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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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

Prometheus

by

Kyle Blalock

May 20, 2015

Abstract

This paper describes my thesis body of work as it originates from my personal experiences being brought up in the Mormon Church, or the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in rural northern Arizona. Descriptions of rituals, religion, and rights of passage as a young Mormon gay man depict a lineage that leads up to forging personal salvation through art making and literature. The narrative of my paper discusses my education and illustrates my growth as an artist who has been intimately informed by sculptural processes and the materials used in creating sculpture.

Kyle Blalock

Masters of Fine Art Thesis Proposal

2014

Creating work that embodies my idea about spirituality and magnetic attraction towards certain materials, with an emphasis on viewer interaction and integration, is the direction for the body of work which I foresee becoming my Masters of Fine Arts thesis. Exploring these avenues further with research into the artists: Joseph Beuys, Anselm Kiefer, Wolfgang Laib, Anish Kapoor, Matthew Barney, Louise Bourgeois, and others who hold the material aspects of their work in high regard will help me further define my personal attachments towards physicality.

History is becoming a very important element in my ideation and material selection as well; on a geologic and human time scale. Rudolph Steiner was a philosopher amongst others, who tied a strong sense of spirituality with the proto-science alchemy, which upon further research could have a strong impact on my ideas coming to fruition in a well-rounded manner. For my Master of Fine Arts thesis body of work I will research more thoroughly the histories of alchemy and its relationship to creativity, my sculptural interests, and the innate connection to the human tradition of making. I will create sculpture that invites the viewer to interact by physically touching and incorporating their body. The scale will accommodate the viewers' body by possibly allowing one to climb a set of stairs or to kneel down in a soft plethora of wool in order to reflect in mirror-finished metal, glass, or a pool of liquid.

In Lawrence M. Prince's book *The Secrets of Alchemy* he describes the common misconception of alchemy being something that “conjures up vivid images of the hidden, the mysterious, and the arcane, of dark laboratories and wizard-like figures bent over glowing fires and bubbling cauldrons.” When I think of the word alchemy I visualize a hermetic ancient striving to create the philosopher's stone, an apothecary in the thick of conjuring up supposed cures for ailments, or a craftsperson troubleshooting dyes or replicating sacred jewels for a royal patron. Alchemy is the proto-science that spawned modern chemistry but came about through the exploration of alloying metals in the hopes of creating gold and silver from other base metals. Concerns for creating or altering other materials were also explored as a means of creating profitable material and utilitarian objects.

Before civilization required precious material that expressed some sort of monetary value, our human relationship to material was more primal and developed out of a need for survival, telling stories or for more spiritual endeavors. I see iron as one of the materials in which I connect to on a deeper level. As the second most abundant element on earth, an element that exists here and in many and unknown reach of the cosmos, and one that exists in the core of the Sun and

our bodies, it becomes an existential factor. The many uses for it throughout human civilization are profound. Some of the earliest uses come in the form of refining raw material such as magnetite, hematite, and ilmenite by the Olmec people, which would be worn as body adornment, polished to a mirror-like reflection. Discoidal mirrors were carved into concave forms that would be polished to mirror-like finishes then filled with water to be used by Mayan shaman. Liquid filled pools were often associated with divination and spiritual quests in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. In post-classic art the Aztecs employed polished obsidian to commune with the underworld.

When I create sculpture, whatever the material, I am drawn to the process of discovering its potential in much the same way the alchemist was enamored by the prospect of the transmutation of one alloy into another. The process of discovery that the alchemist and sculptor experience in their respective places of research can be very similar. Historically art making and alchemy have a rich past where each have influenced the other. Materials, their treatment, and relationships within sculptural compositions will be factors of the upmost importance as well as their relationship to the history of alchemical materials. Glass and metal will be materials of focus but wood, fibers, and other materials will be utilized as the body of work dictates.

I find it interesting that these materials were used early on to capture the image of the viewer. The viewer became part of the material and the material became a window into other worlds and into one's soul. My sculptural work will reinterpret these objects out of the same or relatively modified and refined materials by hand. This has a personal element of spiritual meaning to me. I am doing the same thing as others did thousands of years ago. The context has changed immensely; I am not creating to see into the underworld or discover the elixir of life. I am creating these objects to provoke thought and personal meditation about our relationship to the physical and elemental.

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RITUAL

We waited in the chapel dressed in soft white linens that we were given as we entered. I sat on one of the hard wooden benches that were laid out in numerous parallel rows to the back of the room. Some of the other boys were playing with their Game Boys that they had snuck in but I kept to myself wondering what was going to happen. Some wondered as well but for the most part they seemed distracted with each other and whatever else was going on in their pre-teen heads; I was twelve, we were all twelve.

Brother Smith came out and called us in one by one. When I was called I remember feeling illuminated by a flood of light as I entered the center of the temple. The room was bright white with marble flooring and architectural facades that sprung up to a vaulted ceiling. Beautifully etched glass adorned the arches that wrapped around a large granite, brass, and glass tub. The pool of water was wrapped in a vacant threshold and seemed to be floating above the floor below, suspended by the stone steps that led up to the large baptismal font. Brother Smith had left me in the company of many strangers who were standing in the doorways and other stations in the room like sentinels. I was led up to the water and asked to climb in by a brother who was already waist deep. He put his left arm around my waist and held the other up as if to take an oath, which I had to dictate back. He began to recite names of the deceased and offered them salvation by joining the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. After each name was recited the brother would put his hand right hand over mine and over my face to push me under the water. He would pull me up, read another name and I would go under again. This seemed to go on for a long time.

When they were done I went back in my soggy clothes to dry off with the other boys. Some of the boys seemed perplexed and confused while others seemed complacent and energetic; none knew what had just happened. We had all been baptized when we turned eight, but this time it was

different. Before my uncle David was waiting in the baptismal font at our church and I was only pushed under once and afterward there was a party. My sister was also baptized when she turned eight. There was no celebration this time. Eventually we left the Temple in Mesa Arizona and ate dinner at the SouperSalad before we drove home three hours north to Snowflake Arizona. It was my first time being allowed into the temple. About a month before I became a member of the Aaronic Order of priesthood as a deacon, effectively granting me permission to enter.

As you enter Snowflake from any direction today you can almost always see the gilded statue of Maroni gleaming in the sunlight or lit from the rooftop of the temple that now crests the highest point of the small pioneer town. In the van as a twelve year old I could see massive cranes raising gigantic slabs of grey granite that would soon encapsulate the temple. The temple was *the* topic of conversation for many years before and after the construction. You could see it from each of the four massive Mormon churches that serviced the town. We would have proceeded with the baptisms for the dead there if it were constructed earlier.

SNOWFLAKE

Snowflake is a high desert town where it actually snows, though the name was created combining the last names of Erastus Snow and William Jordan Flake in 1878. They were part of a long-winded massive Mormon migration that started in Ohio until militias pushed them out. The west became a symbol of freedom for the Mormons as America was for the world over. My parents moved us there when I was five after the sawmill where my dad worked in Payson Arizona closed. I grew up with a pioneer mentality and atmosphere that shaped many of the people who lived there. Fishing, hunting, and camping were integral to the upbringing of most of the boys and even the girls. The Boy Scouts training, along with the direction of my father who is a master hunter and fisher, ensured I would be brought up a proper man in the eyes of my community. Gender expectations

were fully integrated into the school systems as they are in many but with an extra sense of Mormon doctrine. Seminary was a possible elective offered and space was provided for studying the various scriptures. The Bishop and Elders would hold sessions and encourage members to take these electives. After school many members of the church would attend boys and girls programs at the stake center: *Young Woman's* and *Young Men's*.

Snowflake also had Baptist, Catholic, Methodist, and Lutheran churches that were very small in most cases with very few members. My father was raised in a large Catholic family and attended Catholic school in Tucson and my mother was raised in and out of the Mormon Church. When we moved to Snowflake my parents took us to the Mormon Church in order to fit into the town and community. Snowflake is a place where one's last name holds all of the credentials to fit in. Smith and Flake are a few of the household names associated with senators, businesses, and powerhouse community members who's wealth had roots deep beneath the surface of the region.

LOSING MY RELIGION

I do not have any grievances about being ex-communicated from the Mormon Church. Growing up in Snowflake and coming out as a gay man was the most difficult and intense experience of my life that continues to exist as a constant battle when I return. My interest in becoming an artist developed in juxtaposition with my estrangement from the Mormon community. The ceramics studio in the high school and community college became my sanctuary where I formed friendship. I went to a high school in another town about forty minutes away where my mother taught language arts. I gravitated towards the art and English teacher who were very open-minded and supportive. At the same time I was enrolled at the community college studying photography and ceramics with great professors.

At this point in my story I am sixteen and working at Subway. I did not often drive back from Pinetop, where I worked and went to school, to Snowflake where my home was. I would stay at friends and in the warmer months we would all camp out at Scott's Reservoir, just a couple miles from school. I would show up to do laundry and sometimes eat with my family or meet them out. Most of the time it was too difficult to look them in the eyes for me to want to go home. My mother was angry and sad but still loved me; we argued too much. My father went into a deep depression; we didn't talk. My sister felt abandoned; she was ignored. I was trying to figure out who I was, trying to meet guys in a very desolate type of dating scene, reading novel after novel to find a new system of belief, and making as much as I could. I wanted my independence and privacy.

There were points where I would meet my mom and a counselor to try and fix my sexuality, for lack of a better phrase. When I found out it was a Mormon owned company it pushed me further away. I went to school and worked hard. I was larger than most of my classmates and developed an attitude that helped me out. I was the only one who was openly gay in a high school of less than four hundred. There were always assumptions about my sexuality but I would have girlfriends and I was not sure. When I did come out the entire school knew. It is amazing how fast gossip travels in small towns. My school life got so much better when I was open about myself. I was more confident and was not hiding a secret. I worked harder in school, joined speech and debate, cross-country, and was showing work locally my junior and senior year.

My mom asked me to tell everyone that I was not gay and that I made it up. A friend's cousin egged my new car. Relationships began and ended. The next few years went by so fast. Eventually I made my way home my senior year and mended my relationship with my family and developed my own set of spiritual beliefs through art making, reading and talking with my parents and teachers. We all changed in our own ways and became a family again.

THE METAMORPHOSIS

Previously I knew that my mother, father, sister and I selected each other before we were all born and that once we died we would be resurrected in heaven where our spirits would be reunited with our bodies. After I came out I gravitated toward people who I thought were open-minded and creative. I was drawn to the classroom of Ryan Clark, my English teacher who introduced me to Kurt Vonnegut, a big influence as I became really interested in literature. I joined speech and debate under Ryan's coaching where I read prose from Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* and also competed in the Lincoln Douglas debate on topics such as Public Domain and the ethics of teaching creationism alongside evolution in public schools. We became quite close over my junior and senior years, as he was someone I could talk to about my ideology, experiences, and goals. He helped me mend my relationship with my mother by mediating. Being coworkers with my mother, in the same academic department, his advice and help surpassed that of the biased therapist's. Ryan grew up with a similar upbringing as me. His family was practicing members of the Mormon Church and he went his own way and got an MFA in creative writing, married, had children, and then divorced. He is a brilliant writer and interpreter of literature. After introducing me to Vonnegut's *Cats Cradle* he assigned the class *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley. Never have I read something that hit so close to home and touched on all the right topics, something that asked all the right questions at just the right moment in my life, when I was going through lots of anxiety trying to justify my existence. *Brave New World* is a dystopian novel about a man named John and his experience assimilating to a totalitarian state, the "World State". In this society the citizens are brainwashed at every stage of their development, test tube conception to time of death. They are genetically modified into five classes: Alpha, Beta,

Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon; self medicated by *soma*; dehumanized by removing the possibility of developing affection and relationships. They have no cultural heritage, religion, or art; and have a predetermined life plan with an expiration date. John comes into the story after two members of the World State visit the Reservation to study the "Savages". John was picked out as a loner and wound up going to the World State where he witnessed the stability and happiness of the citizens in the absence of everything that he felt characterized humanity. Imagining a world without religion, without culture, without war even, I hesitate to say, would be a pretty boring world to live in. I resented religion before I could learn enough to grasp the importance of what it was, how it functioned, where it came from, and how responsible it is for the present landscape of earth.

I continued to unravel the constructs of different human civilizations, societies, and mythologies, while simultaneously working in film photography, ceramics, and painting through high school and then into Northland Pioneer College. I was taking three ceramics classes on top of my general education requirements each semester. Western Literature was taught by Berry Richins who introduced me to authors I would come to admire and whose work I would hold close as I developed my own belief system and understanding of western civilization. He required us to write reaction papers for each of the readings, showing some kind of personal connection to the text in whole or in part. We studied scriptures from the New and Old Testaments, *Beowulf*, *The Metamorphosis*, Goethe's *Faust*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, etcetera. Barry Richins definitely expanded my knowledge and helped me reconcile with my previous faith. I did not find out that he was a practicing Mormon until after I took his second survey class. I have had numerous professors onward who have had a strong impact in my liberal arts coursework that have shown me something new and given me the tools to ask the right questions.

When I transferred to Arizona State University after receiving my Associate of Art degree I decided to go into the ceramics program instead of English because I loved making too much to be consumed by reading. Little did I know that I would be doing a lot of reading in art history classes. I never wound up taking ceramics after having to take an out of area 3D studio course that happened to be sculpture. The challenge of conceptualizing material, objects, and the self in relation to the environment of a sculptural work is a challenge that draws me to the process of creation. I found an area that demanded enough intellectual rigor and knowledge of material and process to keep me on my toes.

I was working on the final project in my introduction to sculpture class in the outdoor sculpture patio watching other, more experienced, students setting up an iron cupola furnace. They were laying sand molds out in rows in front of the furnace, gathering and weighing out coke and iron, and then they went on blast. I could not believe the synchronization of the crew as a whole, working as one organism with sometimes disobedient parts and mistakes, all in an effort to achieve molten iron and create sculpture. The risk and volatile nature associated with the process was bewildering and the camaraderie and charisma of the group was compelling. Everyone was in it together. Soon I became part of this idiosyncratic group of people who populate universities and colleges all over the United States, a member of what I will refer to as the Iron Tribe.

The amount of physical labor and discipline needed to create cast iron art successfully and safely while coordinating logistics is extensive and developing better practices is a life long commitment that never ceases to be challenging. I fell in love with something at once seemingly barbaric and at second glance the most beautiful transformation I have witnessed. Through creating this body of work and reflecting on influential moments in my life I can say I have realized my new religion, and I am once again a cult member.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Louise Bourgeois is an artist who has had a great influence on my work. She creates sculptural environments that are oftentimes referred to as "the cells". By composing sculptural elements together she creates narratives that the viewer can experience by entering as if they were entering a room in her mind. There are personal elements that relate to specific memories and experiences. Usually these memories come from childhood trauma or from personal relationships. Bourgeois shares with me a reverence for materials and the craftsmanship that goes into transforming them into finished sculpture. I feel that the psychological charge that her work exudes comes from this combination of focusing on her personal relationship with the content of her work and sculpting. Layering and combining different materials into sculptural objects or places is a common practice that Bourgeois does in order to create a complimentary narrative that I try to reinterpret in an intuitive way.

Matthew Barney and Joseph Beuys also create sculptural environments in which they sometimes perform. Both artists utilize materials that have deep and personal significance to their overall concepts. Barney creates much more longwinded narratives that deal with geography, the body, and performance that are often displayed as artifacts of the process. When they are removed from the context of his films they can embody the feeling of religious stations or as if some type of ritual has just occurred. Beuys' sculpture emphasizes the idea of sustenance. Fat, fur, and fuel are oftentimes combined and used in performances and sculptures by Beuys, symbolizing his views on humanity. Beuys' and Barney's use of material exudes tactile qualities that relate to the body. Beuys' uses fat and wool, in juxtaposition with more solid materials such as wood and metal, influenced my decision to combine wool, wood and iron in *Prayer Canoe*. Barney uses petroleum jelly that has a very

unstable nature relating back to his athletic past in much the same way I utilize the ephemeral and impermanent qualities of water.

THE WORK

My process of creating sculpture is both intuitive in form and personal in conception. I may create a form based on a lingering image in my head and complete the sculpture by continually reacting to components and symbolism as they become physical objects that generate psychological charge. The combination of hard and soft material, the organic and geological, and the seemingly permanent and ephemeral creates contrast that places an emphasis on material selection. The history of each material, whether it is in an industrial sense with metallic materials or primal with organics, points to our abilities as cognitive beings to create civilization, art, and mythology. We have evolved and changed as animals in direct relation to our abilities to manipulate our physical environments. Our minds have become the prehensile tail or third eye and the tool has become that extra appendage. At some point we began to use our abilities to create histories explaining our abilities. Altars, reliquaries, churches and temples are places that physically house these explanations in a vast array of respective cultures.

Prometheus is a body of work that I created to be universally read as religious and ritualistic. I wanted the viewer to feel a familiarity with the subject matter without blatantly harkening to one specific culture. Suppressing personal bias and experience as a person of the western world is problematic. Throughout the process of creating this work I realized that my religious past and spiritual beliefs began to surface. The physical and visual weight of the work and its elements created a heavy emotional weight. The scale had to be large enough to accommodate the human body so the

size of the work varies from the small objects to potentially architectural spaces. Creating work that competes with the presence of the viewer causes the viewer to feel apprehension and intimidation as well as approachability and curiosity. There is room for the viewer to discover more by becoming physically engaged with the work.

Prayer Canoe is an altar in which the viewer can kneel onto a wool pad that fills a large iron vessel that rests on a dock-like arrangement of railroad ties in order to view one's reflection in a mirror-polished bronze tablet. The railroad ties are bound together with thick leather strapping that have bronze stakes hammered through. The vessel has a fairly narrow base and is slightly uncomfortable to kneel into as it causes the viewers knees to push together as the vessel shape tapers. The bronze tablet has a concave reflective surface that alters the reflection of the viewer. *Prayer Canoe* utilizes materials that are universal but their combination feels very much western and captures the pioneer mentality that propelled the Mormon faith into an American religion.

Pensieve is a sculpture that also requires the viewer to physically step. The steps are bolted cast iron planes that do not seem to be structurally sound. A vessel rests on top of a fabricated steel frame that is filled with water. Over time water drips through a small hole into a smaller hand-held bowl that rests on the floor. This smaller bowl is brought up the steps and is placed back inside of the larger. This ritual of replenishment of water adds a sense of time and the rust that has formed is evidence of use. The overall weight and seemingly precarious form of *Pensieve* creates the same sense of intimidation and discomfort.

The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit is a smaller station in the body that retains some of the involvement in ritual and replenishment but is smaller in size and visual weight. Using cast glass and LED lights, along with water and more delicate elements, allow for interaction with less physical fear. The cycle of dripping water, pulsating cool light, and rust also allude to a ritual object in use.

Recrudescence is another more approachable sculpture in which resurrection plants rest in the palms of bronze castings of my hands inside of a perforated glass box. Water pools on the lid of the glass box and slowly drips onto the plants, which then quickly bloom, and close when the water evaporates. The ideas of a ritual, dying, and of rebirth in the palms of my hands, appendages responsible for all of the work in the show, bring this sculpture closest to being a self-portrait.

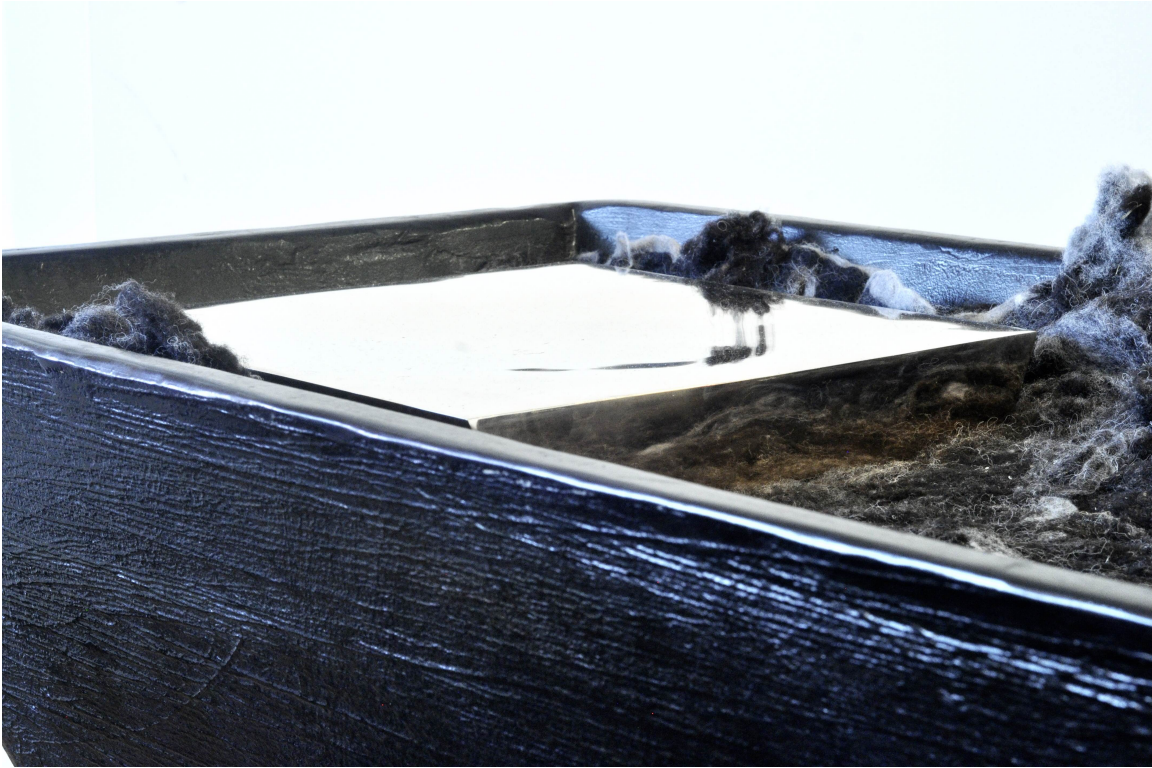
Mortar and Pestle is exactly a mortar and pestle but scaled up to a large size. The mortar is cast iron and the pestle is marble. Having this piece in the exhibition symbolized the acts of creation, discovery, and experimentation that make us human.

CONCLUSION

Through the examination of my artistic practice and this body of work I have had time to reflect on why I make art and how that motivation becomes part of the concept. My religious upbringing has had a relevant impact on my development as an artist and critical thinker by forcing me to become a more introspective and contemplative human being. Working with various materials and in the cast iron art community has given me the skills to communicate through art. The culmination of my introspective nature, religious upbringing, and the community I now associate my artistic practice with, are the driving forces that result in finished sculpture.



Prayer Canoe, 2015. Iron, bronze, wool, railroad ties, leather. 42 x 46 x 65 in.



Prayer Canoe (detail)



Pensieve, 2014. Iron, steel, leather, water, 74 x 35 x 44 in.



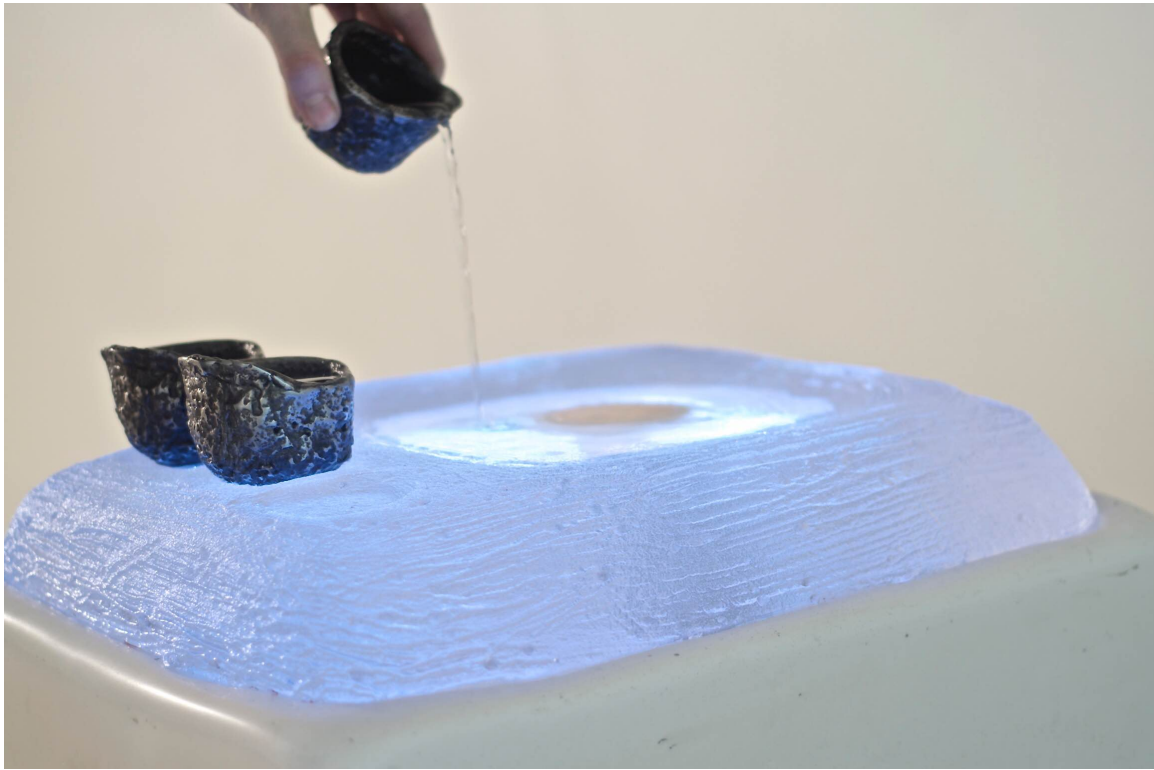
Pensieve (detail)



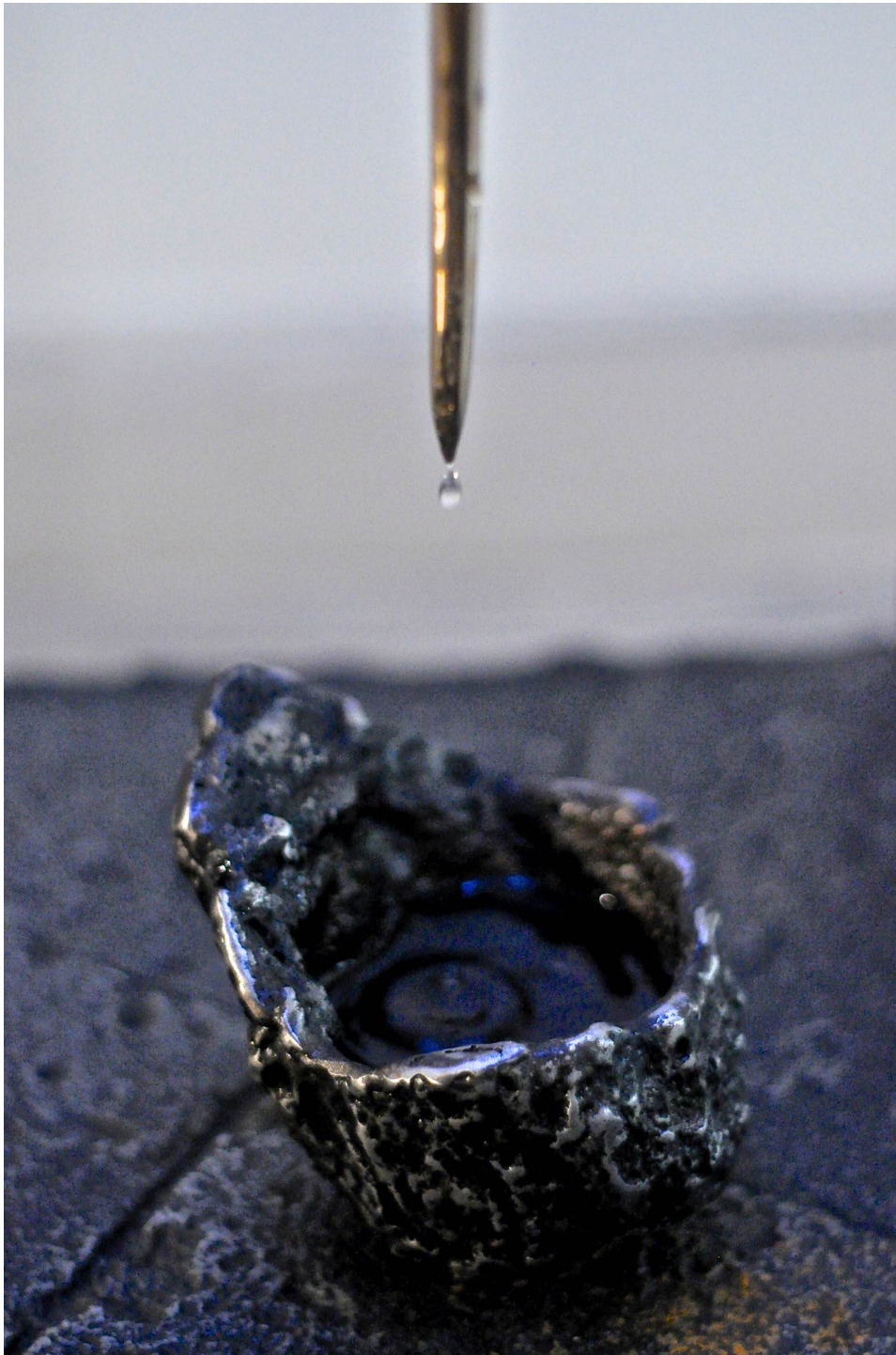
Pensieve (detail)



The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit, 2014. Iron, bronze, glass, water, steel, 50 x 20 x 23 in.



The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit (detail)



The Father, The Son, and The Holy Spirit (detail)



Recrudescence, 2015. Iron, aluminum, bronze, glass, walnut, resurrection plant, water, 37 x 28 x 32 in.



Recrudescence (detail)



Recrudescence (detail)



Mortar and Pestle, 2015. Concrete, iron, marble, 23 x 30 x 24 in.



Mortar and Pestle (detail)