall, which is a signal terminate the mixing operation. The mixing of wheat flour, yeast, salt and water into a dough involves the control of the following variables: water content, flour quality, mechanical energy input shear gradient, and duration of the shear force on the dough.<sup>8</sup>

The text addresses contents, formulas, and ratios. It examines consistency, reactions, and degrading ingredients. Through the phases of mixing, we become aware of the dialogue between the ingredients and the outside forces. This is the person reacting to their environment. This acknowledges the need for personal experience and knowledge. I'm looking at layers of information, and this ground is just the first level of a timeline relating to the loaf metaphor. To emphasize the layers, this painting is low contrast. There are two values of gray on black. This is intentional. I am interested in the subtlety. High contrast commands too much attention, suggesting just one interpretation.

### Paintings

The paintings are the central element. They are a link between figure and ground, further exposing the idea of process within the process. In fact, several of the paintings consist of drawings of the other

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<sup>8</sup> quoted and adapted from Stear

elements of the installation. This repetition appeals to the navigation of the installation. The viewer can see the two-dimensional and three-dimensional versions of an object and relate to the whole space and the implied space[viewer space vs picture space]. The paintings are at the same time sculptural pieces themselves. They are blocks, painted on all edges, that break into the viewers space.

### painting one dough

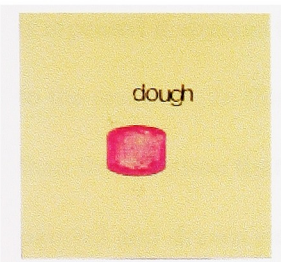


fig. 9 Dough

This image isolates the mixer diagram. It is notable for its position in the installation. In presenting the initial mixing it sets the stage for the logical processes to follow. The text “dough” sets the tone. The images and text imply a simplicity to the message, that is referencing a place in the process, or recipe.

Color is intentionally sparse. All of the panels are painted the same flat yellow—referencing the color of the bread, and vaguely referencing a flat plastic color that is used to address the child metaphor of the loaf.

### painting two dance



fig. 10 Loaf Dance

This painting epitomizes the active element of the installation. It is a static illustration, but it shows the time progression of the process. This dance suggests the interaction among the couples. It's diagram suggests that the loaf is the end result of the couples dance. At the same time it is playful and innocent.

The red stars are naive and child-like. The entire drawing is just a template for the activity. In another way, this is a celebration. It is the seasonal celebration that anticipates each new harvest. This lends itself to historical qualities of farming and cooking. The people were dependent on the luck of their farming effort for each year. To appease the spirits, they dedicated ceremonies and in their honor. This dance is for the higher power. The blue loaf is the totem and the focus of the dance.



### painting three mixer

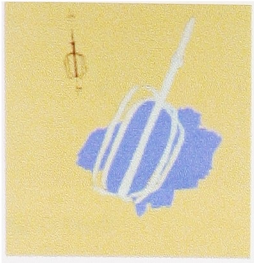


fig. 11 Mixer

The mixer is the tool that challenges the dough. The bread owes its existence to its ingredients and the tools used constructing it. The mixer blade is like an icon that references the male part of the loaf. All of the diagrams begin to take on the appearance of an instruction manual, and repetition is such an important tool to the understanding of the loaf installation. Every time an object or action is repeated it stresses the elements that go into the process. The use of repetition gives a visual hierarchy to the elements. In this instance, one could read the fact that there are mixer blades is more important than the direction that the blade revolves. Though it is especially specific, it logically satisfies the painted and drawn elements on the panel.

### painting four pull-toy

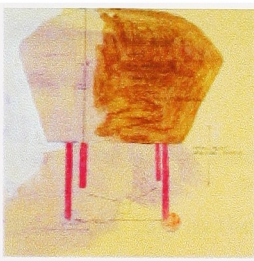


fig. 12 Loaf Pull-toy

This painting, more so than the others, shows the underlying structure that the images depend on. It is a mechanical drawing that epitomizes the importance of the process. This is a finished painting of an unfinished sculpture. It is a message to the viewer. First it describes the role that the actual sculpture plays.

The sculpture is the obstacle that is completely described on the panel. The painting is the map concerning this part of the installation. By recognizing two similar elements, the painting and the sculpture, it becomes clear that information is exposed methodically in layers. These layers are important to the installation, and as such they appear continually.

### painting five bundt

The bundt pan is an odd element of the system. It has meaning in that it symbolizes the cooking and simmering of ideas. I repeatedly go back to diagrams and sketches within the paintings, and the bundt pan becomes the central location for this searching. The bundt pan references the baking. Although



fig. 13 Bundt

bread generally wouldn't be prepared in a bundt pan, it is a light-hearted example of variables that make up the process. Bundt is an exploration of space, that is how the painting directly involves the wall that it is placed against. The Bundt pan is isolated on the yellow ground. The text, "bundt", overlaps the bottom edge of the panel. This blurs the figure ground

relationship. Space must be reconsidered. This also references the fact that the paintings are installed on the surface of a much larger painting.

### painting six table leg



fig. 14 Under Table/Leg

The painting of the table leg has a more negative overtone than any of the other parts. It refers to the "dark" underside of the object. The text on the painting is as follows: "underloaf, under table, bottom, rotten". This text references the overall timeline, it focuses on the end of the cycle. It mentions the idea of being rotten. This is the decomposing stage of the life-

cycle. The use of black paint that wraps around the edges of the panel shows the dark elements discussed. Just as the bundt pan is a center for brainstorming, the space beneath the loaf is the compost heap. This panel uses weight and line elements to give it a particular identity within the process. The blue table leg is the only lively section of the panel. It is related to the rest of the painting by the connecting lines. This built-in repetition finishes the flow of information, there is always a cross-reference to another point on the loaf timeline.

### painting seven crib

The crib painting shows the energy and liveliness of the process. It obviously references life and birth, but it gives a light edge to this perspective. Isolation is used to show the importance of the crib. It is a container for the bread. The crib shows up again as a realized three-dimensional piece of the work.

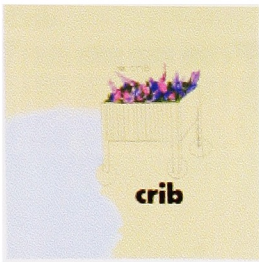


fig. 15 Crib

There is a relationship between the multi-colored crib painting and the velvet cushion of the sculpture, they are the only two instances of such intense color. This color intensity gives a clue to the hierarchical importance. The crib is like a throne. It is where the trophy of the process resides. This image has wheels to show the portability and impermanence of the process.

### painting eight cart-crib



fig. 16 Baby / Cart Crib

The cart crib is the picture of the child. This is the maturation of the loaf and the development of the child. The painting combines the two elements central to the dialogue: the growing child and the image of the bread. The child is standing in a cart; restricted within the crib, but it is a crib on wheels. This image is not as blatant as the previous seven. Its location within the series does provide

closure. It is the last painting, and it is the most mature figure, even if it is still only a child. The child shares the space evenly with the loaf, making a comparison between the two.

### Dough Sculpture



fig. 17 Dough

The dough is a painted, shaped construction on the breadboard, which sits on miniature turned legs. The dough is caught in a stage of rising. To further emphasize the movement of the dough, the bread is slightly off the floor on its own pedestal. This placement refers to the importance of

the early growth. The dough is in an uncooked form, but it already has its golden yellow color. This is the artificiality of the object. This trophy represents the initial stages of the loaf metaphor.



### Crib



fig. 18 Crib

The crib is the object that most blatantly ties to the personal context. This references the birth of the ideas and the birth of the process. The crib has a special association. It is a special bed for the infant child. It is a place where they are protected from their environment and from themselves. By placing a blue loaf inside the crib, I have isolated it in a safe and dear location, thus protecting the idea. This is further insured by placing it upon a rich velvet cushion. The blue loaf has a special meaning within the installation. It relates to the original "conception". My exploration is based on experience, and the final installation is a result of this. The blue loaf literally stands for the condensed experience. I'm placing the fruit of my personal process into a single object. The process alluded to through the loaf installation is the shaping of myself. The irony is that it can condense into one object.

### Pull-Toy Loaf



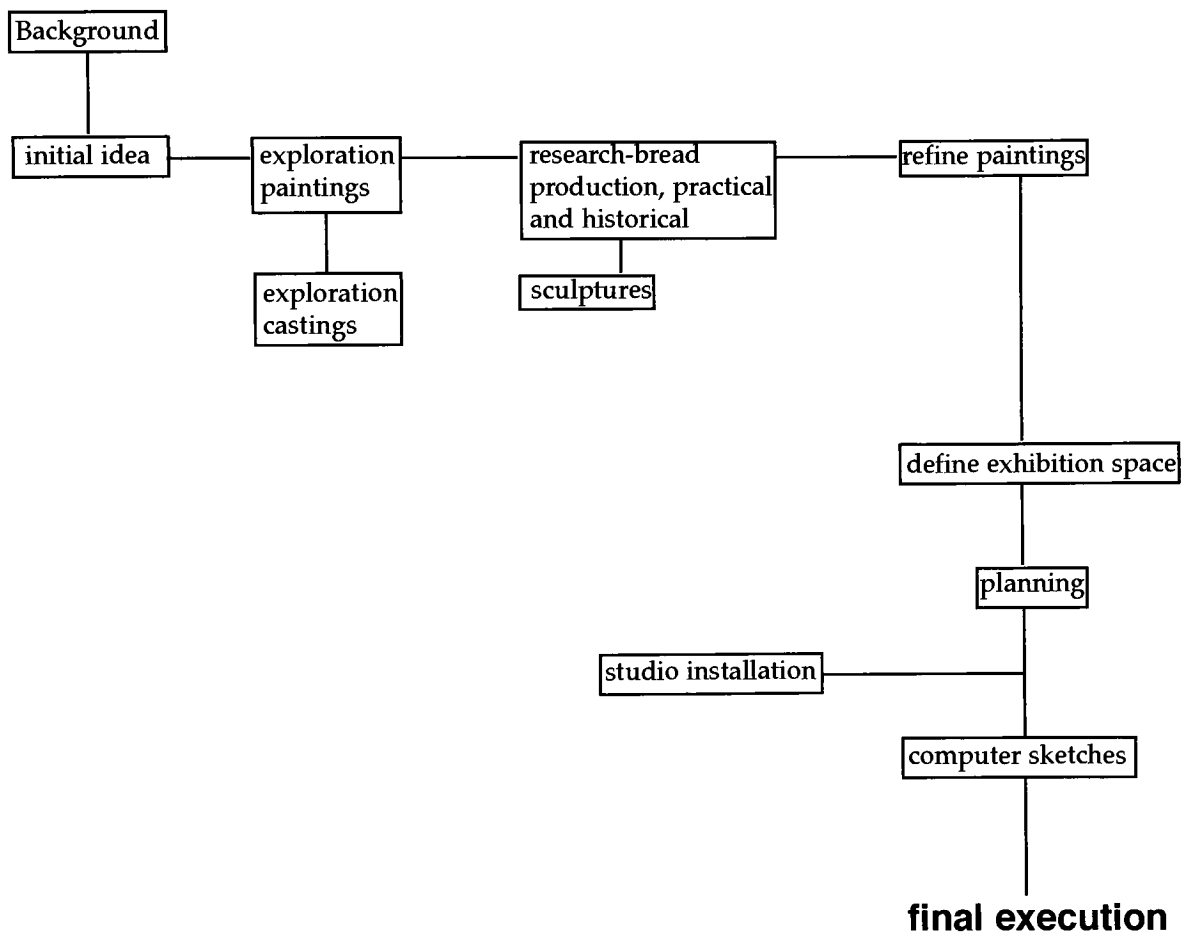
fig. 19 Pull-toy Loaf

The pull-toy is the child's trophy. It represents the final stages of growth. The child has grown from an initial recipe and transformed into the controller of the loaf. It is like a taxidermists mount, poised in action. At the same time it is the transference of a serious (psuedo-serious) object into a version of a children's toy. This duality questions the importance of the loaf. In the final picture, is the result worthy of the process?

### Conclusion

The Loaf Installation transforms the idea of simple, uncomplex painting into a multi-layered system of information. The layers show a progression of growth through time. This step-by-step group of events parallels the growth of every individual. The images examine our common interpretations of bread,

alongside our metaphorical realization of the loaf. In sticking with a common visual element, I have explored various contexts and determined how I chose to represent it. This exploration was supported by the repetition of a visual system throughout the completed installation. Process has been the link to the personal, the common, and the historical narrative. In borrowing and combining interpretations as I constructed my own definitions, I have come to understand the relationship that I formed in studying process within process, and the task of constructing visual examples.



**Loaf Installation Construction Process**

fig. 20

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