

Artifacts of Memory

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the

Degree of Master of Fine Arts

with a

Major in Art

in the

College of Graduate Studies

University of Idaho

by

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May 2018

Authorization to Submit Thesis

This Thesis, submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Arts with a Major in Art and titled “**Artifacts of Memory**,” has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates below, is now granted to submit final copies to the College of Graduate Studies for approval.

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Abstract

This body of work consists of mixed media drawings accompanied by 3D printed vessels. The “artifacts” are the materials—earth pigments, ochres and paper, as well as processes, pigment application, drawing and technical notation, pastel work and gestural mark making. The artworks are metaphors for memory, experience and emotional processing. The geometrical constructs are stand-ins for the increasing complexity of our thoughts, emotions and experiences as dealt with in a rationalistic way. The color ground as a layer begins the metaphor of our sensual, emotional selves as rooted in our natural beings, while the expressive color figures are our more complex human emotions. These layers are assembled, just as our memories are assembled; the artifacts become the drawing, they become us.

Acknowledgements

With much gratitude, I'd like to thank my committee, for their kind and constant shepparding on a more focused path, especially when I kept trying to go off after new "squirrels."

More specifically, I'd like to thank Miranda Anderson for guiding me through the design process and creating of my furniture piece, The Bone Chair.

Sally Machlis, thank you for being a Sunbeam, reflecting back to me the light of kindness and Zen, but also for helping me—repeatedly—to ignore those squirrels and their alluring colors and materials.

Delphine Keim. I first met you at a late November or early December grad student critique in 2015. You asked me "Who are you?" That catalyzed the conversation that I was unable to start on my own. For me, you were the Right person, in the Right space, at the Right time with the Right action. Thank you. The conversation did not end there, you have been continually helping me clarify and express my ideas.

Jay Pengilly, thank you for your calm, anchoring presence in the Design Studio and Woodshop, and for helping me find solutions to so many of my Art problems.

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to the rest of the Art Department faculty here at University of Idaho Art and Architecture.

To my classmates here at UI, thank you for being such a supportive, fun, spirited group of individuals, and also for being my Thai cuisine buddies. #thomkagai

To my faculty and classmates from my undergraduate, Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington.

To my professors in Art from my Associate degree program at Big Bend Community College in Moses Lake Washington, Rie and Fran Palkovic; and to Betty Martens Johansen my ceramics instructor who walked with me the first steps of this journey into Art.

To my high school teachers: Ms. Greiner, geometry; Arlene Naganawa, creative writing; Helen Bedtelyon, humanities and art history; Amy MacAuley, chemistry; Larry Richter, physics.

Dedication

To my family, for your loving support without which I could not bear this world.

To my friends that grew up and left the Jehovah's Witnesses.

To my friends and classmates from Charles Lindbergh High School, class of 1992.

To my former Fred Meyer front end crew.

To my massage school faculty and classmates.

To my grandparents and great grandparents.

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Artifacts of Memory

Introduction and Personal History

This body of work consists of a series of mixed media drawings accompanied by 3D printed plastic and ceramic vessels. Portraits of “exes” coalesce with self-portraits and underlying imagery. The visual languages are inspired in part from the appearance of old manuscripts and journals, such as those of Leonardo Da Vinci, and from more ancient sources such as cave painting and petroglyphs. The figures are rendered on color fields of earth-based pigments. Geometry taken directly from Euclid’s Elements and other ancient sources are also placed on the pigment fields creating one of many conceptual layers. Each person represented in a portrait is also represented by various ancient Greek/Roman ceramic vessels or “artifacts.” The primary subjects drawn loosely in charcoal and dry color pastel. Each figure has an accompanying vessel that serves as an avatar—an object that embodies the traits of the corresponding person in the portrait. Figures and their vessel avatars are sketched over base layers of ochre/oxide pigments and geometric diagrams. Color is chosen specific to the individual but is not rigidly limited; color themes are a mixture of earth tones and/or complementary pairs, split complementary. In any given work, one or more of the language components may be absent.

The multiple visual language components in the artwork range from the emotional to rational, each serving a different, sometimes overlapping function. To me the geometry is complexity, building upon itself, and is metaphorical for my past experiences, which also build upon themselves. Complexity of growing awareness of self-identity, complexity of position—of the precarious situation I felt I was in, i.e. being young, gay, in a religious and family group that I knew would not be supportive of that—and the repetitive and hopeless quality of those thoughts, to me can be alluded to by the complexity and repetition of the geometric constructs, as they are rational, and in some way I thought rationality could help me “solve” my dilemma.

For this body of work, with the complexity of the experiences, I think the truth communicated is that although we have similar experiences, we all respond to them differently, some are hurt less and others more so by specific trauma. Also, we all try to assemble these experiences or assimilate them, uniquely, or suppress them, and the complexity of that is what is universal to us. We can all take the same road and end up in different places, or we can also take many different paths, and arrive at similar destinations, and it is not one or the other, but often a weaving back and forth.

Terminology

Cognitive Dissonance is holding two disparate, contradictory ideas/beliefs/feelings, or acting in contradiction to belief/thought/feeling. My primary conscious experience of cognitive dissonance stems from realizing at a young age that I was gay, but being raised in—and unfortunately believing—an evangelical Christian religion (Jehovah’s Witnesses), but also gay in a straight culture. *Multi-Threaded* is an apt term to describe the materials, processes and conceptual objects, and the way that they are layered. Appropriating the term with its definitions and connotations intact from computer science satisfies my need for precision in language. *Brain Washing* is a highly suspect term, while Undue Influence sounds too benign. From “Brainwashing: The science of thought control,” Kathleen Taylor writes:

The anticult movement has found the term brainwashing, tainted from birth with the stench of propaganda, a useful stick with which to beat its enemies.

And the fears of the anticultists are not without some justification. Sometimes groups, particularly small groups, can become extremely dangerous. This can occur particularly when they are highly cohesive, when group membership is extremely important to individual members (perhaps because of perceived or actual persecution by an outgroup), and **when abstract, unchallengeable ideas are coupled with extremely strong emotions**. *Because abstract, ambiguous ideas and strong emotions are characteristic of religious and political belief systems, they are often particularly associated with dangerous groups—those whose members are prepared to attack or kill outgroup members.* Such groups often show features of totalitarian thinking. They use a number of processes to attract and maintain new members. Some of these *can be so apparently compelling that they attract the label of brainwashing*, but all of them appear explicable in social psychological terms. Taking a closer look often reveals characteristic group mechanisms at work and demonstrates the way in which being a member of such cults fulfills the deepest needs of both leaders and followers.” (47) (Italics and bold type added for emphasis)

Undue influence is a common part of the human experience, but it is generally not well understood by most people. It leaves an intense emotional mark, one of many layers I have engaged in my work. This is a profound component of my experiences, both the initial experience and the much later understanding or interpretation, and I relate the cognitive processing of this to the geometry layer.

The *artifacts* are developed in the following media: the ochre and oxide earth pigment grounds, the paper substrate, the geometry or vessels in graphite or charcoal, the figures in pastel, the process of drawing, and vessels prepared in 3D printing or ceramic. The ritualistic methodical preparation is

integral to the development of each work from the preparation of the pigment ground to the gestural drawing and mark making.

These previous concepts loosely underlie the multi-threaded ness of the work. The process makes for a chaotic, exhaustive, contradictory internal experience, which is portrayed in a comprehensible fashion in the works.

Inventory of Visual Language, Process and Function

Pigment Ground

My first act is to tape off the margins of the paper, this is the first geometric action, and the ritual seems to evoke a “partitioning” and to set me up for the next stage: laying the ground pigment. I first experienced this form of drawing from a middle ground in my undergraduate drawing classes with Natalie Dotzauer. Our process then utilized charcoal or graphite powder, and they tended to be in the darker range (5,6,7 on a scale of 1-10, 1 being white-blank, 10 being ultimate black). We later used dry pastel for addition of color for some assignments. We taped our margins in this class.

I have adapted a form of this method but start with powdered pigments for the color ground. I am using raw earth pigments -ochres, umbers, oxides. They are in some cases indistinguishable from ancient pigments used in cave painting. The same materials were also used by Leonardo and other pre and renaissance artists, and we still use them. These pigments are used in Fresco, water color, tempera, oil and now acrylic. The pigments also find limited use in ceramic bodies and as glaze materials. It is in large part that they have been so used through history that I chose the materials; however, the rich chromatic saturation also appeals to my aesthetic sensibility.

The sensual quality of the pigment and the massage like way I apply it, is the first emotional act of the drawing process. This moment of the process is powerfully grounding and centering to me, emotionally and cognitively; it can approach an exhausting intensity, but it leaves me ready for the next steps which are more linear, rational, technical in nature. During development of this, I noticed that certain pigments adhered better than others, and the only reason I could work out is that the pigments have clay in their formulation, ochres, umbers, sienna. The pigments that were more oxide based, red and pink iron oxides, green copper carbonates, pale rutile and even titanium white, these all did not adhere nearly as well or create rich color. I reasoned that possibly I could alter this, by

adding clay to them. I obtained a sample of kaolin from the ceramics lab and tested small amounts. I chose kaolin due its extremely fine particle size and being practically everywhere in the natural environment. Turns out it does not take much kaolin to “fix” the colors. I was even able to use this method on synthetic oxide like pigments such as ultramarines. I was very pleased with myself for this discovery.

The color fields are then sprayed with workable fixative, but this does dull the color somewhat, so in a few cases I did not apply fixative at this stage. It was during this phase of exploration that I also tried color fields of multiple pigments.

Rational/Technical/Geometric

My technical aesthetic comes from my High School drafting classes. Our margins here were drawn and not taped, that was our first action, so it is possible this seeded my “opening ritual” as it were. These were simplified exercises showing multiple views of non-complex objects or even polygons, drawn with compasses, straight edge, triangles and T-squares. Precision and clean-ness were the requirements. These were satisfying to me then as they referenced math, especially geometry, but without having to go through the proofs. To me these represent linear, rational thinking or even state of mind.

I adapted the appearance at first of this technical drawing aesthetic, representing the vessels that I had chosen as avatars for myself or my exes. Just as vessels start with a few basic forms, but utility leads the maker to alter and adapt those forms to better suit their intended purpose, human beings start out with generalities, and their experiences lead them to develop differently. In my quest to understand my experiences gained from these men, I have endeavored to approach them in a linear, rational way, hence the drafting aesthetic.

This later changed to a more geometric approach, mostly dropping the drawings of the vessels as I adopted construction of actual geometric forms.

Once the color field is set, I then apply the technical drawings. In the beginning of this body of work, I was using draftsman’s type plan drawings of the ceramic vessels. This later morphed to geometric constructions using straight edge and compass, taken from Euclid’s Elements and other sources. These forms represent linear, logical thinking and the need for control, order, planning, reasoning.

The technical as I call it, encompasses logic, math, rational. It is our problem-solving skill and our abstract, symbolic thinking. In its purist form, it is free of our biases, attachments to identity and beliefs. Complexity ensues because most of us have differing degrees of ability in keeping our emotions and ego in check and separate from our rationality, and so there is always going to be emotional tie in.

The compass constructions are touchy, and even minute errors can lead to visible mistakes. I do not deliberately try to create imperfections as they are naturally present and develop. I have not assigned any particular geometric construction to the individuals portrayed. Some constructions are of a foundational nature, they are simpler and build up into other proofs. Some are not even proper “proofs” but are approximations. To elaborate on this, the simpler constructions are the beginning forms that a student would learn if using Euclid’s *Elements* as a primer. These methods are further built upon to lay out step by step instructions for creating polygons of given sides around circles, inside circles or of a given side length. The most complex geometric forms I have used are of circles bisected, then using only compass settings to create tangents and arcs, used for new radii lengths and centers, with the end result being a group of inscribed circles. These are the most sensitive to minute errors.

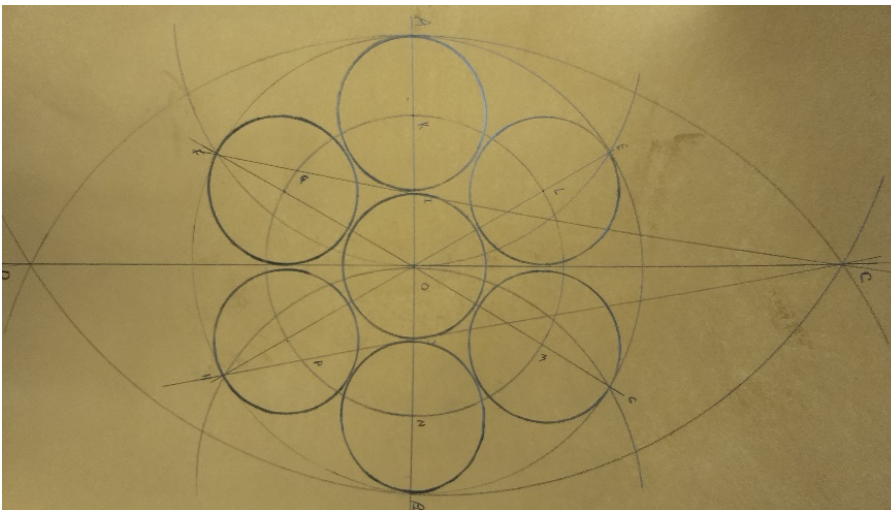


figure 2.1

Figure 2.1 is a series of inscribed circles, the error margin being observable. It soon struck me that these forms were reminiscent of eyes, and they could possibly have a Sacred Geometry tie in. Using that metaphor descriptively, the “eye” is the larger arcs drawn to bisect the original circle, which corresponds with the “iris,” the “pupil” being the seven inscribed circles.

Figure 2.2 is even more difficult, sensitive to discrepancy, and also “eye” like.

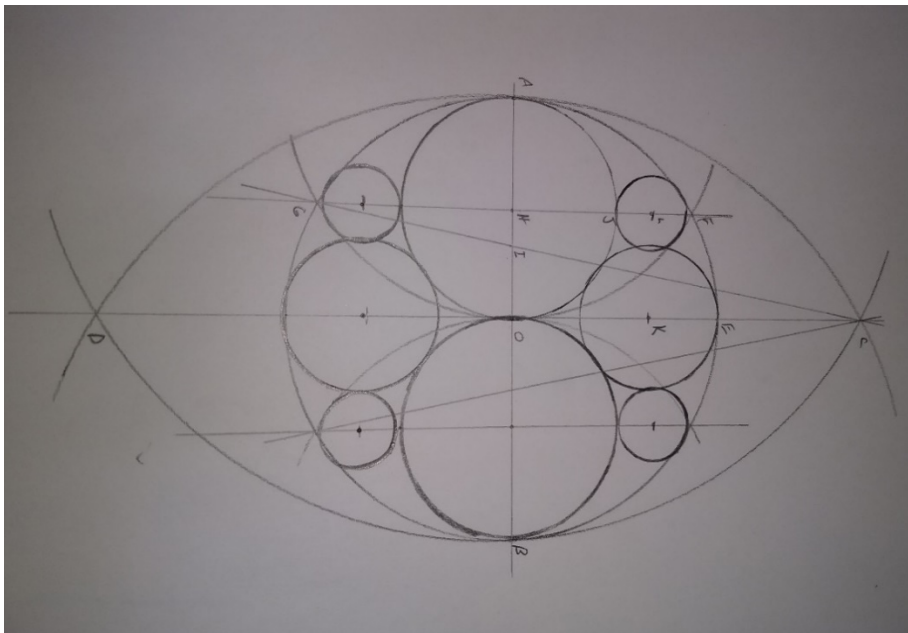


figure 2.2

This construction is my favorite to perform. The construct displays nicely the bisectors' and arcs' alignments creating new points and line segment lengths which further the construction. It is important to note, that there are no ruler measurements taken to create these new points and segments; *they are emergent from the properties and internal logic of the original construct and bisectors*. This concept, applied as metaphor to person, personality, memory and artifacts is how I tie the rational geometric forms back into the person, the emotional, the irrational.

Figures

At this stage the figures are rendered somewhat abstractly, but the selections become more concrete. Individuals, selected vessels and colors are as follows:

Dan Kylix blue and green analogous scheme

I selected the Kylix to represent Dan, my former partner of four years. The Kylix is a wine drinking bowl, used socially or ceremonially. Dan's spiritual practice is a collage of Neo-Pagan, Wiccan, Hermeticism and Hellenistic Mythological allegories. In his preferred type of Altar Work, a vessel is used to contain natural elements or other substances. Furthermore, a large kylix could hold dark liquids for scrying or clairvoyant ritual work. I chose an analogous color scheme for Dan, but with the

vessel sometimes portrayed complementary (red). Partly because he would have chosen these colors for himself, but also because I represent myself as blue, and he and I “felt” blue and analogous.

Bill Pythos umber, sienna, orange, red Complementary

Bill was not a partner or boyfriend; a tutor on an intimate level would best describe him and that is why I assign to him the Pythos as avatar. A Pythos (also spelled Pithos, Pithoi) was a large storage vessel, cousin to the amphora in utility and development. Pithoi -plural-sometimes were in excess of two meters in height, but more often 1.0-1.5-meter height range, with diameters approaching half the height of the vessel—generally. They were large, long term storage vessels, usually partially buried or sub floor installed. They were for storage of liquids such as wine or olive oil, but also for dry goods, grains, spices or other materials of value that needed protection from elements and pests. The most commonly depicted examples were from Knossos. These vessels represent to me a foundational, fundamental quality of “beginning” coupled with wealth, security.

I selected a complementary—possibly split complementary—color scheme for Bill, complement to my blue color. I chose earthy tones for their connection to earth, to mass, to foundation, but also into the orange and even red for passion, heat, fire.

David Alabastron sienna, orange, yellow Complementary

The Alabastron and Arybalos are the vessels I assign to David. The Alabastron was used by athletes to store perfumed oils. They tended to be oblong vessels, with rounded or pointed ends, a rounded belly leading to a narrowing neck, similar to how we think of a glass bottle. The Arybalos was a rounded form, also for perfume or oil storage, but more portable. These were commonly made from ceramic or carved from stone—alabaster, hence alabastron—but could also be made from expensive Egyptian glass. Aside from being a beautiful young man, David was also an athlete, competing in various sports.

The colors for David are complementary, maybe analogous but still complementary to my blue. They are lighter and not heavy like for Bill, alluding to the lighter quality of our relationship, and its non-foundational nature for me.

Note Amphora

I selected as my vessel avatar the Amphora. The variety of function and forms, development through time, and kinship to many of the other classical ceramic forms appeals to my sense of self. The Amphora can take on the metaphorical mantle that this body of work depicts and represents; the various Amphorae, forms, uses, states of decay or preservation, I see as an analogous body of materials to this body of work.

I chose blue for myself as that is the color I think of myself; blue like the clear sky, saturated like ultramarine, intense as an arc welding spark.

Generic male couples have been portrayed with little or no vessel avatars but instead with geometric progressions, Lascaux Paintings, and complementary or analogous palettes or black-purple-blues.

Using charcoals or chalk pastels I apply one or more outlines of the vessels over the geometric layer. The figure is then projected onto the surface and gesturally rendered. In a few instances, the figure breaks the plane of the taped boundary. Finally, another outline of the vessels is sometimes drawn over multiple pages as a unifying element.

The linear mode of cognition returns to the vessels in the 3D printed forms. I use mainly Tinker-CAD 3D modeling software to design and build the forms and export them in a format that can be locally 3D printed. This process pushes me to the higher end of my linear-rational state or mode.

Influences

I have entered my career in Art later in life and this is visible in my wider more holistic influence base. I come from a family with a long history of independent, self sufficient makers, so material usage and creativity—creative solutions—is so native to my mindset, I have a difficult time comprehending not being able to do or think that way. I claim as my non-artistic influences Lao Tzu, Marcus Aurelius, Nicolai Tesla, George Washington Carver. I must acknowledge my father here as well, Jerry B. Ulmer, I believe my artistic qualities are inherited from him and his side of my family.

I have an idea I've borrowed from evolutionary biology, "Convergent Evolution," this is when different life forms, possibly not even closely related, develop a similar constellation of traits and behaviors, due to those being *advantageous adaptations to the environment*. How I relate to this idea of Convergent Evolution is that, I don't feel influenced so much, instead have noticed similarities in work,

or ideas leading to personal development, and this gives me a sense of validation. To me it's almost as if I am traveling a jungle path, and I find these individuals leaving markers for me.

Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* has been very satisfying to read. He writes of color in a way I've never read before, and of "internal necessity," and "internal need."

Regarding color, Kandinsky writes with descriptors that border on synesthetic, in his case color and sound. On "—necessity," "—need," I have yet to distill down to a succinct statement his intent, but I wonder if it is akin to "Tao" expressed by Lao Tzu. Kandinsky's writing and artwork engage me emotionally, his writing is passionate and earnest. His paintings to me demonstrate another way of combining the rational with the emotional.

Georges Roualt's artwork embodies fauvism, expressionism, luminous color and black outlines derived from his experience in working with glass. Roualt's strong Christian faith is in contrast to my own beliefs, but I am still drawn to religious art. I see in his figures and forms, a similar attempt as my own to show light and shape; I struggle for higher realism but do not achieve it.

Francis Picabia, like myself, was also drawn towards different styles and movements (political and artistic) including pointillism, dada, and surrealism.

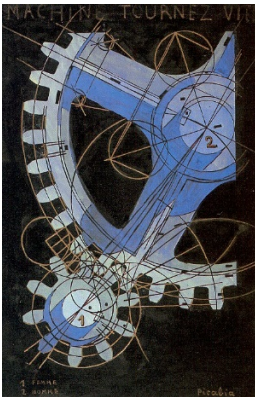


figure 3.1 Picabia, Machine Turn



figure 3.2 Picabia, Hera

I selected these works by Picabia to show my idea of convergent evolution. Present are mechanical technical drawings, layered with figures. Color palettes connect to my work as well. Picabia and I have used analogous elements, but for different reasons. The layering in the works in this instance demonstrates convergence.

David Salle, September 2005 edition of ART + AUCTION.

When I came to New York in the 70s, it was common not to expect to be able to live from your art. I had very little idea about galleries or the business side of the art world. It all seemed pretty distant. When people started paying attention to my work, it seemed so unlikely that somehow it wasn't so remarkable. I made my work for a small audience of friends, other artists mostly, and that hasn't really changed. At the same time, having shows is a way of seeing if the work resonates with anyone else. Having that response, something coming back to you from the way the work is received in the world, can be important for your development as an artist. But you have to take it with healthy skepticism.

I see some signs of convergent evolution when viewing Salle's paintings, there is the appearance of multi-threaded visual layers, color schemes are loosely similar, and visual language components have commonalities. Commonalities include simple outlined figures, monochromatic figures, repeated figures, multiple non-figure forms, and boldly stimulating color schemes. Much like Salle making art for a small audience, I too tend to do this. My audience is former Jehovah's Witnesses and former members of other religions and cults, with an emphasis on LGBTQ members, but also those who's spiritual path is akin to my own, a fusion of Eastern and Western spiritual thought and mindfulness.

Philosophically and artistically, I feel a great connection to the Impressionists and Post Impressionists of the late 19th century. They sought freedom from the academic dogma of their time, and with my personal spiritual journey away from Western religion and its dogma, I get a sense of that "convergence" in my development as an artist as well.



figure 3.3 September 2014, untitled



figure 3.4

May 2013, Der Angler im Montana Zelten Geht (The Fisherman Camping in Montana)

Fig 3.3 is a mixture of pointillism and brush strokes, somewhat Cezanne-esque. The pointillism (fig 3.4) I did immediately after my gallbladder surgery and was still recovering from the opiates, anesthetics and physical trauma; which is relevant to me because my cognitive functions were altered.

Influences from Instagram

Judith Peck



figure 4.1 Jus in Bello

These textures and colors elicit a visceral response in me. Aside from the sensual qualities, her figure work has an intelligence and humanity that I aspire towards. To quote from her artist statement:

I look at the things happening in the world today, and what history has taught us about our broken world and I can't stop being drawn into the unreason of it all. What I try to express in my art is that we all have the same hopes and dreams as anyone, anywhere at anytime in the present or throughout history.

I am struck by her choice of words here—unreason, broken world. In my work I have striven to illustrate the complexity of human experience, in its many layers, by anyone, anywhere, anytime.

Jason Briggs



figure 4.2 "April" 2006

Jason did a two-week workshop with us in my undergraduate program. I liked the qualities in his art and personality that were humorous and subversive. His creations are of thickly wheel thrown then altered porcelain. They take weeks to months to work, require special firing and other technical challenges. From his artist statement:

Though my objects contain strong visual references, I am more interested in the implied Tactile ones; the things that stir in me a compulsion to touch. Beyond other external inspiration lies this basic, primal impulse. I recognize and act upon a profound desire to push, poke, squeeze, stroke, caress, and pinch. I intend for my pieces to invoke a similar sort of temptation. Obvious sexual references, along with an extravagant, fetish-like attention to surface, can arouse a yearning to touch as powerful as the act itself.

Whereas Brigg's work invokes tactile engagement, my work in this body uses color as the gateway then shifts awareness to the underlying layered complexity inherent in the geometry. I find this quote from Chuck Close to be highly accurate in my case, and in this instance directly tied to the geometry.

"Inspiration is for amateurs...ideas flow out of the working process"

Tim Sherman



figure 4.3 vessel, Wood Fired



figure 4.4 Plate, Wood Fired

Wood fired aesthetics, texture and color, I am enamored of these and wish to pursue this for sculptural forms. From his website:

For as long as I can remember, I have been interested in finding new purposes for old things. For me, clay has become the ultimate test. Turing raw earth into something functional, beautiful and exciting has forever changed my thinking and way of life.

Robert Hardgrave



figure 4.5 Foreshadow—70”x70” —Acrylic transfers and paint on paper—2016



figure 4.6 Handbag—12”x11” —Gouache on hand-made paper—2016

From his website:

I change media regularly and process each to a point where I feel proficient. This helps ideas feel fresh and uncharted. Each new material requires unique allowances; I want materials to guide the work toward what it is going to be, while maintaining a consistent language across media. I believe that by allowing only a few variables to exist the materials are forced to reveal their nuances. This permits my personal vocabulary to speak louder, conducting cross-pollination between media, where ideas, discovery and surprise reign supreme.

This changing of media and process, quickens ideas and refreshes the development of visual elements allowing new forms to come to fruition. This meshes neatly with the idea of Convergent Evolution.

Installation

I have chosen to frame my mixed media drawings. I crafted my own frames to give me greater control over appearance and the satisfaction of a “closure ritual” to the art making. I prototyped a frame of alder and was satisfied with the aesthetic of the wood. I used a tung oil finish in prototype and was satisfied with its response to the color of the wood and it’s not overwhelming finish—not glossy, not matte, but sensually comfortable, warm. I selected a 1/8” plexiglass material for the pane

In the prototype, there was some struggle with mounting the test drawing onto the matte board and foam core frame inserts. Also, I reapplied a final touch of pigment to the drawing before mounting without spraying with fixative. This allowed the colors to remain vibrant, but also left them in a fragile state.

These are mounted to the wall in a straight forward 2D install, divided into groupings. The groups are selected to lead viewers down a path of envisioning a narrative. The photos of the work at the end of this text are in order of appearance, except for actual vessels which are photographed out of sequence. The groupings are 2,2,1,2,4: the first two groups of two are at an angle to each other, both of which are obliquely facing the single. The last group of two are aligned with the group of four, but there is a space between them that communicates they are separate. The group of four is a selection of one of everyone who appears in this series.

I have a small shelf on the wall for the 3D printed forms, displayed next to the two drawings that most visibly connect to them. The ceramic vessels are on a pedestal displayed in a space between two groupings of the framed drawings.

Conclusions

When I left the Jehovah’s Witness cult, I set about deliberately removing beliefs and old thoughts that no longer suited me, that held me stuck. The experiences of former cult members are part of the normal range of human experience, but perhaps much more intense, rarified and trans mutational. The process of working towards an MFA has also been quite transformational, with “ideas coming through the process.”

I create for me, for my need to express, to feel, to understand myself, with the awareness that my work may appeal a small subset of viewers, mostly those who have had similar experiences.



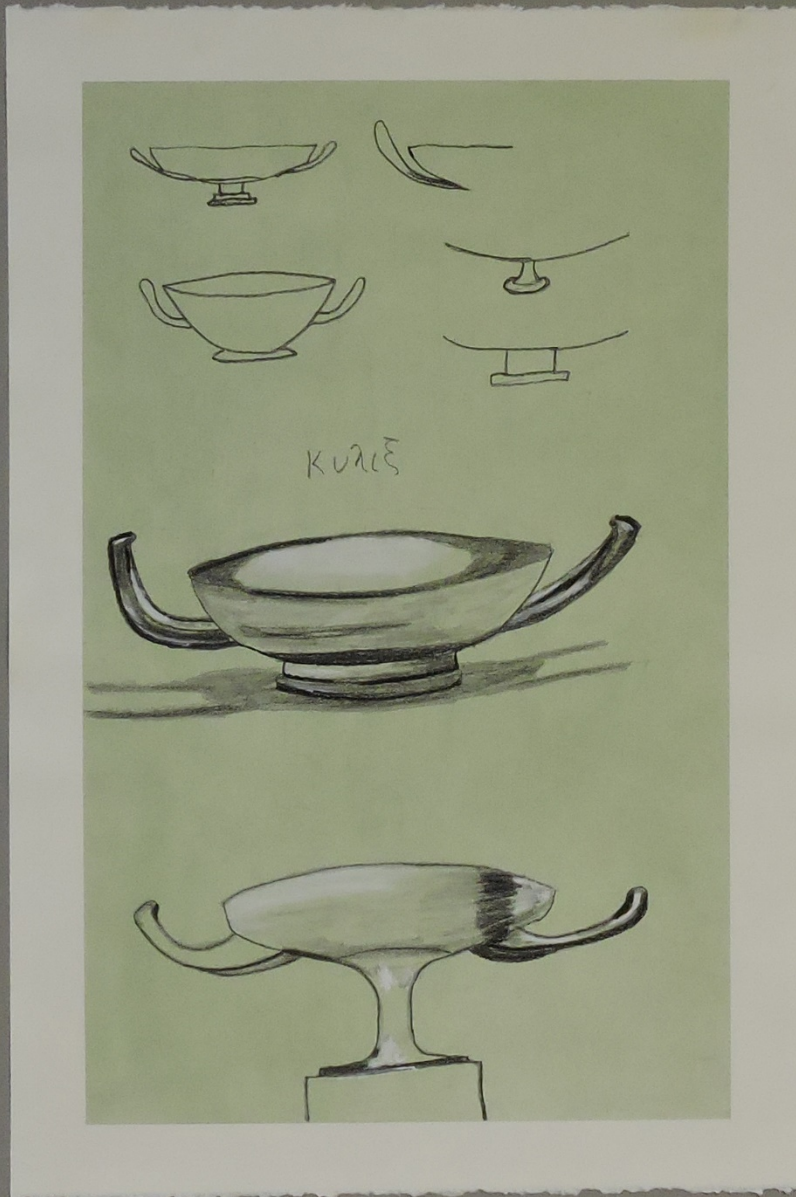
Couple 2017



Self Portrait, Nate, Amphorae 2017



Alabastron 2017



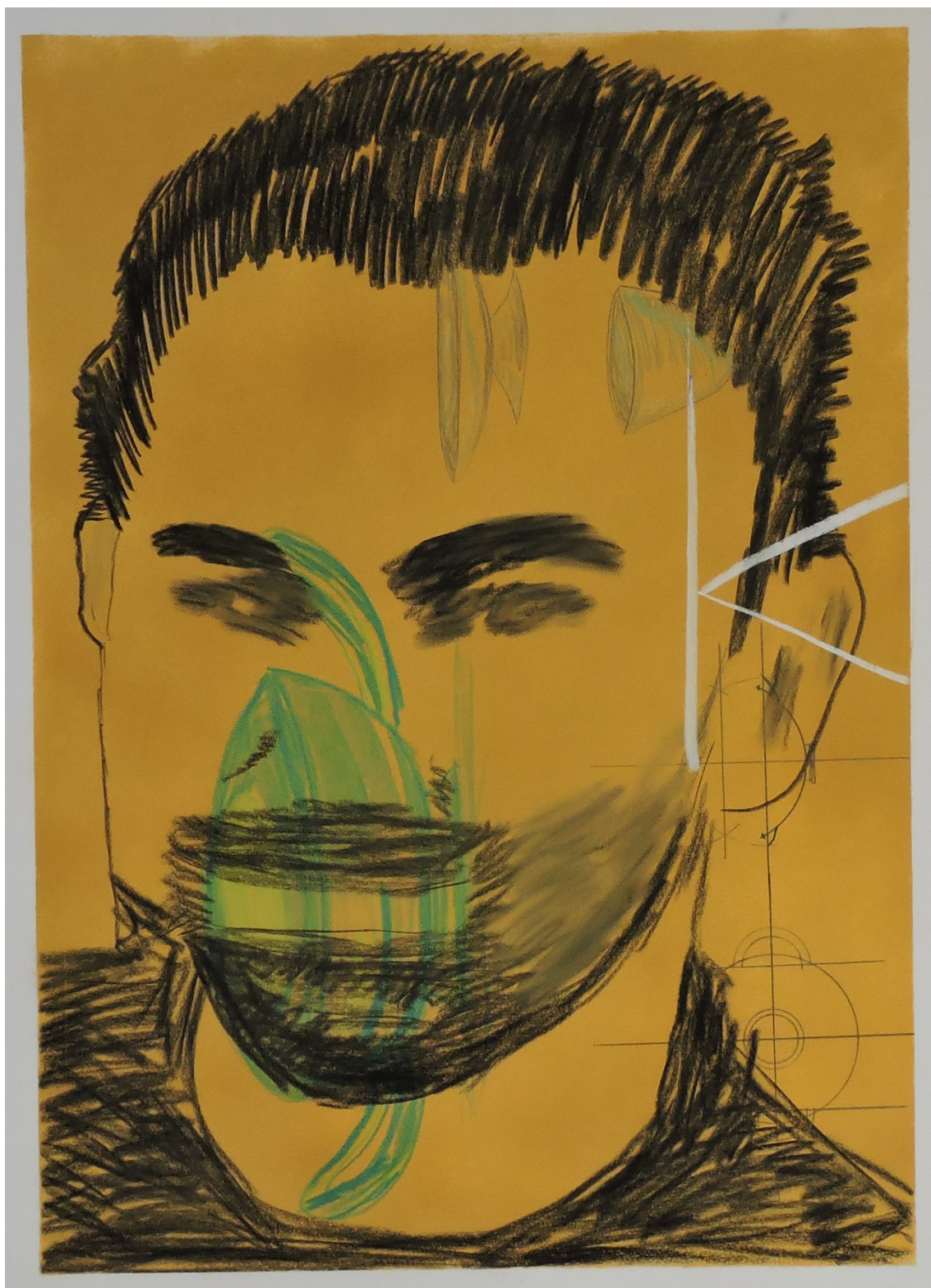
Kylix 2017



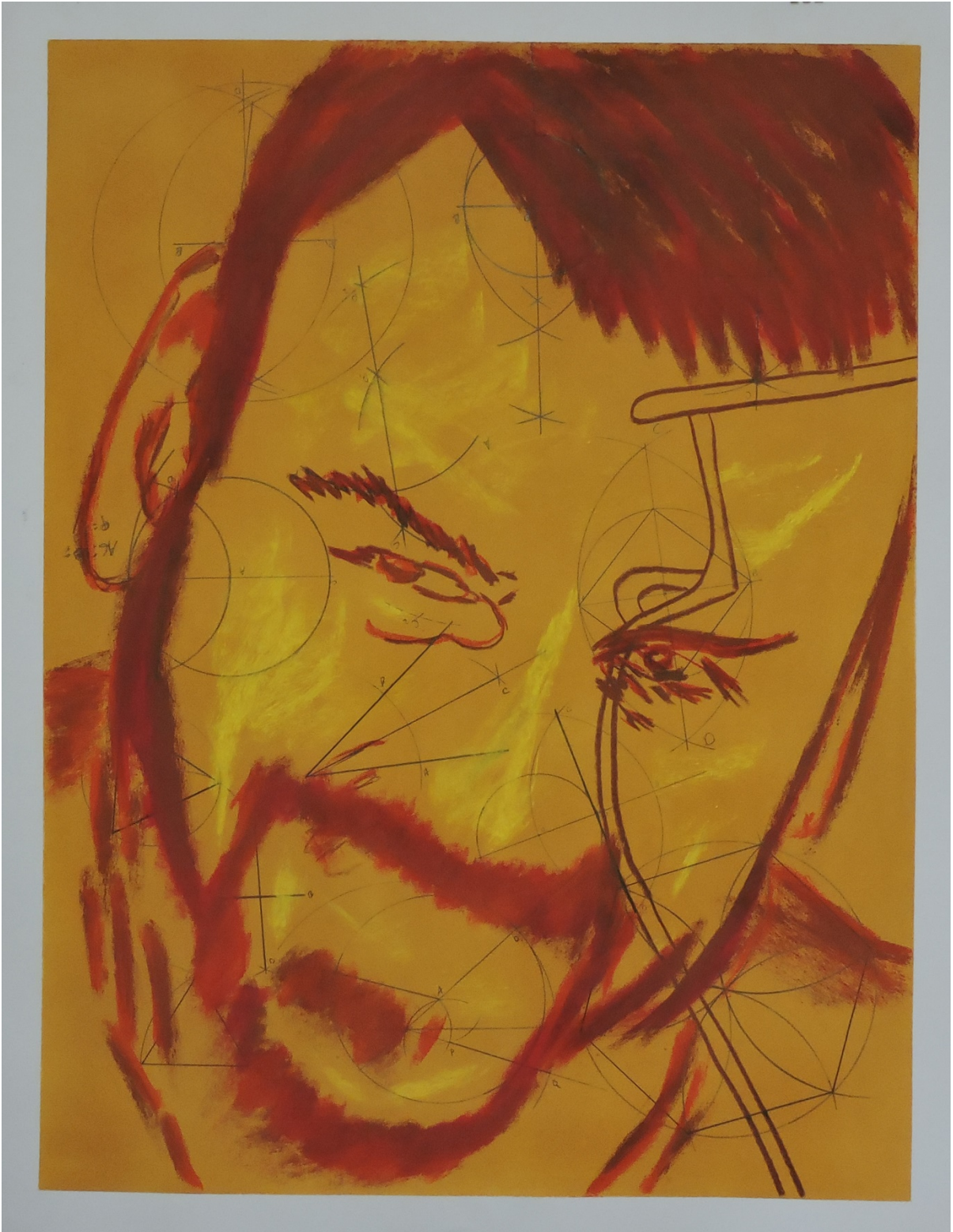
Dan, Inscribed Circles, Kylix 2017



Nate, Amphora 2017



Dan, Kylix 2017



Bill, Geometry 2017



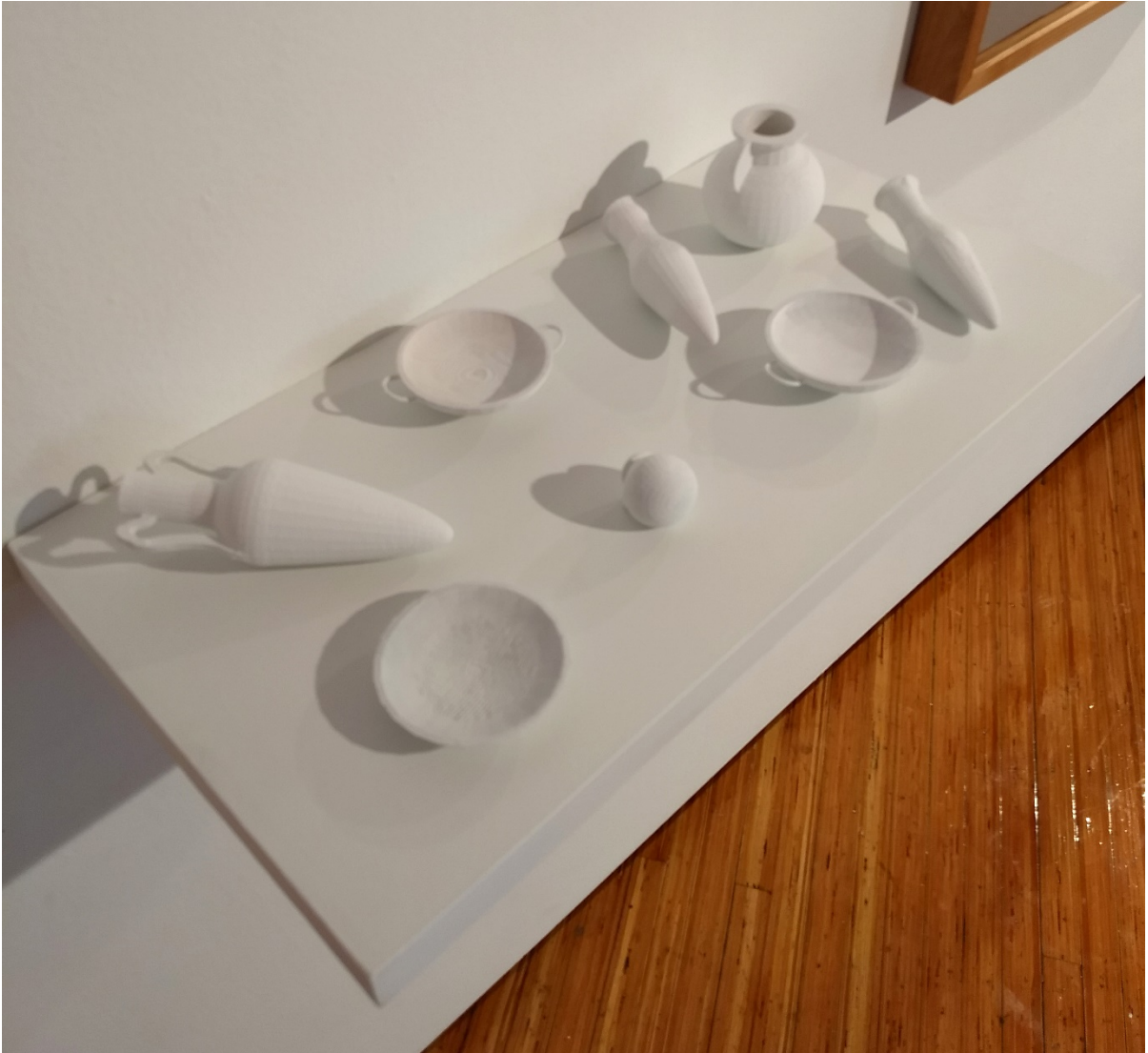
Nate, Amphora 2017



Dan, Geometry and Kylix 2017



David, Alabastron 2017



3D Printed vessels, including Amphora, Kylix, Alabastron and Arybalos 2017-2018



Ceramic Vessels, Earth Pigments in Slip, Geometry Scrafito and brushwork 2017-2018

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