

BRANCH INSPIRED TEXTURES

A Thesis

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Degree of Master of Fine Arts

with a

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Authorization to Submit Thesis

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Abstract

More often than not, people pay constant attention to issues that are unsolvable, worry about issues caused by our own activities and pay less attention to, or take for granted, the minor things that surround us like intricate patterns in our natural environment. I have always had a keen interest in nature and I appreciate the beauty of it, especially trees. My work seeks to draw attention to the aesthetic beauty of our immediate environment and how marvelous the things are that we normally overlook, walk over and kick around. This thesis provides insight into my process of using mixed media to engage the viewer through the use of textures and abstract forms that reference trees and twigs. The ultimate goal is to draw attention to found objects that are usually ignored in our immediate environment through viewer interaction and experience. My hope is that at least some will acquire new appreciations and ways of seeing and thus choose to walk slowly with softer steps.

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Table of Contents

Authorization to Submit Thesis	ii
Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments.....	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Illustration.....	vi
CHAPTER 1: Inspiration	1
CHAPTER 2: Collecting.....	10
CHAPTER 3: Creative Process.....	21
CHAPTER 4: Conclusion	38
References	43

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Artist: Eric Serritella, Title: <i>Kimono Teapot</i> , Medium: Clay Size: 21"	2
Figure 2: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Raised Up</i> , Medium: Stone ware Δ6, Size: 12" X 6"X 6", Year: 2014	2
Figure 3: Children Africa Child work, Copyright Jacques Jangoux,.....	4
Figure 4: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Pine Tea Pot</i> , Medium: Earthenware Δ04, Size: 8" X 4", Year: 2011.....	8
Figure 5: Found Objects, <i>Tree Twigs</i> , Size: Varied sizes	11
Figure 6: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Scaly Log</i> , Medium: Earthenware Δ04, Size: 12" X 8", Year: 2012.....	13
Figure 7: Artist: Kirk Voclain, Title: <i>The Hands of Time</i> ,.....	13
Figure 8: <i>Handkerchief Tree Cell</i>	14
Figure 9: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Villi- Map</i> , Medium: Paper clay and Burlap, Size: 23" X 31" Each, Year: 2012.....	14
Figure 10: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Depletion of Forest</i> , Medium: Earthenware Δ04, Size: Varied sizes, Year: 2012.....	16
Figure 11: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Unnoticed Voice</i> , Medium: Earthenware Δ04, Size: 21"X 9" X 12", Year: 2012.....	18

Figure 12: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Glazed Tiles</i> , Medium: Earthenware Δ04 glazes and nails, Size: 5" X 6", Year: 2012.	23
Figures 13(a, b, c): Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Flying Creature</i> , Medium: Earthenware Δ04, Liquid Shoe Polish and Acrylic Paint, Size: 43" X 17" X 8", Year: 2014.....	24, 25, 33
Figure 14: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Fauna</i> , Medium: Stone ware Δ6, Size: 14" X 7" X 9", Year: 2014	27
Figure 15: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Branch Out</i> , Medium: Earthenware Δ04, Shoe Polish and Dye, Size: 14" X 5" X 5", Year: 2014	27
Figure 16: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Void</i> , Medium: Stoneware Δ6, Size: 16" X 5" X 7", Year: 2014	28, 31
Figure 17: Artist: Lee Middleman, <i>Sea Foam</i> , 2010	28
Figure 18: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Grab</i> , Medium: Earthenware Δ04, Shoe Polish, Dyes, Acrylics, Size: 34" X 15" X 5", Year: 2014	30
Figure 19: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Octopustick Branch</i> , Medium: Stoneware Δ6, Size: 20" X 15" X 6", Year: 2014	32, 34
Figure 20: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Dua</i> , Medium: Paper Clay, Dye, India Ink, Shoe Polish, and Size: 66" X 29" X 17", Year: 2014.....	35
Figure 21: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: <i>Rooted</i> , Medium: Earthenware Δ04 Size: 40" X 22" X 7", Year: 2014	37

Figure 22: Artist: Jacob Commodore, Title: *Twisted Twig*, Medium: Earthenware Δ04,
Liquid Shoe Polish, Acrylic paint, Size: 30" X 10" X 8", Year: 2014 37

Figures 23-26: Prichard Art Gallery, *MFA Thesis Exhibition*, Year: 2014 39- 42

CHAPTER 1: **Inspiration**

Stemming from childhood, my work as an artist has been characterized by making and experimenting with the visual language of textures and patterns. As an adult artist, I have explored these visual elements on different surfaces primarily referencing trees and branches using clay as my usual medium. The intricacies of textures and patterns found in nature especially trees, move me to examine the physical structures I see in them. My fascination with texture has had a great influence on how I work, including the materials I use and the surface treatments I employ to finish my pieces.

Imagine fixing your eyes on what looks like a delicious meal. Your appetite is stirred and your mouth begins to water. Oddly, however, this “food” has no aroma, no taste, and no nutritional value. No doubt you would prefer to go hungry rather than eat such a “meal.” In the same vein, for us to make well-informed choices and decisions, we must actively employ, and bring into harmony, all five senses. It is a natural phenomenon for humans to satisfy their curiosity. This occurs mostly through the sense of touch; I am no exception. My work falls in between abstract and realism, with the aim of engaging the viewer to look at and examine the object thoroughly, thereby paying attention to the surface treatments. Through this engagement, viewers’ artistic sensibilities are stimulated, encouraging them to draw their own conclusions based on their past experiences and connections they may have with other surfaces. What interests me most in this approach is that it reminds the viewers about different surfaces they have previously encountered. Memories are echoed, encouraging viewers to explore past experiences and project into their future expectations of visual artistic sensibilities. Relating past reactions to one’s current artistic vision sharpens one’s focus on

their thinking processes. Instead of replicating one specific tree texture, I seek to create a range of textures so that my viewer considers the range of forms and patterns found in the many species of trees. Through the creative use of textures and patterns I am able to visually express my personal voice.

Eric Serritella is one of the artists from whom I draw inspiration. His art and my own pursue the same goal of inspiring and fostering love of nature in those viewing it. However, our work differs in production. Serritella mimics, even replicates, the appearance of specific tree conditions; his preferred method is *trompe l'oeil*, which seeks to create as realistic an appearance as possible. In my work, I strive to extract the essence of the textures in an abstract form so as to create an altogether new experience.



Figure 1: *Kimono Teapot*



Figure 2: *Raised Up*

In *Kimono Teapot* by Eric Serritella, one can clearly discern the type of tree that it depicts. He uses slips and engobes for the finishing process to maximize the realism of the of the piece's surface. The illusion of depth is manufactured by the painting techniques.

In comparison, my piece, *Raised Up*, the only surface treatment I employed was to apply black iron oxide on the green ware. When bisque fired the clay turns brown, the black iron oxide finish blends with the fired clay, giving the surface a matte finish. This finishing creates naturalness, without stark realism. The viewer's mind is navigated through the carved lines of the piece, evoking a strong sense of movement and offering exploration of the texture's depth.

The motivation for creating my pieces in a style merging realism and abstraction, such as is seen in *Raised Up* is based on childhood experiences in my native Africa. In my experience, manufactured, brightly colored and realistic toys were not readily available to be purchased in stores and even if they were, our parents could not afford them. Thus, we were compelled to make our own toys out of objects found in our surroundings.

At the tender age of five or six years old I started my exploration with art. Considering the copious rains in my homeland, our primary method of having fun as children was playing in the mud, especially during rain storms. Sometimes we would go out to the forest, not only to admire nature, but also in search of firewood for cooking, snails and wild fruits.



Figure 3: *Children carrying mud, helping in the construction of a wattle-and-daub house.*

This was the time we used to fashion makeshift household utensils and to build little cottages where we would play; it also served as a hiding place from the scorching sun. It was indeed a “home away from home”.

Clay, like water and sand, has a natural appeal and I enjoyed playing with it when I was a child because I was attracted to its ability to be formed as I wished, rather than scribbling with markers, crayons and paint brushes at hand. As a child, I loved playing in sandy and muddy areas, using my fingers to draw on the ground. Playing with clay became a series of experiences that subsequently informed my current work. Even though I was young, it was fun and enjoyable to pound, pinch, roll, flatten, tear, squeeze, coil, stretch, squash, twist, and bend clay into all sorts of shapes, forms and sizes to satisfy my curiosity. I made many objects even though they were eventually broken. The pleasure of creating something was not spoiled by the inevitability of the subsequent loss. There is no doubt that there is enormous satisfaction to be gained from the craft of making objects from clay.

In the three years that I have been working on this degree, I have gone through quite a number of processes; including experimentation with and exploration of textures using trees as a reference and clay as material. I have tried different clay bodies and examined their shrinkage levels in an attempt to familiarize myself with my new environment and to get to know the materials available. This was crucial for me because when I was a student in Ghana, processed or manufactured clay was not available. In the United States clays are readily available to students the manufacturer has already determined the tensile strength of each clay body, making it much easier to determine which clay body would be most appropriate for a particular piece of art work. On the contrary, I was trained to mine clay for all projects, both during my school years and when I started practicing, preparing them from scratch to make it workable. Determining the tensile strength of clay was always a nightmare; clay was sourced from different locations, so the clays responded differently to my techniques. Using a firewood kiln added another capricious element to the process. While in the U.S., I have been exposed to a wide range of clay bodies, experimenting and checking the plasticity and shrinkage levels of the processed clay available. The test results have allowed me to achieve the desired dimensions for each piece I create. I use an old fashioned way of testing, by forming a roll or a coil out of a lump of clay and then making a little arc with the roll. The clay is not plastic enough to work with if it breaks or cracks as a result of that bend.

I've explored different building techniques and other processes such as throwing, slab building, modeling, pinching, and pebbling. Sometimes I combine two or more techniques to attain the desired shape or form. Combining methods is also an effective way to control the density or weight of the piece. In order to enrich my forms, processes and the dialogue between the piece and the viewer, I have broadened my knowledge through research of and

experimentation with different surface treatments. While the research is still ongoing, I must admit that some degree of success has been achieved where other experiments have failed.

Again, glazing as an important aspect of ceramics, was unfortunately an unfamiliar process for me. While I had studied the theory behind the chemical compositions of some glazes in Ghana, I never had the opportunity to use it in practical applications. I was flabbergasted at the massive variety of glazes available when I started my program, as though I were lost in a new forest. I eagerly delved into hands-on experimentation with the chemical processes of glazing, learning how each glaze reacts with the intense heat of the kiln. Now, I not only find it easy to use glazes, but every firing becomes a new experience for me because of the variety in color and texture that comes as a result. This enhanced my desire to experiment even more, using equipment such as an electric potter's wheel and electric kilns to which I did not have access in Ghana.

When I look back at my earlier experiences in ceramics and compare them with the new equipment I am able to use during my master's program, I see that my work methods developed to include more complicated pieces due to having access to the electric wheels and electric kilns.

I wanted to go beyond my comfort zone to become more proficient in different techniques, so I decided to start building with slabs, a method that I had used infrequently. Becoming proficient with multiple media and methods of clay production enabled me further incorporate my experience with trees into my body of works. With this in mind, one of the first pieces I made is the piece below, *Pine Teapot*. I used an unusual method of building the pot by using slabs because a teapot is typically noted for its oval and smooth edges. I wanted to portray a

trunk-like tree structure with rough ends, and at the same time avoid a perfect cylindrical form. The centrifugal force of a wheel naturally creates a smooth single shape, whereas by using the slab technique I am able to form the ribbed texture I desired.

My motive was to create a remembrance experience of nature from the user's past. The commonality of the teapot and the users' past experiences make the teapot special and memorable. This approach of building, of course, brings the structural integrity of the pot in question, but when the slab is joined properly with slip from the same clay body, any tendency to leak will be avoided. Chemically speaking the same clay bodies will bond together strongly; different clay bodies will usually not bond tightly together therefore a vessel would leak.

In my first project, I used some cardinal features of the pine tree, which is also the most common tree in the state of Idaho. The concept was to find ways to bridge the gap or find a common interest with respect to my process and passion. This idea reminds me of home, how I used to play and running through the forest, climbing trees with friends and hanging washed clothes to dry on logs. So in an attempt to rekindle the joy of my childhood fun with the pine, the teapot I first made was textured with bark from a pine tree. A teapot, or a mug as we refer to it in Ghana, is one of the utensils we use almost every day, either for personal use or for sharing with family members. It's something that we encounter daily, a routine activity in which we engage in Ghana. So, using this pot daily is indirectly likened to indirectly interacting with nature. As tea is made with water, which reflects the brilliant blue skies of Ghana, the blue of my teapot relates to the contents and the overhead beauty of a forest. Looking closer, one frequently sees blue reflected in the individual needles of a pine tree.



Figure 4: *Pine Teapot*

Using the real bark textures of the tree, to me, authenticate the piece and makes me feel that nothing is missing as compared to the original tree.

Carving onto the teapot would of course, add some additional rich details, but doing so would have defeated my intended purpose for the piece. The purpose is to remind users about their surrounding natural environment through their sense of touch, in other words mimicking the pine tree. The pot is also meant to portray a constant long lasting love for one's homeland; especially when one is in a distant land or experiencing life outside of one's normal environment.

Imagine a native Idahoan, a person who has grown up among trees, who has moved to an urban area where there are no or few trees; using such a tea pot will serve as a constant reminder of home. A person who loves nature like myself, having access to a functional artifact such as the teapot will experience an interaction with nature daily as a result of one's routine use of the teapot. This same teapot can also serve as an educational resource to people whose family memories focuses on experiences in the pine tree forest. Many first and second generations will be able to cherish historical accounts of the Idaho forest, even though they have never visited. While the teapot is not the tree, its texture shows the mimesis of the pine tree. My hope is that people will view trees the way I see them and enjoy their different surface qualities, hence the teapot.

CHAPTER 2: **Collecting**

The aptitude to feel, touch, and examine the things around me has had a great influence on my artistic process. Through the sense of touch, we can detect different textures as well as temperatures of varying degrees. Our skin allows us to detect whether something is squishy, wet, slimy, smooth, rough, hard, soft, fluffy, spiky, ridged, hot or cold in relation to our body temperature. The sense of touch lets us experience the shape, size and texture of everything around us. The power of touch led me to the collection of natural objects, especially twigs and branches from our environment; this I have done since childhood. I have collected tons of twigs, branches and other natural objects, such as shells. I have become engrossed in examining the intricate details of these objects. The experience that comes from these sensations always captures my emotional attention. I spend time with these objects, studying and examining their textures, patterns, and other features to the point that I begin to see things that have similar surfaces and forms. These may include, but are not limited to, the joints of the human body, or perhaps some sort of organism or an animal.



Figure 5: *Found Objects*

My involvement in tree climbing as a form of leisure during my childhood laid the foundation for my later appreciation of the elements and characteristics of the things I find in nature.

Currently, I collect twigs that display fascinating texture, form, color, and other elements of nature. It primarily reminds me of places I have visited and surfaces that I have felt before, in fact it makes me homesick sometimes. I am most interested in the form and surface qualities of these objects. I spend a lot of time walking in the arboretum searching for twigs and

branches that have gestural and expressive forms. I spend an average of two to three hours each week looking for these objects because they are the very things from which I draw inspiration for my ceramic processes.

I am fascinated with the surface texture of branches, especially those that relate to the human body. Textures and patterns are found in both our natural and man-made environments. In nature, every living thing changes in appearance as it grows over time. The particular aspect of this ongoing change is its surface texture. This natural process will develop time and again in the same manner with no outside interference. This is equally noticeable in animals, trees and humans.

My work entitled *Scaly Log*, reminds me of changes that primarily occur in plants and on the human body, the differences and similarities between these two living things actually informed this piece. I am interested in the patterns that occur as a result of aging and the change that goes on in our body as well as in trees. As plants grow, the surface texture changes, it builds up and becomes thicker. The patterns also become more elaborate and sometimes overlap each other; volume increases, and becomes tougher and stronger. Plants and humans have similar growth patterns; the image *The Hands of Time* by Kirk Voclairn shows the transition from a hand of his two-month-old daughter and eighty-four year old grandmother. One can clearly see the contrast between the wrinkled hands and the smooth baby skin.



Figure 6: *Scaly Log*



Figure 7: *The Hands of Time*

I want my viewers to recognize and appreciate the beauty that exists on these two surfaces and be reminded of the ever-changing process that exists between trees and humans. It reveals the contrasting effect that time has on us; while trees grow to be stronger, humans experience the exact opposite—a weakening.

As much as I am interested in tree bark, the cellular structure of a tree is equally important to me. There is a relationship between the structure of a tree in Figure 8 and the pattern of a village settlement in my home country as depicted in Figure 9. Their relationship is that of a contrast between their shapes and sizes. How they attached to and detached from, each other creates a nice sense of negative space. These structures have inspired me to make art works that reflect such relationships. The layout of a village has no formal arrangement, houses and sheds are scattered around, whereas the structure of a tree is predictable. Usually one or two big trees are left untouched to provide shade and to serve as a center where community elders meet to settle family disputes.

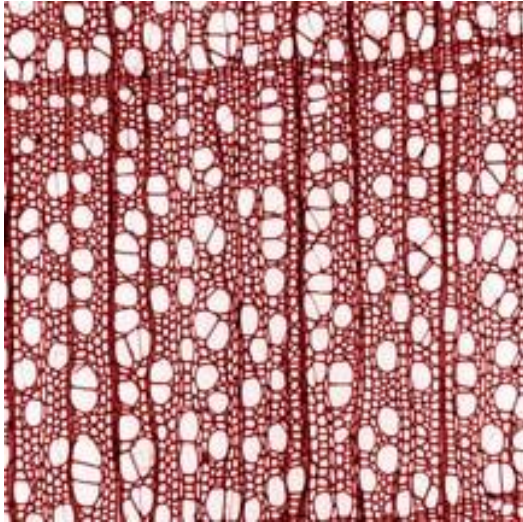


Figure 8: *Handkerchief Tree Cell*

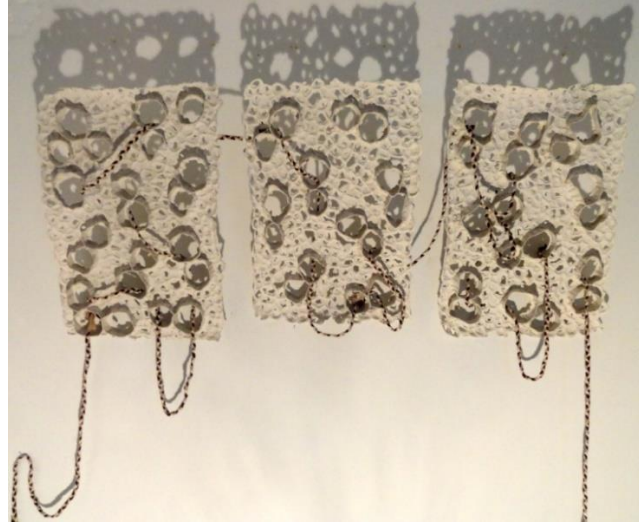


Figure 9: *Villi-Map*

The handkerchief tree cell coupled with my experience of village life informed my piece *Villi-Map*. The general layout of a typical village is such that you will find first, second, and third generations living in the same locality. I depicted the main buildings with the big round portions. Some of the buildings are attached, others are not. The attached buildings are for the parents. When the children grow, they build their own house and live there, but they continue to carry out their primary responsibility of taking care of their family. It is most likely that the whole village will be for one family. My piece represents three family villages. The woven fabric connecting the villages signifies that humans are social creatures and we depend on each other for survival. I connected the fabric from one village to the other to suggest one can cross boundaries without any fear because of the cordial relationship that usually exists among the families. The shadow cast signifies the resolution the village heads make every year to urge their families to leave covetousness and disagreement behind and to always think about how they can improve on their lives to the betterment of society.

Another pressing issue that has also influenced my work is deforestation and illegal logging. The illegal act of cutting down trees has become one of the most common offences in Ghana and Africa as a whole, it usually happens in the rural areas. In Ghana for instance, the reason behind the cutting down of trees is often for producing charcoal, pasture for livestock, farms, urban or industrial purposes. The cutting down of trees, in the eyes of the law, is determined to be either legal or illegal, however, both the legal and illegal actions are having a drastic effect on the nation, since they do not involve proper reforestation activities. The forest place is left bare, mostly with the notion of waiting for nature to reproduce these trees again, which takes many years, even decades to do so.

Deforestation also affects the changes in weather, which can result in extreme drought or famine in some lands, as well as intense flooding and soil erosion in other lands. This endangers the lives of many other living organisms and micro-organisms that depend on trees, driving them to their extinction, throwing off the balance of our planet's ecosystem. These changes affect the surfaces of trees as they reforest the land.



Figure 10: *Depletion of Forest*

In line with this pressing issue, I have formed tree stumps using different types of clay to depict varied species of trees. The stumps are formed to suggest different ways by which trees can be endangered through, say, flooding, wind and human activity. Figure 10 vividly portrays the brutalization of a once majestic forest also, it demonstrates how excessive human activity can adversely affect, even endanger human life, depriving them of such basic necessities as clean air and water. The scale of these stumps also has an impact on the viewer as one navigates through the artwork; it triggers the viewer to think about what is missing in such an environment, possible cause and effect, the fragility, the scale at which these practices affect our future. In general, trees benefit the environment so much more than we humans can imagine. Trees are living creatures, as are we, and they need our care and protection just as

we need them. Trees are not just beautiful in appearance; their existence on Earth is significant as well.

The importance of our forests cannot be over emphasized. The forest produces both tangible and intangible benefits. To have a forest is a blessing, this is why Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India from 1966-1984, once said, “*When the last tree dies, the last man dies.*” Even though there is no concrete scientific proof to back up this statement, looking at some of the devastating effects of deforestation confronting both public and private sectors of society is evidence enough.

My work seeks to assist my viewers to not only to be compelled to preserve our trees, but also to focus on the beauty of the naturally appealing textures and patterns found on them. The scale of the work in Figure 10 is effective because, as one navigates through, it forces the viewer to crouch or sit by it to pay close attention to the details on the surface. It helps the viewer to appreciate and to make connections, to our natural environment, and especially about the possible causes of deforestation and ways to prevent or minimize that from happening. As I walk through the space, I personally feel for these stumps and I endeavor to put myself in that situation. This actually led to my creating a voice for these speechless creatures, to personify the stumps.

The piece *Unnoticed Voice* is not just an ordinary piece of wood; it contains a character, emotion, feeling, sentiment and above all, nature. I try to sympathize with the trees and imagine the pain and suffering they endure.



Figure 11: *Unnoticed Voice*

It makes me think of a person who is helpless and furious, the stump seems to go along with the concept of frustration and torture. If I were in the position of this tree and were being tortured, cut down, or even gnawed at, I would be extremely angry, and would most likely display my actions in such a way of bitterness. Whenever I look at this work, I can't help but think of someone who is in severe pain and crying out for help. This piece immediately makes me feel somber and sympathetic, especially when I consider how devastating and unknown the pain really was. I resolved to use throwing techniques for this vessel-like form that has been altered for an important reason: to create a sense of void that occurs when trees are cut down.

I chose to throw this piece because the fluidity of the design matches the malleability of clay, enabling me to distort the cylinder, thus reflecting the pain the tree might experience. The remaining three teeth illustrate the disadvantage trees experience in their struggle against mankind's greed. The other methods of production do not lend themselves to creating this type of sensitivity.

My intention here is to draw my viewers' attention to the effects of deforestation and how we can help fill the emptiness created by our own activities or from a natural disaster. I altered the vessel to have human features so that my viewers can easily relate to the piece and have some sort of feeling or affection for it. This has reminded me of a tragic incident that hit our family like a tornado when I was young. I experienced devastation through a bush fire of about 3,000 acres of a cocoa plantation and 1,000 acres of a mixed crop farm that belonged to my grandfather. At that time, the cocoa plantation was the backbone of the family. The farm was the food basket for both immediate and extended family. This heartbreaking experience of mine became the turning point of my future career. I had always had the dream of becoming an accountant, but this tragedy motivated me to want to become an artist instead. Since then my perspective on trees has changed and has had a great influence on my work as an artist. This has led to my keen interest about our natural environment, hence the need for preserving trees.

The goal is to observe, document, and share with the viewer ways in which this may or can exist with regard to our environment and help them appreciate what is around them, thus paying more attention to immediate surroundings as viewers go about their daily chores. The surface treatment is open to interpretation and it can be likened to a word or sign or even a language.

“A word (or in general any sign) is inter-individual. Everything that is said, expressed, is located outside the soul of the speaker and does not belong only to him. The word cannot be assigned to a single speaker. The author (speaker) has his own inalienable right to the word, but the listener has his rights, and those whose voices are heard in the word before the author comes upon it also have their rights (after all, there are no words that belong to no one).”

- M. Bakhtin (1986)

CHAPTER 3: Creative Process

Throughout my process, I create forms that I find aesthetically pleasing and generate the viewer's initial interest in them, through the use of particularly familiar materials, such as clay, burlap, shoe polish color and glaze. When I form clay or clay mixtures into nature's shapes and patterns, the clay reflection of the branch will prompt the viewer to recall tree branches they have seen. My processes rely heavily on modeling and carving. These processes work best for the twigs and branches that I create because of the unfathomable qualities clay possesses. Clay is the most elementary of materials and one of the most useful. Everyone has a personal reaction or relationship to this versatile material. A portion of the content of my artwork is derived from the process itself and from the environment in which I work. When speaking about how our environment can influence our work, F. Carlton Ball states "*Every potter will produce something that is distinctly his own without consciously trying because of where he works and what he selects to work with.*"

Similarly, when I am making the gestural marks on my forms, I turn to grab any available tool on which I can lay hands without thinking through the result of the mark. This approach of working helps me create forms with unique and varied surface texture; it also imparts individuality to each piece.

Every ceramist has his own particular way of working: approaches, choices in terms of clay bodies, glazes and other finishing processes. These informed choices usually stem from one's background experience in that discipline, what influences they have had, the environment and even resources available in a particular period of time. For example, in both high school and

college, I always prepared my clay from scratch, as there was no processed packaged clay that specified the maturing temperature required for each specific clay body. So because of that, I have always preferred to blend my own clay bodies for my works. Most of the works I presented in my thesis exhibition are all a mixture of different clay bodies.

I made these choices for a number of reasons: to decrease the plasticity of the body, to make the clay more open, and to aid in drying thereby decreasing shrinkage. My choices with regard to clays have a direct influence from this quote by Eleanor Roosevelt “*One’s philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes... and the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.*” I must admit that some amount of success has been achieved from my approach of mixing different clays together; there are indeed some failures. I have lost some of my best pieces through exploding, which may be caused by improper wedging, foreign materials or a difference in moisture content.

Another process I would like to discuss is glazing. Again, before I started this program, I had no experience with glazes. Unfortunately mixed glazes were not available in Ghana, where I spent my four years of undergraduate school. We could only study the theoretical aspects of glazing; therefore I had little interest in glazing my works. By now I have experimented with firing some glazes and have had interesting successes. However, firing glazes continues to be a nightmare for me because I cannot accurately predict the outcome. The figure below shows some of my first glaze test tiles.



Figure 12: *Glazed Tiles*

Despite this fantastic result, I decided not to glaze all of the works in my thesis exhibition, but rather do something most ceramists try to avoid, that is combining paint instead of glaze with ceramics. The relationship between glaze and clay is expected; establishing a relationship between paint and clay is quite different. I decided on this because of the nature of my work. I want each piece to reflect the environment and the interaction with human communities. Both communities and the environment are complex; to better represent their diversity I included a variety of unusual finishes. As a viewer approaches each piece, I expect them to relate to the textures and colors in the artwork.

I realized that I have more control over paint than glaze because I can always paint over it, or change colors to suit my intended purpose, whereas glazes always come with surprises. One cannot have absolute control over their outcome. The method of application and the consistency of the glaze mixture can affect or influence the total outcome of the expected result.

The works I have exhibited in partial fulfillment of the MFA program vividly portray my process of creating as a ceramist. Even though ceramic sculptures can be constructed using various building techniques, I decided to employ the technique of modeling for my pieces,

because it gives opportunity to add different clay bodies to the mass and to manipulate the form to the desired shape. Ultimately this gives me ample room to build and make alterations if necessary to my satisfaction.

The figure below, entitled *Flying Creature*, as the name denotes, has some essence of a creature that cannot readily be identified. Looking at the overall form and shape of the piece, with an elongated out-stretched limb coupled with the underneath spaces, it illustrates a creature. The surface treatment references the environment where it exists. The lower part, painted brown suggests to the viewer that it was buried in the soil or the original object was found half way in the ground. The top references moss in a wet state due to the sheen I added.



Figure 13 (a): *Flying Creature*

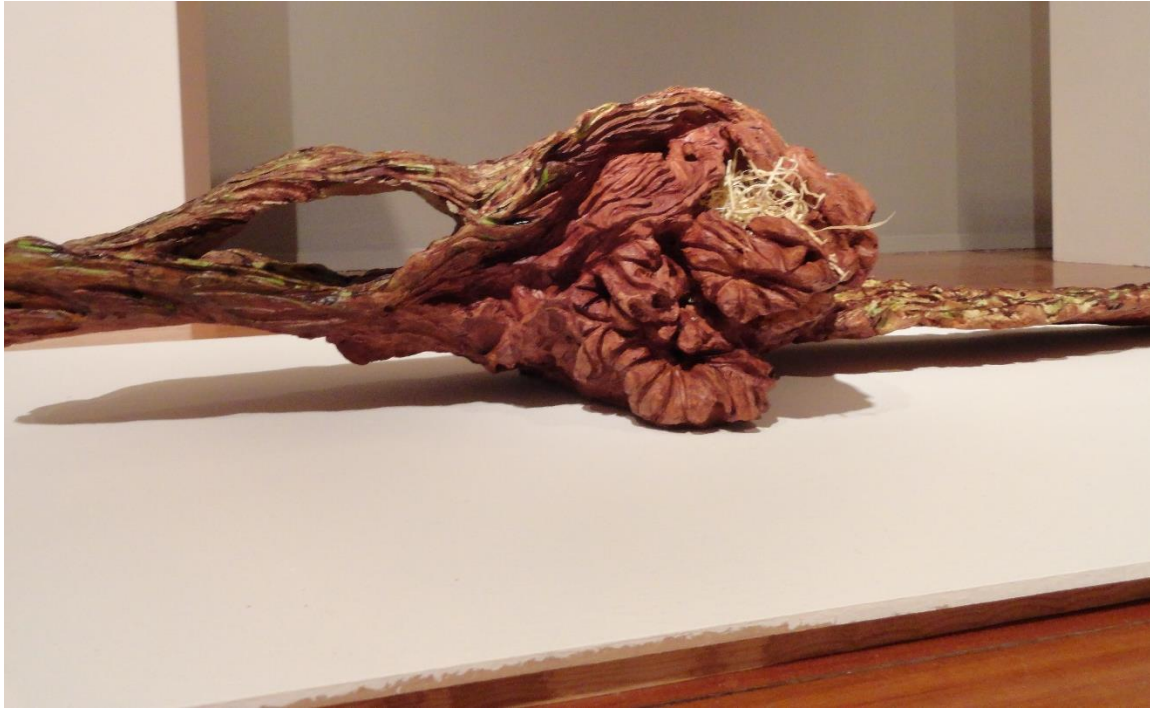


Figure 13 (b): *Flying Creature*

The way the piece is displayed on the ground helps the viewer to be more observant when walking in and around their immediate environment and compels them to crouch down to take a critical look and admire these little twigs. Viewers responded this way during the show.

The space in the form filled with wood shavings gives the impression that some sort of creature might live there, but we don't know what. The motif behind that is to reinforce the idea of interdependency among humans, trees, and other creatures. This particular work suggests a flying creature that has met his demise, but continues a useful, lifeless existence as a dwelling place for creatures still alive. The shavings could serve as a cushion and the carved place as protection; they could be found and used as shelter by many insects or even snakes.

As all artists hope, my work should be viewed as a representation of my inner thoughts. As with all pieces, a viewer will also contribute their own thoughts and personal views to the interpretation of the piece. Any piece of art work is open to multiple interpretations in a way that visually evokes a challenge to the viewer depending on their past experiences, interests and curiosity about their environment. I welcome any interaction with viewers to understand their thoughts and feelings. This experience may help me expand my work in the future.

When one compares the piece *Fauna* with *Branch Out*, Figure 14 and 15 respectively, you will notice a sharp contrast between the two pieces in respect to the finishing, detailing, and size. Both forms have dynamic negative space and exterior profiles that help viewers to discover the life or the character in the form. During the discovery process, it reminds the onlookers of surfaces they have encountered before, and how the surfaces relate to what they are experiencing. I like the way some portions of the form touch the ground and elevated parts portray the journey or changes that have happened to the plant. This can equally be compared to the journey of life, our ups and downs; everyone needs some sort of support to make it through life.

As evidenced by its lighter color *Branched Out* is clearly a younger piece than *Fauna*. In fact, *Fauna* appears to have been settled into the soil long enough to have reached a state of petrification, whereas *Branch Out* is still in process of changing through decay. As an individual piece of tree, fallen to the ground, *Branch Out* will eventually achieve the look of *Fauna*. As an artist I appreciate the process a branch undergoes in becoming broken and enjoy illustrating that to my viewers. Throughout my life, I have examined many broken branches and the patterns that are created as the branch decays. That is why I so much enjoy working with these forms.

The Charcoal-like appearance of *Fauna*'s skin suggests it could serve as charcoal for fire, used for warmth or for cooking. I use the term skin, because, as skin covers, protects and forms part of the human body, likewise the glaze oxide on *Fauna* covers the true nature of the wood and serves as a protection. Symbolically, this represents the truth that, one cannot judge one's true self by looking at one's outward appearance. We can compare *Fauna* to charcoal, to demonstrate the value of maturity. Charcoal burns more quickly than wood, because it has gone through refinement by fire, the appearance of *Fauna* represents the refined state of quickly burning charcoal. In terms of its ability to burn, *Branch Out* represents an unrefined piece of wood not having gone through the stresses experienced by *Fauna*. Therefore, when we compare *Fauna* and *Branch Out* with ourselves, we find a mature state of matter in *Fauna* representing the years of practical value and wisdom an experienced human has achieved – a state yet to be reached by *Branch Out*.



Figure 14: *Fauna*



Figure 15: *Branch Out*

I used Manganese oxide for the surface treatment on the *Fauna*, with the idea of revealing and concealing, because the oxides are a thin coating compared with normal glazes that fire thicker. The thicker glazes have the tendency of sealing all the beautiful expressive marks.

The oxide reveals the textures serving as a skin, a bond that protects the inner material; it can be likened to tree bark, in that the chemical skin protects the piece as human skin protects the flesh, blood and bones.

In *Branch Out*, Figure 15, I decided to use shoe polish for finishing because it simulates the richness and naturalness of wood. The way the clay body absorbs the shoe polish and is penetrated by the material, reminds me of when a plant is watered. It contrasts live and dead portions of the plant, becoming like an injured creature.

The negative space underneath the work makes it feel light instead of massive and provides an opening for a viewer to explore the hole even more intriguing. This is important because it invites the viewer into the artwork.



Figure 16: *Void*



Figure 17: Lee Middleman's *Sea Foam*

My work *Void*, can be compared to Lee Middleman's work *Sea Foam* in regard to the carving. In each case the carving echoes the shape of the work and defines the form.

The viewer is moved about the work by the energy of the lines. Shadows caused by the environment's light change the viewer's experience. Movement around the piece enriches the reaction of the viewer. The hole that goes through *Void* can be related to the void created in a forest when trees are cut down. Regarding Middleman's approach, he says,

"I often adjust the carving to reflect the changing shape. Sometimes this [is] done by change [changing] the tool I am using. In other cases, I can achieve this effect by simply allowing the carving process to respond to the expanding or contracting shape. A texture used on only a portion of the surface can highlight the shape or add interest.

No two pieces are quite identical. I think the variations in hand-made textures give the piece energy and acknowledge the nature of the process."

Middleman's comments reflect the approach that I take when in creating my own ceramics.

For example, *Void* is especially brilliant and glossy from the lacquer I used to finish it. As a mirror elevates the importance of a room, so the lacquer elevates the sophistication of *Void* and imparts elegance to the artist complete body of work.

In the forms below, I begin by exploring the exterior shape of a found object, examining the natural shape, form and texture. Putting it aside, I then form my own version of what I have seen, rendering the shape, form, and texture from my experience with each particular piece. A shift in scale gives me, the artist, a unique familiarity with my chosen branch or twig, because each one of us sees differently. Therefore, I am able to guide the viewer's experience, to consider the details I deem important. It is a method of interpreting nature's message. In Figures 16 and 18, I displayed an actual twig along with my artwork, which is a scaled up version. Displaying the smaller, natural form with my clay version, aids the viewer in understanding part of my process, focusing attention on the textural aspect of the subject and its patterns. I find viewing both sizes is important to picturing the real forest from which the pieces come. Several times above I have mentioned my childhood experiences, a viewer who is not so familiar with the forest is better able to understand the scale of the forest by seeing the larger piece.



Figure 18: *Grab*



Figure 16: *Void*



Figure 19: *Octopustick Branch*

My work focuses on a variety of lifestyles. In *Octopustick Branch*, I have created an imaginary creature, which could be a realistic octopus or a combination of other animal forms we can imagine. The deep carving indicates a complex head from which we as humans can extract many living qualities or thoughts. Art has the ability to stimulate one's imagination,

to blend their experiences with new ideas and ways of viewing objects. That is why an appreciation of art requires time and consideration.

The red portion of the piece represents the blood spilled in the battle for life; the blue portion represents blood flowing within the body. The red portion of this imaginary creature also represents the agony these silent creatures would have endured as a living tree and later as an artifact. The claw-like structure on the right symbolizes a result of a struggle with other creatures. The red indicates a stressful condition; the blue, on the other hand, indicates a peaceful, healthy condition, wherein the blood flows calmly through the veins unopened from struggle. Human life experiences both of these extremes, thus building a bridge between these clay forms and our own lives, making these pieces personal.



Figure 13 (c): *Flying Creature*



Figure 19 (a): *Octopustick Branch*

The fracture in *Flying Creature*, Figure 13(c) above demonstrates two simultaneous conditions, that is, the ability of living creatures to absorb injury, then endure without treatment and carry-on as if nothing had happened. In this case *Flying Creature* has sustained an unintentional, visible mark of struggle, a fracture. Whereas the break in *Octopustick Branch*, Figure 19(a) exposing the life-sustaining blood is a dramatic, intentional, external severing of the creature, from which it might not recover. However, *Octopustick Branch* appears to be healing because the clean cut shows no evidence of blood continuing to flow. The external intervention reflects the damage mankind imposes on a forest by careless

logging or clear cutting without man's replanting, the forest may not heal as *Flying Creature* would heal and carry-on.



(Uncontrolled)

Figure 20: *Dua*

(Controlled)

In Figure 20, entitled *Dua*, I have explored an entirely different approach, requiring alternate materials: paper clay, burlap, fabric dye, black shoe polish and India ink. This exploration was driven out of my desire to see the harmony that can be obtained by using a common, everyday material to create a mimesis of tree bark. In this process I mixed approximately a ratio of 90% paper to 10% clay. The reason for using the clay in this manner was to bond the paper

together and stiffen it, thereby making a more uniform structure. The strength comes from the interweaving of multiple layers of paper, which also makes a desirable texture. In order to achieve a realistic view of the barks depth, I employed two methods of layering the paper, one controlled and one uncontrolled. In the case of what I call controlled layering of paper, after it has been soaked in clay and water, I positioned several strips of paper with a help of a tool to give the look of a tree bark that grows in ridges. To replicate a different species of tree bark I used a more free form method of forming the paper. Again I soaked the paper in clay and water, then I evenly distributed the substance to create a bark similar to a pine tree, a reference I used in creating my *Tea Pot*, mentioned above.

The darkness of the finishes harkens to the appearance of trees that have gone through a bush or forest fire. The black colors are achieved using India ink, black shoe polish and acrylic paint. The naturalness of the color variations result from combining these substances. This process reinforces my notion about the use of materials that nothing is useless in the field of art and often, everyday supplies can be manipulated to produce beautiful forms beyond ones imagination.

My experimentation illustrates my thought that clay is a material with many applications; it can be used by itself or mixed with other materials, such as in the creation of *Dua* (illustrated above). I was excited to learn that mixing clay with wet paper gave me a new medium that could form similar to clay, but it does not need to be fired. Therefore I can make larger pieces while continuing my artistic exploration of branches and twigs. My intention is to continue my ceramics expressions made with the clay using other materials. I can achieve effects that appear quite similar on both the mixed substance and the fired clay by using paints, India ink.



Figure 21: *Rooted*



Figure 22: *Twisted Twig*

Unlike most ceramicists, I chose to “break the rule” of usually finishing pottery and ceramics with glaze. *Rooted*, Figure 21, is glazed and is shown in two different positions. *Twisted Twig*, Figure 22, is not glazed, but finished with paints and shoe polish of different colors.

The panoply colors and interplay of light enhances the depth of the pieces’ exteriors. Their look changes according to their position, relating to lighting effects and the type of finish. These effects are compelling reasons for my experimenting with color and materials. There are multiple methods of finishing ceramic work beyond traditional glazes. All of my experimentations have proven the effectiveness of applying non-traditional finishing methods

CHAPTER 4: Conclusion

As a child I loved the bush and forest around me, I paid special attention to its details, developing the ability to see like an artist. My goal is to introduce others to my beloved wildlands through my artwork.

When I was a child we did not have expensive manufactured toys, my friends and I turned to the many twigs and sticks to act as our imaginary toys. We climbed the trees, swung from ropes tied to their strong branches and hid from each other behind the bushes. This brought us face-to-face with the textures I grew to cherish.

Ceramics offer a malleable medium to combine the look and feeling of the forest I love and my childhood joy, which naturally matured as I became an adult. It also reflects patterns of light which show highlights and depths creating more texture. In my thesis I explored other media which also enabled me to visualize for others the bush and forest.

The sometimes unpredictable outcomes of ceramics and glazes never cease to amaze me. I experimented with multiple finishing techniques. Mixing wet paper pieces with diluted clay offered a beautiful material with which I could present the texture of bark and bare sticks and twigs. It is as malleable as clay, but different as it does not lend itself to work on a wheel. All of the media with which I work requires me to form shapes with my hands; intimately involving me with the pieces, a closeness I always felt in the bush and forest.

It is a privilege to be able to speak for nature through ceramics and other clay products, assisting viewers of my work to see nature's reality in detail, to draw from it, and to present

my view and experiences. This is an art field I can explore for years to come and teach to inquisitive students, thus impacting the students' development as artists.



Figure 23: Prichard Art Gallery, *MFA Thesis Exhibition*



Figure 24: Prichard Art Gallery, *MFA Thesis Exhibition*



Figure 25: Prichard Art Gallery, *MFA Thesis Exhibition*



Figure 26: Prichard Art Gallery, *MFA Thesis Exhibition*

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