ICONS OF ECO-ANXIETY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Notre Dame
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

by

Mitchell A. Springer

________________________________________
William Kremer, Director

Graduate Program in Art, Art History, and Design
Notre Dame, Indiana
November 2018
© Copyright 2018

Mitchell A. Springer
# CONTENTS

List of Figures ........................................................................................................................... ii
Preface ........................................................................................................................................... iv
Acknowledgments ......................................................................................................................... vi
Introduction ................................................................................................................................... 1
Creative Impulse .......................................................................................................................... 3
Eco-Anxiety ................................................................................................................................. 10
Aesthetics for the Anthropocene ............................................................................................... 15
Runination and Architecture ....................................................................................................... 21
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................... 25
Figures ......................................................................................................................................... 27
Bibliography ............................................................................................................................... 33
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Drought-related tree mortality in Sequoia National Park.................................27
Figure 2: *Dripstone*, series with detail, 2016. Soda-fired porcelain.................................28
Figure 3: *Molting*, 2017. Soda-fired stoneware and glaze........................................29
Figure 4: *Stochastic Monument*, 2018. Black stoneware...........................................30
Figure 5: *Archway for the Anthropocene I*, series, 2016. Porcelain, charcoal...............31
Figure 6: *Archway for the Anthropocene II*, series, 2018. Annealed glaze..................32
PREFACE

I believe all great makers of art express something deeply personal in what they make, and my work is no different. I am a lens that filters observations, thoughts, and experiences of my past and present into the art I make. My art is highly informed by my decade-long tenure as a National Park employee in Sequoia National Park, California. During this time, I had the great pleasure of assisting in biological and geological research being conducted in various caves by park Cave Specialists Joel Despain and Benjamin Tobin.¹

The foundation of my understanding of humanity’s place within the natural world was established during my time assisting in this research. Our goal was to study extremely sensitive underground environments for the effects the outside world had on them. Samples for hydrological analysis were taken, newly emerged fungus was studied and identified, and rare creatures were inventoried to monitor change in the underground ecosystems.²

These trips were profoundly influential in my development as an artist. The experience has inspired visual references to the spiritual and the sublime originating from


² Ibid
underground rooms which display cave formations that are implicit of cathedral interiors. I found these displays of nature to be a profound source of knowledge and have provided me with a visual and intellectual understanding of geological processes. This has inspired in me the contemplation of the sublime and spiritual and has instilled perspectives of fragility and sacredness to the landscape. I also invoke these affective states by using historical references within my work. Bridging ancient invocations of the sacred and contemporary environmental concerns through the visual iconography of ruins, free-standing sculpture, and sacred architecture. And I invoke the spiritual through the exploitation of ceramic form and surface.

My sculptures draw primarily from two key modes of thought. First, I formally reference the visual language of ruins from western Europe, funerary monuments, religious statuary, and gothic architecture. Archways adorned with sculpture, varying scale and proximity serve as tools of navigation for the viewer. My written thesis examines my sculpture’s relationship between this classic (and often global) framework of spiritual expression and contemporary ecological concerns. Second, I examine a visual language of materiality and rely on heavily textured surfaces to communicate the psychological distress that is shaped by the slow and chaotic onset of environmental collapse. The contemporary term Eco-Anxiety is a psychological condition triggered by various environmental disasters and is a discerning reaction to perilous times as we navigate humanity’s place within the natural cycle of things.
AKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the faculty and staff members in the Department of Art, Art History and Design. In particular I would like to thank my thesis director, Bill Kremer and ceramics area research associate Zach Tate, as well as my committee members, Jason Lahr and Robin Rhodes- whose feedback throughout this process has been invaluable. I would also like to acknowledge the Nanovic Institute for European Studies for their generous Graduate Summer Travel & Research Grant which allowed me to travel through Italy and Greece during the summer of 2017 to experience ruins and to visit the Venice Biennale and Documenta 14. Lastly, I want to acknowledge my colleagues and creative partners Cory Mahoney and Thomas Cornell, who continually challenge and inspire me.
INTRODUCTION

“Wilderness is the preservation of the world.”
-Henry David Thoreau, Walking

Over the past three years my work has developed several apparent characteristics. I most often look to nature for form and surface possibilities that reflect upon opposing, contradictory forces: humans and nature; empirical and ethereal; permanent and fragile; ominous and triumphant; intimidating and optimistic. These categories reflect on notions of the sublime where beauty and terror are central to the work. As I examine the cause for the manifestation of these elements within my art, I have found it is a combination of curiosity with ceramic materials and a growing concern regarding humanity’s relationship with nature. The issue of humankind’s place in nature is the foundation of my work and is explored in pursuit of a problematic connection between human development and nature in the age of the Anthropocene.4

We are all inextricably part of the natural world, yet with the development of science and technology we experience decreasing interactions with natural phenomena. There has been a substitution of culture for nature and a resultant unconscious feeling of

4 The Anthropocene is defined as relating to or denoting the current geological age, viewed as the period during which human activity has been the dominant influence on climate and the environment (Laird 2017).
isolation. I believe that there is a relationship between the development of empirical thought, our psychic disassociation with nature, and the split among the many elements that comprise our beings. For this reason, I aspire to have my works entered from a psychological point of view.

The corporeal and spiritual selves are not generally thought of as being unified and of the same essence, but as separate entities at odds with one another. This ironic clash between our natural bodies and different parts of the psyche can create an intangible tension in most of us. This tension seems inherently paradoxical. It is both a cultural development as we seek to discover our origins, and yet in an ecological sense, it separates humans from nature. In my art I try to make concrete and dimensional things that are understood, imagined, or felt in an abstract way that address this paradox.

---


7 Ibid, pp. 647-648

CREATIVE IMPULSE

“Alchemical artwork that proposes a world view that demands tolerance, acceptance, and receptivity, has shapeshifting properties and is an experiment in transforming repellant forms into magnetic, alluring stuff.” -David Altmejd

The ways in which I treat the material of clay and glaze is a departure from traditional processes intend to question pre-conceived definitions of the ceramic object. I choose to work with the materials for their transformative, technical, conceptual, and metamorphic possibilities and to capitalize on ceramics’ versatility. I often view the kiln as a collaborator in the process of making where extremely high temperatures cause chemical and volatile reactions on clay and glaze surfaces. I have found great value in using ceramics and kiln processes- sometimes predictable, sometimes not- as a way of looking, knowing, and understanding the Earth’s natural transformative processes.

I pursue processes that usually foster the durability and permanence of ceramic objects in a paradoxical effort to expand and transform the possibilities of the medium for the creation of seemingly fragile, ethereal objects. I intentionally generate objects that visually display the stress of transformation.

9 David Altmejd, Isabel Venero, and Trinie Dalton, David Altmejd (Bologna: Damiani, 2014).

10 My work spans temperatures ranging from 1800-2300 degrees Fahrenheit.
Through my actions I seek to capture moments when ceramic materials become deliberate actors and agents within artistic processes and thereby entangle their audience in a web of connections. My investigation of materiality in art attempts to expand notions of time and process in relation to earth sciences by showing ways in which materials obstruct, disrupt, or interfere with feelings of stability. To accomplish this visually, I use textured elements which emerge as impure formations and unstable substances. Smooth melted pools of colored material coincide with malefic edges and bubbles appear to ooze and collect. Some elements relate to the material of the body while others appear to relate to the material of the earth. Within these material properties I explore ideas of abjection and horror and use ceramic materials to link associations between earthly matter and human nature.

Empirical observation during the making process provides me with a sense of scientific discovery and serves as metaphor in my work. I use ceramic materials to think about or to think with and act as indicators of something else. Exploring the transformations inherent in the process of their making is an attempt to push my thoughts and objects beyond material boundaries. The current environmental changes in the Anthropocene resonate in the transformation of materials in the ceramic process.

The alchemy of ceramic transformation parallels my experience in underground cave systems, where I have long witnessed the building up and tearing down of earth. My research in caves has overlapped and interacted with my kiln-firing research and has influenced me to view the ceramic process as consonant with paradoxical processes of building up and tearing down of the earth in the context of caves. These visual cues are
explored in depth as a pursuit of a problem and are used in my work to connect ideas of fragility to environmental change within the Anthropocene.

When I sculpt clay and combine melted glaze components, my process becomes a fine balance between control and happenstance as I allow the materials’ intrinsic properties to play a major role in the outcome. This balance is an attempt to be inspired by risk and unpredictability while maintaining a customized space within the kiln that will allow for material movement once extremely high temperatures are reached. My sculptures show emphasis on the physicality of the materials through the process of weathering clay with heat and water, stretching it to collapse, and pushing components to collide. These features embed layers of history in the material and suggest an object changed by forces.

I think of ceramics as a geological experience where flowing, bubbling, and fissuring create a visual language that results from the transformation of material from one form to another. It expresses the essential energy of natural processes. The works are both solid and transparent, craters and cracks in the surface contribute to a look of disintegration and an overall effect of ruin-like. Aspects of the work appear not only to fade away but also to emerge; some components are slick and glossy and new, while others are faded and matte. These binary contrasts- solid and transparent, emerging and receding, ancient and new, create an ambiguous sense of time and origin and experience. Through this I believe my sculptures can trigger the imagination of the viewer to work in contradictory ways, in various layers of meaning.

My experience examining and exploring geological cave features has activated a deep interest in the evocative and associative potential of form and the pleasure that
comes with exploring the relationship between interior and exterior. This notion is specifically explored in the sculpture *Molting*,11 where a bent over hollow void meets the average viewer at eye-level and invites a look down the interior of its open cavern. My works are perceptually and associatively mercurial. As one moves around them there are suggestions of terrestrial, geologic, oceanic, and human form, of the horrific, the tragic, the seductive, the beautiful, and the repellant. This multifaceted experience can engender a sense of anxiety, just as our insecurity in the Anthropocene does.12

I often treat ceramics like fiber and use paper as a material with a palpable three-dimensional presence rather than as a support for mark making. I soak fabric and paper in clay slip and apply the material in layers or suspend lengths which hang off edges. I also utilize wire to span distances on the clay’s surface where it forms thin lines that seem to impossibly connect one side to another. These material treatments, with their dripping, shrouding, draping, and building up of layers resonate with the appearance and processes of cave formations. This is particularly evident in the *Dripstone Series*13 where two monumentally scaled wall hanging sculptures are created through the layering accomplished by dripping liquid clay thousands of times. This construction-by-dripping takes many days to complete, a repetitive, meditative process that parallels the ages long dripping of calcined-water to create massive cave formations.

11 Figure 3: *Molting*, 2017. Soda-fired stoneware and glaze, p. 29
13 Figure 2: *Dripstone*, series with detail, 2016. Soda-fired porcelain, p. 28
The fragile components I create through a process of repetition and multiple kiln firings often appear as if they are barely held together, as if they may fall apart if one were to stand too close, or as if they are about to collapse from their own weight. The visual weight of gravity resonates with the destructive forces and threat inherent in environmental collapse, entropy, and cultural destruction. The sulking and slumped forms seem to succumb to or overcome the power of gravity, a precarious balance that is similarly characteristic of the unstable conditions of the Anthropocene landscape.

_**Stochastic Monument**_14 questions the inevitable invincibility of gravity. This sculpture differs from others in my thesis exhibition as it does not appear to be held down by the weight of gravity. Rather, its buoyant, wind-swept appearance is a triumphant nod to the Hellenistic sculpture _Nike of Samothrace_,15 a ruined sculpture from antiquity, broken down by age and experience but, simultaneously appearing to overcome them. _Stochastic Monument_, like _Nike of Samothrace_, speaks of age and ruin, but also of optimism and hope and ultimate victory.

The use of various surface textures enhances the effect of the pieces. In conjunction with classical formats such as Gothic and Renaissance archways and statues on plinths, great achievement and subsequent neglect and decay are communicated. _Stochastic Monument_16 is a tall, black stoneware sculpture, anthropomorphic in its

---

14 Figure 4: _Stochastic Monument_, 2018. Black stoneware, p. 30

15 The _Winged Victory of Samothrace_, also called the _Nike of Samothrace_, is a marble Hellenistic sculpture of Nike (the Greek goddess of victory), that was created about the 2nd century BC. Since 1884, it has been prominently displayed at the Louvre in Paris, France (Unknown 2nd century BC).

16 Figure 4: _Stochastic Monument_, 2018. Black stoneware, p. 30
leaning posture and waisted center and cephalic top that rises slightly above the height of an average person. The abstracted figure is held up by a ceramic plinth and echoes the stylistic choices of Giacometti by using a clay body that mimics bronze and has been gouged at much in the same way he treats wax and clay. Its violently gouged and clawed surface imparts a sense of primitive urgency, and combined with its classical form, creates an impression that is simultaneously ominous and auspicious.

Archways of the series *Archway for the Anthropocene* are made from annealed ceramic glaze. This material represents the highest level of material evolution within my exploration of the ceramics medium. Establishing a hierarchy of materials within my sculptures, I begin with unfired-stabilized clay, evolves to fired clay and glaze surfaces, and culminates with the use of pure glaze as a medium. This reflects my ambition to display cycles of deconstruction and reconstruction through the evolution of materials. These cycles relate to Earth’s land-forming methods and speaks broadly to the cycle of life and death found in all living things.

The annealed glaze panels build on my years of experience developing and refining this process. I begin by mixing glaze compositions that will result in vibrant colors and coarse textures. These compositions are layered together by pouring raw fluid glaze into a basin of kaolin. The kaolin allows for an intermingling of chemical reactions during the firing while isolating the fluxing event from the kiln floor so that the cooled and solidified material may be removed from the kaolin bed post-fire.

---

17 Annealing is the process of heating metal or glass, in this case glaze, and allowing it to cool slowly in order to remove internal stresses and strengthen it.

18 Kaolin is a natural occurring clay that is refractory (resistant to melting) in its nature.
For these sculptures I utilize the heat the kiln produces literally and integrate the function of heat visually within the sculptures themselves. The heat vitrifies clay components making them durable and lasting, and melts glaze components causing the material to flow and spread. All ceramic materials lie on a spectrum of melt, some materials resist while others surrender. Matching clay and glaze compositions to various temperatures allows for endless visual possibilities. I view the inside of the kiln as an expansion of the studio in terms of process, I see it as the primary space where the action of art making takes place. My studio work space is an area of preparation for the unique craft of installing and firing my sculptures. I believe this to be a highly unique process that is currently being used by very few, if any other ceramic artists. It is my biggest contribution to the field of ceramics.
ECO-ANXIETY

“You can’t study the darkness by flooding it with light.”
-Edward Abbey, *The Best of Edward Abbey*19

As humans continue to alter their world and the effects of climate change worsen, psychologists find that these alterations make people more stressed. This increase in stress also increases the development of anxiety disorders, PTSD, depression, and problems with substance abuse.20 In the U.S., psychologists saw these reactions immediately after Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy.21 In Australia psychologists observed these same reactions during the millennium drought that went on for more than a decade.22 The psychological burden is much worse for those directly affected by climate change (e.g. farmers and those who lost their homes during Hurricane Katrina) than for those who see these environmental crises happening from a distance. However, whether

21 Ahearn, A. (Host). (2017, May 2). You probably have eco anxiety you just don’t know it [Radio broadcast episode]. https://one.npr.org/?sharedMediaId=526517383:526517385
22 Ibid
we are on the frontlines or see these events unfold on social media, our brains perceive a very real threat unlike anything our species has dealt with before.\textsuperscript{23}

Eco-Anxiety is a term used to identify the increasing anxiety and concern many people are currently experiencing in relation to environmental changes and the outcomes of these changes on humanity and the world. It is a relatively new psychological affliction.\textsuperscript{24} We are after all animals. We look at the environment around us and figure out how to survive. When we see destruction, whether it’s climate change, oil spills, forest fires, species extinction, it is not surprising that we react negatively.

In the summer of 2012, California, particularly the Great Central Valley, was just beginning a five-year drought. While working as a National Park Ranger, our summer training concentrated on the effects of the drought on Sequoia National Park. In lower elevations we observed hundreds of acres of dead pine trees.\textsuperscript{25} The densely packed trees were in competition for the little water that was left in ground water reserves. Once trees become weak and vulnerable, native bark beetles begin to consume the trees cambium layer which restricts vascular growth.\textsuperscript{26} In times of severe drought, the number of trees under stress in a forest will intensify. This dramatic increase in relatively defenseless

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{25} Fig. 1 Drought-related tree mortality in Sequoia National Park, p. 27
\end{thebibliography}
trees allows beetle populations to skyrocket. I have seen this cause and effect take out hectares of trees in a matter of years.

Over time the ground cover became more sparse, and roads were often blocked by fallen trees. By 2017 fires had overtaken many areas of the dry standing fuel causing entire mountain sides to become blackened. A haze of smoke that was present for weeks at a time stopped visitors and caused employees to leave the park. During the work day I would discuss the effects climate change was having on our park with people from all around the world. I came to expect the question “What’s with all the brown trees,” or “Are these fires natural or human-made?”

During the five years that I was immersed in the Sequoia ecosystem, I had a paradoxical and complex relationship with what I was experiencing. On one hand, the relentless beauty of pristine forests and underground cave systems was awe-inspiring, while the visible effects of climate change kept me in an equal state of distress. I was experiencing cognitive dissonance, and I found myself having inconsistent thoughts about my relationship with this natural area. The forests of Sequoia National Park were a source of unparalleled perfection in my mind, yet anger consumed me, I continued to give nature walks and attempted to broach the subject of climate change without coming across as negative and abrasive.

These experiences inform much of the content I deal with in my sculpture. I make work as a reaction to my association with environmental anxiety. Surfaces and forms develop through intrapersonal analysis of conflicting levels of cognitive dissonance

27 Ibid
and psychological afflictions. The anxiety is heightened by the conflicting imagery of the overwhelming sense of wonder and discovery I experienced when exploring cave systems and the influence the five-year drought had on my psyche. These opposing emotions are seen in the contradictory arrangements of emerging and disintegrating forms and surfaces. They are emphasized in the way I capture evocative surfaces which express physical environmental pressure and use color and translucency to communicate optimism and hope. This helps me visualize the psychological relationship between the increasing evidence that irrevocable changes have occurred, and the understanding that changes can be made to remedy or slow down environmental catastrophes.28

I have created my own visual language of equilibrium- a state in which opposing forces are balanced. This balance emphasizes the vital contribution of the cycle of life and death and concurrently in deconstruction and reconstruction. I use generalized formats of ruin sculptures, sacred spaces, archways, and niches to provide a contextual setting for the icons of Eco-Anxiety I create. Generalizations of architecture operate in my work as a way to create an impression of sacredness and to attribute that to the idea of equilibrium.

Grief is the love we feel for something that we are losing. Making art is a way for me to allow the grief I have towards environmental concerns to roll through me and bring me deeply into the present moment. I attempt to visually communicate a feeling of grief within my body of work, where sculptures are linked together to create a memorial type

of setting. I do not think of my sculptures as post-apocalyptic. They are an of-the-moment reaction to "the now" and they capture emotive qualities responding to what is happening during this new geological epoch.
“It was delightful to witness here the infinite deliberation of nature, and simplicity of her methods in the production of such mighty results, such repose combined with restless enthusiastic energy. Though cold and bloodless as a landscape of polar ice, there was building going on in the dark with incessant activity. The archways and ceilings were everywhere hung with down-growing crystals, like inverted groves of leafless saplings, some of them large, others delicately attenuated, each tipped with a single drop of water, like the terminal bud of a pine tree. The only appreciable sounds were the dripping and tinkling of water falling into pools or faintly splashing on the crystal floors.”

- John Muir writing in 1894 in *The Mountains of California*²⁹

Over the last decade, a new geological epoch- the Anthropocene- has been the object of progressively intense discussions in both the scientific community and popular media. We are now living in the Anthropocene, where human activities leave a significant, if not dominant, signature on Earth.³⁰ These activities are expected to alter Earth’s topography, climate, ecosystems, and associated earth surface processes.³¹ Anthropogenic landscapes now cover great amounts of Earth’s land surface and in these landscapes, direct human disturbance of surface morphology and processes is


³¹ Ibid
significant. The increase of severe farming, industrialization, and urbanization has transformed the natural landscapes by changing topography, vegetation cover, soil properties, and water balances. Recently, various studies on human and natural systems have pointed to the importance of “coupled human-landscape dynamics,” where changes in the function of certain landscapes affect human systems. Earthquakes caused by fracking, flooding due to inverting natural water ways into dams, and controlled forest burning to imitate naturally occurring lightning fires are a few examples of these dynamic effects. The examination of human-landscape interactions in Anthropogenic landscapes reveals a real challenge for better understanding the evolution of our present-day environment.

During the creative process I often ask, what does the Anthropocene looks like? Followed by, what does the Anthropocene feel like? When translating these questions into art, I dream up dynamic, urgent, chaotic, and anxiety-ridden qualities. For me, the onset of environmental collapse is both slow and chaotic, beautiful and terrifying, it is proof that natural cycles construct and deconstruct simultaneously; where all things are intrinsically connected and affect one another even at far opposite ends of the spectrum. This system of equilibrium is no better exemplified than in cave ecology. These

---


extremely fragile ecosystems can show signs of changes happening on the surface within a matter of years. One sign of a human-landscape dynamic change I observed during my tenure researching caves in Sequoia National Park, was a shift in physical and chemical imbalances in the water that were directly related to leaching fertilizers and pesticides from illegal crop growing above rural cave systems.

I use the geologic process of cave formation as an example of a cause and effect system. Through natural processes of mineral displacement, speleothem formations, such as stalactites and stalagmites, appear when acidic carbon-rich water dissolves calcium rich bedrock under great pressure. As pressure increases, water molecules carry more calcium. Once the water reaches the unpressurized interior of a cavern, it deposits minerals in a variety of speleothem formations. This paradoxical process displays both decay and growth at play with one another.

In creating works like Molting, I evoke cave systems and by artificially creating a similar process in the studio, I highlight the paradoxically beautiful and terrifying aspects of our impact on nature. Molting appears as an abstracted form bending over and exposing a cavern-like interior. The outside surface of the sculpture is tattered with draped cloth and wire, along with hundreds of pinch marks. These marks give the viewer insight into the process of the sculptures creation and were formed as a compulsive


37 Figure 3: Molting, 2017. Soda-fired stoneware and glaze, p. 29
repetition, a way of distracting my mind and dealing anxiety. The abstracted sculpture is anthropomorphic in scale, standing just over five feet tall. It forces the viewer to contend with its visual mass at a human level and elicits empathy. Its downward pull suggests somber and mourning as if the sculpture is sulking. The contrast between its sharp interior and textured abrasive exterior is intended to be both alarming and astonishing. The ambiguous nature of these emotive qualities allows the mind to openly make sense of the form through its pareidolia- the tendency to perceive a specific, often meaningful image in a random or ambiguous visual pattern.

The aesthetics of anxiety I employ in my art making attempts to place anxiety at the very heart of the viewer’s experience. Anxiety is universal, which justifies its philosophical relevance and its place within the experience of art. Anxiety in my work is an aesthetic notion. It immediately touches on feelings of displeasure through its abrasive tactile nature. There is a catharsis in displeasure which is distinguished by my attempt to provide a certain sense of terror within the works. This relationship to catharsis through the aesthetic experience, interprets terror in a tragic way for its overarching connection to the idea of the sublime.

Anxiety aesthetics within my work are paralleled with aspects of beauty. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “beautiful” as “excelling in grace of form, charm of

---


41 Ibid, pp. 5-6
coloring, and other qualities which delight the eye… calculated to inspire awe, deep reverence, or emotion.”  

I believe my use of vibrant color and translucency are the key links to the idea of the beautiful in my work. Through careful consideration of color, I distinguish a hard contrast between subtle earth tones and coarse textures. Likewise, I use translucency of material to counterpoint opaque elements and to expose the beauty of light as it refracts through panes of glaze. I attempt to enhance the pleasure that comes from viewing beautiful elements by positioning them in close contact with horrific elements. These tactics of using opposing features—translucent and opaque, colorful and muted, beautiful and malefic—adds to the conversation of anxiety and the paradox within my work.

Edmund Burke’s writing has been very influential to my thinking and process. In *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Burke states that "terror is in all cases whatsoever… the ruling principle of the sublime." In keeping with his conception of a violently emotional sublime, his idea of astonishment was more violent than that of his predecessors: "The passion caused by the great and sublime in nature… is Astonishment; and astonishment is that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror."

As he explains the philosophical opposition of beauty and sublimity, Burke also makes the contrast between pleasure and pain the source of the two aesthetic categories-

---


deriving beauty from pleasure and sublimity from pain.\textsuperscript{44} According to Burke, the pleasure of beauty has a relaxing effect, whereas sublimity, in contrast, tightens the body.\textsuperscript{45} By using this theory, Burke links a relationship to the beautiful and sublime: "The ideas of the sublime and the beautiful stand on foundations so different, that it is hard, I had almost said impossible, to think of reconciling them in the same subject, without considerably lessening the effect of the one or the other upon the passions."\textsuperscript{46} This resonates with my philosophy and visual goals as an artist- to highlight dichotomies and draw parallels between opposing natural forces. It provides me with a way to analyze the function of paradox within my work, particularly regarding transparency and color-which seek to ascribe the ethereal, balanced with dark, ominous, and ruined features.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid, pp. 43
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid, pp. 113-114
RUINATION AND ARCHITECTURE

“The sign is ambiguous, it remains on the surface, yet does not renounce passing itself off as a depth. It seeks to make itself understood, (which is praiseworthy), but at the same time presents itself as spontaneous. Which is deceptive. It declares itself to be simultaneously intentional and irrepressible. Artificial and natural. Manufactured and discovered.” -Roland Barthes Mythologies

Ruins are a way of seeing. They have an intrinsic ability to engage our feelings about where we see ourselves in history, early or late, and in some cases, our feelings about how the world will end. Ruins can be a place where people of new civilizations look on and attach their own philosophical meaning while engaging in aesthetic and contextual atmospheres. “Ruins are models of a disintegrating collective mind and collapsing principals of the age after the end of stable belief.”

My experience with ruins has been robust and exhilarating. I have fixated on surface and substance, where histories of vanished civilizations perish, and meaning can become ambiguous and inspire the imagination. The astonishment of time transcended before my eyes is an inescapable source of inspiration. Artempo is a term used by curator Axel Vervoordt to describe objects which hold the value of time and where time becomes

47 Corinne François, Roland Barthes, "Mythologies" (Rosny: Bréal, 2009), pp. 5

art, in rooms where the passing of time is a visible presence. This term applies not only to sites of ruins but cave interiors as well. The only difference is one source began as human-made and the other by natural process. It is not a stretch to compare statues and architecture with humankinds’ ability to temporarily control or to have power over natural forces. Carved marble statues, gothic cathedrals, sites such as Easter Island or Stonehenge, and the great Egyptian Pyramids are proof of humans’ ability to overcome physical forces. That is, until time and natural weather processes return the work to material ruins.

Ruins are uplifting. Their surfaces excite the imagination, and through the mechanics of time, the mystery of their decay. “Decayed splendor is a source of curiosity and inspiration because it forces us into a realm of timelessness...” This is the key difference between ancient ruined surfaces and the artwork I create, that is deep time. The decayed splendor of surfaces I create only appear affected by time and use the additive method of building. I do however, consciously make with the idea of ruination in mind and employ many methods of material removal.

I view Stochastic Monument as well as other sculptures in my exhibition as a kind of illusory relic. They have the illusion of time and cause the viewer to make reference to the past. This format of making contemporary relics suggests the

---


51 Figure 4: Stochastic Monument, 2018. Black stoneware, p. 30
perilousness of our era. In reaching back in time and bringing forward notions of failed civilizations I relate to the potential of our own demise.

I use Gothic sensibilities in my sculptures as a way to connect the age of the Gothic to current times. The gothic is “an aesthetic of pleasurable fear,”\textsuperscript{52} where its stylistic and aesthetic appearance was developed as a way to express the cultural tribulations of the time. In William Worringer’s book \textit{Abstraction and Empathy}, he identifies two opposing tendencies infusing the history of art from ancient times through the Enlightenment. He claims that in societies experiencing periods of anxiety and intense spirituality, such as those of ancient Egypt and the Middle Ages, artistic production tends toward a flat, “abstraction,” while cultures that are oriented toward science and the physical world, like ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy, are dominated by more naturalistic, embodied styles, which he grouped under the term “empathy.”\textsuperscript{53} In my work, I can relate Worringer’s claim that societies experiencing anxiety tend towards abstraction as a way to visualize emotions of their time.

While analyzing the format of ruin sites, my work generalizes this as sculpture adorned by or in close proximity to architecture. Archways provide a place holder for sculpture, such is the case with a niche, while other times the archway is independent. In the series, \textit{Archway for the Anthropocene}, the archway itself becomes a wall-hanging


sculpture and acts as a gate or portal. The arch is a typical equilateral gothic arch with many overlapping layers that build up the surface. The ultimate effect is that of a religious or classical entry way, such as a door, gate, or arch that depicts imagery involving war or conflicting scenes of heaven and hell.54 This leaves the viewer searching in the ambiguity of the surface, generating and completing potential narratives by way of pareidolia. The archway fades in tone from light at the bottom to dark at the top.

Gradients of tone and color often appear in my work as a referent for transition.

The Archway for the Anthropocene series is on-going as I generate my thesis exhibition. I have developed Archways that utilize bright and vibrant color to lure viewers from afar and deliver a surface of decayed splendor as they are drawn near.55 The goal of this series is to continue exploring the possibilities of contradictory principles within aesthetic choices. They are presented in a boldly architectural format and are confronted on a human-scale. The inner section of the archway - the surface which the arch adorns, presents textures with geological features that allude to aerial views of the Earth’s surface. The cracked and emerging surfaces are presented as sacred landscapes acting as new iconography of the Anthropocene.

54 Examples include Lorenzo Ghiberti’s Gates of Paradise on the east doors of the Florence Baptistery (Ghiberti 1425-52) and Auguste Rodin’s The Gates of Hell, residing at Rodin Museum, Philadelphia, PA (Rodin 1925).

55 Figure 6: Archway for the Anthropocene II, series, 2018. Annealed glaze, p. 32
CONCLUSION

I see my sculptures as a reflection of one of the most critical aspects of our own history - the transformation of environment due to Anthropogenic tendencies. Making work with the philosophy that there is an undeniable truth with a synergy with the laws that govern all things, allows for my exploration of materials to display these vital laws. My practice is based on the sense that materials and techniques are in and of themselves expressive, and I regard my artistic position as a medium-specific search for potential in materials’ symbolic weight.

I use aspects of materiality that locate viewers within their corporeal selves by engaging the senses; such experiences are, naturally, unique and individual to each viewer. The aesthetic experience I seek to convey is evoked first through art’s physical components, and then through an intellectual engagement with materiality. The means of production and the degree to which process is evident in the final work also impacts how viewers experience the work. Clay has this great potential of responding to whatever forces are imposed on it and I have found a way to develop a powerful vocabulary of impacted forms using the will of clay in a direct way.

I explore contemporary ideas of sublime aesthetics through my fascination with the macabre. I find beauty in death and decay and simultaneously in life, birth, and

regeneration. My sculptures appear to have “weathered time” and engage architectural formats which act as a space to recontextualize the alchemy of ceramic materials as a profound source of spirituality. I use time to dignify destruction and use rapid transformation to give a sense of violence within landscape. I am preoccupied with the idea that time is the source of human condition, and it occurs as an underlying theme throughout my practice. Visual elements I describe as macabre deliver alteration and discomfort through a seemingly time-induced breakdown of forms. This breakdown allows me to focus conceptual efforts on tension and stress through transforming materials which imply contemporary psychological disassociations with the condition of our Earth’s natural environments.

There is a universal concept of knowing one day we will perish. My goal as an artist is to contradict the notion of permanence and is captured in my work through a consistent effort to make things fragile. My practice concurrently looks at permanence through fragility with an explorative and experimental engagement with material. Through the combination of physical forces, cultural markers, intrapersonal conflict, and contrasting elements of beauty and the macabre, I seek to symbolize the decline of our natural environment in order to conjure thoughts about the end of nature itself.

FIGURES

Figure 1: Drought-related tree mortality at a low elevation forest in Sequoia National Park. Photo by Nate Stephenson, October 2015
Figure 2: Dripstone series with detail, 2016. Soda-fired porcelain.
30 in x 40 in x 3 in (76 cm x 102 cm x 8 cm)
Figure 3: *Molting*, 2017. Soda-fired stoneware and glaze. 68 in x 32 in x 17 in (173 cm x 81 cm x 43 cm)
Figure 4: *Stochastic Monument*, 2018. Black stoneware. 84 in x 20 in x 17 in (213 cm x 51 cm x 43 cm)
Figure 5: *Archway for the Anthropocene I*, series, 2016. Porcelain, charcoal. 90 in x 42 in x 8 in (229 cm x 107 cm x 20 cm)
Figure 6: Archway for the Anthropocene II, series, 2018. Annealed ceramic glaze. 112 in x 45 in x 2 in (284 cm x 114 cm x 5 cm)


Bednarik, Robert G. "Pareidolia and Rock Art Interpretation." Anthropologie:


