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### Tangerine sours

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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

Tangerine Sours  
Gisèle N. Couturier  
March 1, 2004

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Date: March 1, 2004

## THESIS PROPOSAL

My thesis work will explore the use of the ceramic object as metaphor for the self. Due to my strong background and interest in science and mathematics, I have a tendency to process my surroundings through logical order and pattern. I am continuously searching for this order and trying to classify and organize data so that it makes sense to me. Finding this order within chaos, particularly in the natural world, is fascinating. My intention is to reference these biological elements in a form that has a clear delineation between interior and exterior. The dialogue between the two is where my interest lies. I wish to create an experience for the viewer that replicates my sense of discovery with objects; and, in turn, mirrors the human condition.

## DEVELOPMENT/PROGRESSION OF THE WORK

Coming from an undergraduate experience lacking encouragement of content offered opportunities for extensive exploration during graduate school. Before entering graduate school I was fairly committed to the vessel and the use of the wheel as my primary tool. In retrospect, I now understand that I was drawn to containment and the sense of meditation in the making process. Immediately being freed from this work at the start of the program, I struggled to figure out what I wanted to make and what the work was about.

In the first quarter, an assignment forced me to work sculpturally on the wall, removing me from my comfort zone. This proved to be a project that would provide multiple lessons for me. It opened my mind up to using different building processes, the power of scale, and the possibilities in working with clay on the wall. I was forced to spend an entire quarter on one idea, making the same piece over and over again, working through the difficulties and desires to abandon the idea altogether. This was a good practice in seeing a vision through, working out every detail of the piece, and one which mirrored the thesis process. The most relevant discovery that came from this piece I was unable to recognize at the time, this was the manner in which I constructed the piece. I worked extremely repetitively, making the same small object over and over, building up large quantities of these building blocks that would create a larger whole.

After working through a couple bodies of work dealing with topographical maps and the mountainous landscape of my home, I attempted to focus my work more internally. My work had to be about something more than place, it was about my relationship to those

places, the quietude I found in the outdoors, and the empowerment I experienced. I was searching for an object to use as a symbol of these concepts, and I arrived at the canoe. The canoe provided a way of utilizing an interior space and returning to the vessel where I felt more comfortable. As I concurrently solidified my aesthetic through other courses, other interests such as pattern, order, and repetition made themselves evident in the work. Still dissatisfied with this body of work, the summer provided time for reflection, preparing for the next step.

As I began the thesis journey in the second year, I was aware of my attachment to the idea of containment and the inside/outside relationship, still feeling as though the vessel might be the best vehicle for exploration and expression of that dialogue. The idea of the vessel relating to the body, the inside of the vessel paralleling the inside of the person was a strong connection for me. It represented an emotional or spiritual containment, and the vessel was holding, protecting, or perhaps even hiding these contents. Early pieces were small geometric vessels, often lidded, with organic contents. I was reluctant to depart from the safety of this form, but committing to this format was proving to be a limitation. I came to realize that these ideas could be expressed by other means.

Embarking on this liberated search, I found myself making organic sculptural objects that contained, and that had an inside/outside dialogue. A dilemma arose with the realization that these forms were too close to objects existing in nature. Although aware of my attraction to representation in some capacity, trompe l'oeil was not my intention. These early works appeared to be nothing more than reproductions, leaving little room for other interpretations.



It became clear that geometric forms were the solution. As my choice of form solidified, the concepts followed. Stated in my proposal, my interest lied in using the form as metaphor for self, a place to communicate themes of the human condition. With the progression of the work, it became evident that the exploration was focusing on one idea--a tough, protective exterior with a more vulnerable interior.

In the art world, the human condition, specifically vulnerability is not unexplored territory.

Working with themes of psychological states for decades, Louise Bourgeois explains:

I am obsessed with human nature. In my work, it's the relationship to the other person that motivates me. The human condition is what I sculpt and my forms emanate from within my body.

Most relevant to my work is her "cell" series. Even her titling seems appropriate, using the term "cells" which can be interpreted as microscopic biological elements or prisons and cages. These pieces are assembled with a variety of materials; some "cells" employ a minimalist approach, presenting a limited amount of information to the viewer, others consist of many layers. Each piece is concerned with providing the viewer a window of access, making the contents visible through an opening or mirror positioned above (Castro 2001).

Incorporating psychological issues, Kiki Smith examined the protective qualities of the human body. Using literal human references, she made work that spoke of her emotional and spiritual concerns and conflicts. Her early work dealt with internal organs, fluids, etc., and over time she began to expand outward to explore the skin, which she saw as the protective barrier separating the internal body from the external world. After research,

however, Smith learned that “it is actually a very porous membrane, leaving our bodies far more vulnerable than we may like to imagine. Our supposed barrier against incursions from the outside world...is in fact a highly permeable tissue” (Posner 1998).

The acknowledgement of this protective exterior/vulnerable interior theme provided the backdrop to experiment with various levels of accessibility to the interior, where I could create a pleasing discovery. In order to accomplish this without recreating natural forms, I began using organic elements within a geometric framework, employing my own systems of pattern and order.

Subsequent pieces were boxes covered with protective “skins”. Surfaces resembling fish scales and turtle shells were applied to cubes. A breakthrough occurred with an increased awareness of my work process. The tedious, repetitive behavior involved with these pieces provided the meditation I craved. Working in this manner made perfect sense with my love of numbers and obsessive tendencies. It also allowed me to build larger scale pieces while still working small. These pieces fell short, however, because they failed to go beyond the surface, to show what was being protected, to have any kind of interior/exterior relationship. It was only with the thesis work that I found a balance between the two.

The themes of protection and shelter that I was exploring also have a history among artists, present in the trademark igloos that Italian artist Mario Merz began making in the late 1960’s. He assembled structures using metal armatures, netting, clay, glass, twigs, wax, or other materials indigenous to the location of the gallery in which he was exhibiting. Merz also became known for his use of the Fibonacci numbers, representing growth patterns in



nature (i.e. pinecones, seashells, leaves). Many of his pieces incorporated these images, or more often, the numbers themselves (Celant 1989).

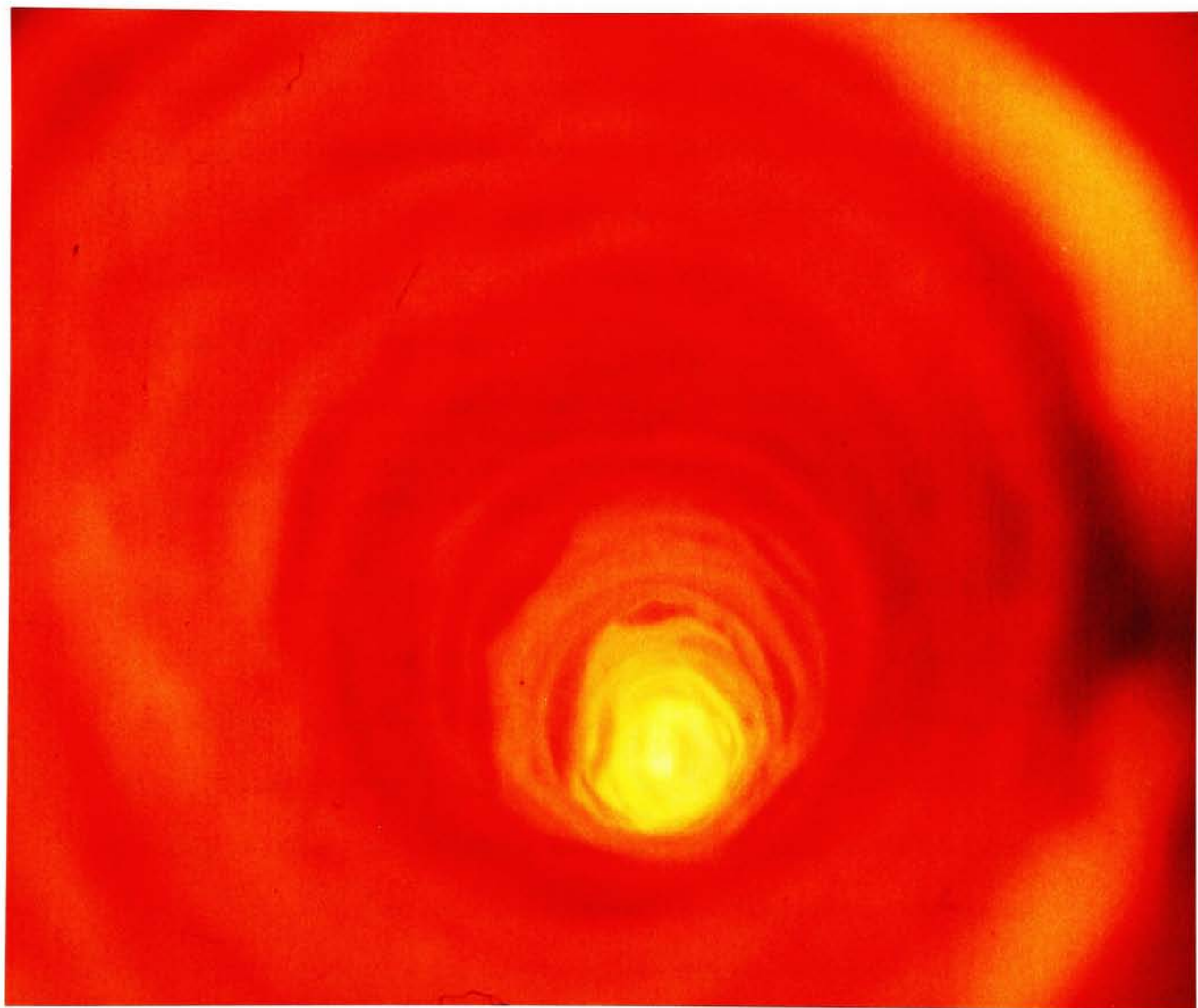
Steve Tobin, working in various media, produced a number of shelters in the 1990's. These are rather large outdoor sculptures constructed from many repeated units, from medical glass tubing to M-60 bullet-resistant tank windows. The size of the sculptures allows the viewers to enter and experience them from an interior point of view. Art critic Nancy Princethal likened the feeling inside one of the shelters to being inside a tank, in a "position of sheltered aggression" (William 2001).

## THE THESIS EXHIBITION

*Drop* (10"x10"x36") is the first piece completed for the thesis show. This box form is covered with a pattern of spiky protrusions, growing increasingly larger and pointing upward as they gain distance from the base. Crackled in some areas, exposing the clay body underneath, the dry and crusty surface appears to be flaking off. From a pale yellow-green at the bottom, the color shifts to mossy green then to blue/black tones at the top, a gradation enhancing the direction of the spikes. The action created by the varied patterns of form and color, paired with the piece's placement on a pedestal of uncharacteristically low height, promote a certain level of accessibility, drawing the viewer in, and leading the eye to a point of interest. On the top of the box, at the peak of their height, the protrusions begin curling inward around an opening, as though a hidden force is pulling them inside the box. Standing over the box, enticed by the intrigue of the opening, the viewer makes a significant discovery as the interior reveals itself. With a warm, radiating heat and glowing light, a tunnel-like form adds to the motion established by the spikes, moving beyond the physical and metaphorical limitations of the exterior. Connections are drawn to internal structures of the human body with this passageway whose end seems indeterminable. The viewer senses the life and energy force contained in the box, concealed by its unaffected exterior.

Spending some time in the gallery permitted the observation of viewers' reactions to the piece. The vast majority of people reacted in a rather physical way—first moving closer to the opening, then demonstrating their discovery of the interior with abrupt facial expressions and body language. Surprised by having anticipated the contents of the box based on its exterior, they often peered inside repeatedly, motioning for others to come share in their







find. It was disappointing to see that some people did not go close to the box at all, but in retrospect, perhaps the exterior was successfully serving its purpose. Unwilling to take the time to examine it, these viewers readily dismissed the box, and therefore, missed out on its reward.

The discovery that I was seeking to accomplish in this piece is closely related to a significant influence, Andy Goldsworthy, whose process and work encompass this idea. Constantly working to gain a better understanding of nature and his relationship to it, he approaches every piece as a new adventure and potential learning experience. He tells a story about uncovering vibrant red stones in the river near his home:

There is little indication that red is present and I worked there many times before finding it. It has to be prised from the place and is a shock when first discovered. That such an intense color can be so hidden is a reminder to look beyond the surface of things (Friedman 2000, 25).

In addition to the theme of discovery, my work is strongly connected to his on multiple levels. His work often involves the use of small organic elements (such as leaves, stones, sticks) paired with repetition to build larger sculptures. Protection and shelter are reoccurring concepts which examples are numerous. Stonewalls convey messages of protecting contents and delineating boundaries, and life-sized stone chambers constructed on top of a hill provide shelter from the harsh weather. Other pieces experiment with relationship reversal, challenging protective scenarios that exist in nature.

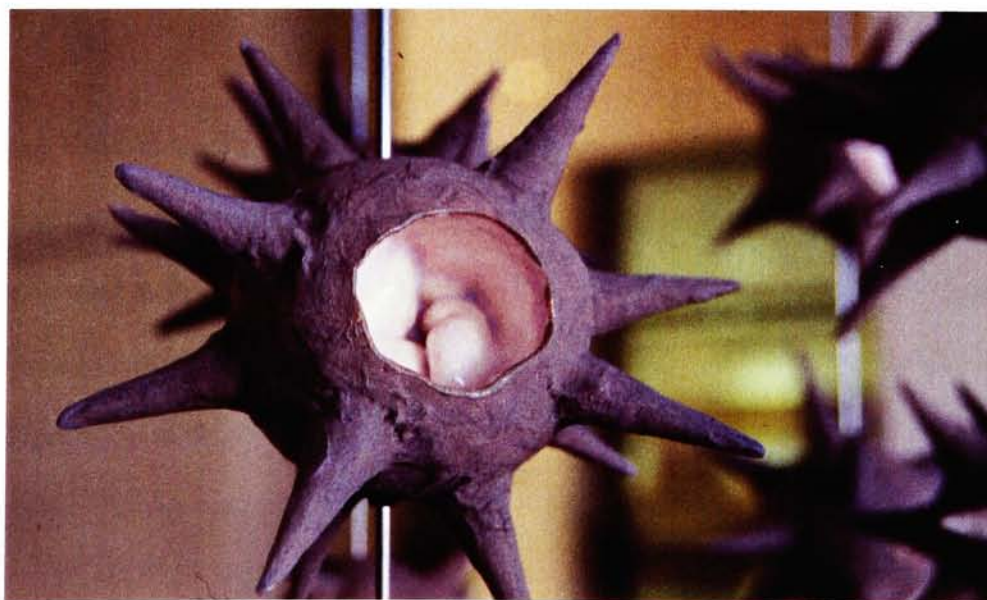
Another contemporary sculptor utilizing related themes is Sarah Lovitt. A great deal of her work uses images of the body as a means to talk about emotion, layers, and protection. In an interview for *Sculpture Magazine* she remarked:

The tension is between the break in the surface and the much more serious systems still functioning beneath. The body appears impenetrable but it is always vulnerable. Still, within its vulnerability there are systems of resilience. The complexity of these delicate areas and their layers of defense inspire and move me. A small cut might highlight these layers, but the vital systems, like the circulation underneath these small incisions, are buried and protected (Honigman 2002).

The second piece created for the exhibition is *Screen*, the installation of a massive barrier (8'x8'x1') supported by metal grids spanning two twenty foot steel beams. Fifteen steel rods hang from the grids, each piercing fifteen objects, creating a wall that divides the exhibition space. These objects are spiky spheres, each of which has an opening on one side, permitting a glimpse of its interior. Placed close enough together to give the sense of a barrier, there is sufficient negative space between the objects to enhance visual interest, while also allowing the viewer to see through the piece. The grid-like placement instills a rigid order, contrasting the forms themselves, which are organic with subtle variations. A variegated dry brown glaze creates an earthy appearance and unifies the multiple objects. Positioned on the rods with all the openings facing the same direction, the viewer is unaware of the interiors, which are protected by both their group configuration and their possession of spikes arranged in specific patterns. Physically walking around the barrier allows the viewer to experience finding the vulnerable insides exposed. These interiors are slightly iridescent pale pink, and mushy in appearance, bordering on carnal with their reference to innards, yet undeniably feminine, soft, and touchable.

*Screen* can be linked to the work of Neil Forrest, an artist with whom I feel a kinship to visually, conceptually, and through process. Working in a methodical manner, he creates large-scale installations consisting of thousands of pieces. *Hiving Mesh* is one such





installation with similarities to *Screen*. To create this piece, Forrest produced vast quantities of a limited number of forms directly referencing nature, diseased pinecones in this case. Connecting these units in a complex system of hexagons using steel wire, a “thicket” is created through which other layers are visible. Units on the outside layer of the piece are inlaid with intensely colored cellular patterns, providing additional information and a sharp contrast to the stark white pieces constructing the interior (Beesley 2000).

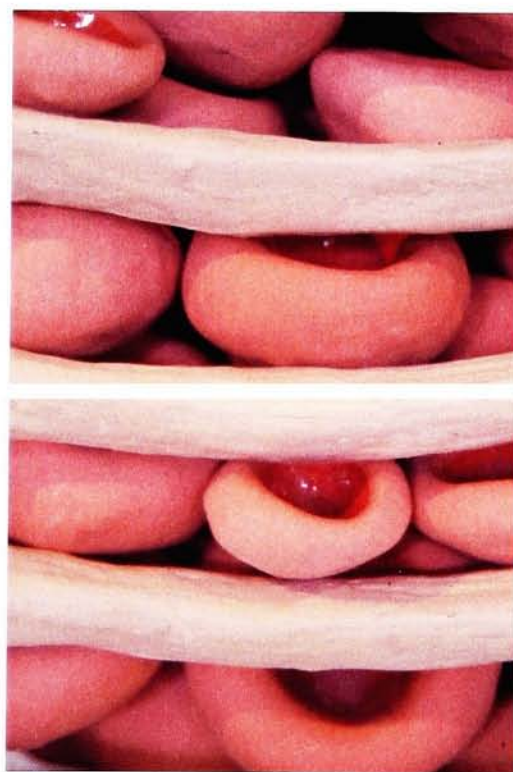
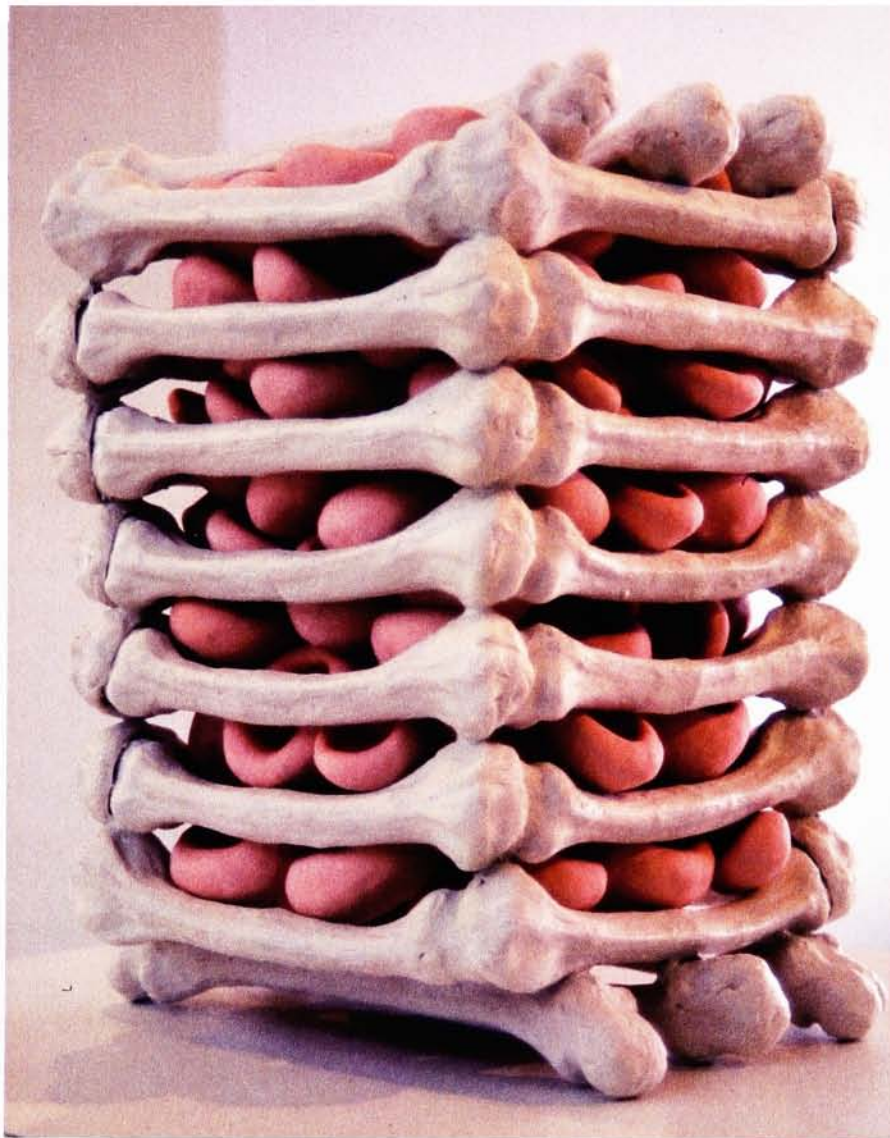
Magdalena Abakanowicz also touched on the idea of protection in reference to the human body. This is evident in her sculptures involving rows and rows of empty headless figure/tree forms. Karolina Hübner writes:

The empty husks of these figures are an awaiting armor, as if our bodies were too soft and vulnerable. They resemble pieces of pottery or snake skins, shed and left behind... These bronze figures look like Abakanowicz's earlier sculptures in burlap and resin, metamorphosed by their metal coating. Hard and massive, they appear like an admission that the fragility exposed by the burlap bodies is permanent and inevitable (2000).

Abakanowicz is also interested in repetition, though not mechanical repetition. Many of her sculptures involve armies of figures, set up in ordered rows. Though part of a larger group, each figure has its own characteristics, allowing it to function as an individual in the crowd.

In another thesis piece, *Structure* (18"x12"x12"), twenty-eight dense porcelain bones are attached at right angles with ball and joint sockets in groups of four, creating squares which are then stacked to form a container. The identical bones each have a ball end and a socket end, allowing them to fit together neatly. Though not intended to replicate a specific human bone, their scale and choice of material lends a certain human sensibility. Rows of single bones attached to the top and bottom complete the cage-like enclosure that has been likened

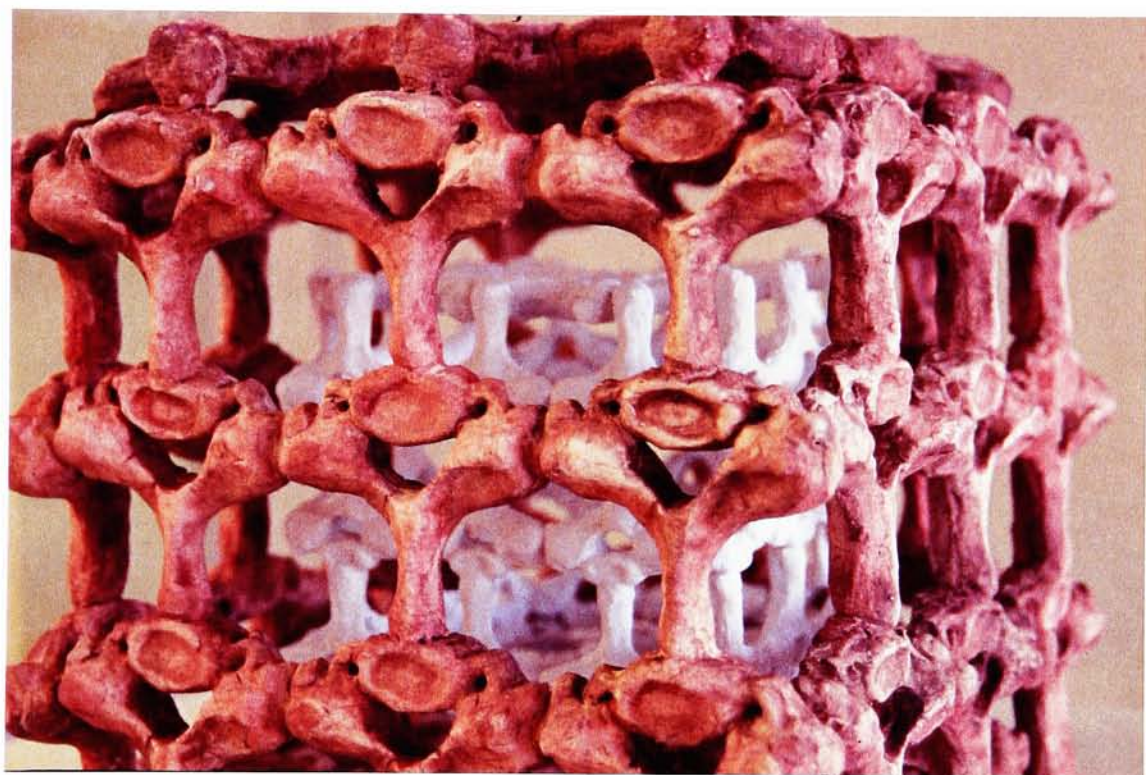




to a square ribcage. Due to the bulkiness of the joints, negative spaces are created between the narrow lengths of the bones, providing visual access to the contents. The viewer readily sees that the box is filled with magnified red blood cells, voluminous and soft in appearance, simultaneously contained and overflowing. This condition is amplified by the varying sizes of the cells, which would allow some of them to slip through openings, while others would be trapped. Their surface is a soft matte pink color, with a juicy red pool of glaze in the indentation, creating an effective juxtaposition against the pure whiteness of the unglazed bones.

The final piece is a second bone box, *no. 7* (8"x8"x8"), consisting of two boxes assembled with repeated vertebrae bones. The outer box is made up of equally sized stoneware bones, attached in a grid like fashion, with each bone connecting to four other bones, forming a six-sided cage. This orientation is far removed from their natural existence in the body, allowing for a broad range of interpretations. The bones of the exterior layer are larger and rougher in their handling, with a surface stained with washes of earthy red and brown tones. The exterior protects the inner box, its precious and fragile counterpart. Visible through the outer layer, this pure white porcelain box floats inside, suspended by thin microfilament. Though assembled in the same manner, its tiny components construct a much smaller, more refined box with a lace-like quality.

These last works share visual connections to Annabeth Rosen's work, best evidenced in her "cake tile" sculptures. With hundreds of pieces, she works through a process of firing, breaking, assembling, glazing, breaking, reassembling—fitting organic components together



into larger geometric forms resembling thick, sandwich-like layered tiles. The resulting ordered forms consist of multiple pieces unified through the application of a monochromatic surface treatment. Horizontally oriented on metal bases, the tiles are arranged in rows for display (Whitney 1999).



## CONCLUSION

Having had a chance to step back from the work and spend some time with it, I now have a better sense of its successes and downfalls. I have a clearer vision of how I see the work developing in the future, and I am more aware of particular areas to improve upon.

The issue that needs the most consideration is scale. It is admittedly one that I have struggled with over time, and it is a concern that should remain in the foreground. Shifting the scale more radically, whether increasing or decreasing, would be beneficial, allowing the viewer to engage with the work on more physical and intimate levels.

Engineering is another area to be addressed. Various methods of construction to consider are designing the pieces as interlocking building blocks and incorporating a variety of other materials. Alternative hanging methods need to be researched as well, easing weight, moveability, and assembly.

Finally, I would like to explore other relationships—not always soft and vulnerable inside, hard and protective outside. There are multitudes of ways in which we exist in relation to each other. As humans we are not always presenting or perceiving ourselves in a single way. Opening this up to other scenarios will provide endless possibilities, further enhanced by an expanded range of reference material.

On a positive note, I feel confident about my departure from the vessel. I discovered a method of working which fulfills my needs. Working with multiples allows me to work in a meditative manner. I am able to work obsessively, concerning myself with the number of objects, and organizing them into my own systems. I can make things somewhat representational, yet no longer is there any question about my interest in trompe l'oeil or in wanting to merely replicate objects that already exist. Most importantly, I have developed a solid foundation that I can continue to build upon throughout my lifelong journey as an artist.

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