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## Fare Thee Well

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# FARE THEE WELL

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

in

The School of Art

by  
Georgia L. Godwin  
B.F.A., University of South Alabama, 2010  
August 2014

This thesis project “Fare Thee Well” is dedicated to the memory of my late husband Michael David Godwin, whose sacrifice and love made this all possible.

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## **Abstract**

The common thread in all my work is time—its passage, effects, and remembrance. I have created a series of works that are meditations on time, the ephemeral quality of memory and the effects of aging, profession, and life decisions on our bodies, especially faces. The physical materials and my treatment of them reinforce these themes, showing the erosive qualities of earth, and drawing inspiration from natural features that signify the passage of time such as desert hoodoos, desert varnish, old wood, erosion and chemical oxidation, and from man-made features such as old documents that have been written, erased, and rewritten. The effects of time are likewise reflected in my treatment of surfaces, for example the use of oxide washes where oxidation equals rust or weathering, the exploitation of the characteristics of clay, which dries and cracks over time, and the layering of other media result in surface textures that are like geological strata. As we age we begin to feel the high speed of time going by. Like our bodies, our memories fade as well. We cherish memories of friends and family but memory is ephemeral, because we are ephemeral. We often judge character by facial appearance. The patina of age on people is not valued, although old finishes on furniture are highly valued. Ultimately my sculptures are about placing value on the relationships we have with our family members and friends and cherishing the short time we have with them. It's making lasting memories of our times together because they are the most valuable things we have in life.

## Introduction

“If you free yourself from the conventional reaction to a quantity like a million years, you free yourself a bit from the boundaries of human time. And then in a way you do not live at all, but in another way you live forever.” -- John McPhee, *Basin and Range*

The common thread in all my work is time—it’s passage, effects, and remembrance. My clay figures are meditations on the effects of time and decision. This is reflected both in my treatment of physiognomy and of surface, what I call patina and invisible patina: the seen and unseen effects of time and consequence on the physical body and on human character. My title “Fare Thee Well” is an old phrase that is meant to bid farewell to someone before setting off on a journey. It can also refer to our decisions to let go of memory and regret, as in “Farewell to the past life.” It is a wish for us to live well and be blessed.

I have created a varied series of works that are meditations on the passage and effects of time and the ephemeral quality of memory. These works echo the effects of aging, profession, and life decisions on our bodies, especially faces. They demonstrate aging through exploiting the nature of clay: erosion as a metaphor for the aging human body: all returning back to the earth.

The physical materials and my treatment of them reinforce these themes, showing the erosive qualities of earth/dirt soil/rock/minerals, and drawing inspiration from natural features that signify the passage of time such as desert hoodoos, desert varnish, old wood, erosion and chemical oxidation, and from man-made features such as old documents that have been written, erased, and rewritten.

In these works I tie several concepts together. These are the effects of the passage of time in nature, the erosion of our bodies through natural processes, the visual erosion of our faces/bodies through life decisions and aging, the erosive nature of memory, and the various ways we attempt to resist this erosion.

## **Influences**

I've always had a particular attraction to patina. Whether a vintage toy, decaying wood or an old cast iron bank, I love to see objects that have been well used and well loved. Since becoming a ceramic artist I have tried to replicate natural patina in my work. Rusty, faded, worn, and threadbare objects inspire me. Old, used things have an obvious history, which stimulates my imagination.

The ceramic sculptures of George Jeanclos and Andrea Keys Connell have influenced my work method. Their forming process – exploiting the nature of clay material -and their concepts about human experience are close to my heart. The faces and postures of their figures evoke an astonishing depth of human emotion defined by tragic experience. I have incorporated these ideas in my works by placing more concentrated detail on the eyes and expression of my figures.

Personal life experiences both joyful and tragic inform my perspective on the subject of fading memory of loved ones. The sudden death of my father when I was 8 and the loss of my husband were events that have molded my view on the fragility of life and the value of preserving memories. I had a strong relationship with my grandmother who gave me time and was an early encourager of my creativity. These strong memories and my attraction to aging surfaces explain my focus on memory and the effects and passage of time.

## Process

When creating these sculptures, my physical process reveals my fascination with the effects of time. This is reflected in my treatment of surfaces, for example the use of oxide washes where oxidation equals rust, tarnish, fire or weathering. The exploitation of the characteristics of clay, which dries, crumbles and cracks over time, and the layering of other media result in surface textures that are like geological strata. I express the idea of partial, fading, or selective memory by sanding; leaving blank areas that symbolize gaps in memory, and exaggerating or inventing certain features while minimizing or eliminating others to reinforce the idea of selective memory. The theme of memory both faded and preserved is supported by the incorporation of found objects and additional media such as stains and oil paint.

I used Cone 10 white stoneware to build my sculptures, applied oxide washes, and then fired them to Cone 1. After firing I used various media, such as oil paint, wood stain, and other media for surface finish. Old, salvaged wood and sunken cypress serve as a support for mounting the character faces and a pedestal for the reliquary.

## **Thesis Works**

### ***Life Leaves a Mark***

9' x 16"

Stoneware, oxide stains, underglazes, oil paint, old wood.

Wall installation consisting of a board of aged sinker cypress supporting a ceramic character study of a biker with a weathered face.

### ***Remnants***

"WW", 70" x 35" "Ron", 68" x 35", "Gerry", 62" x 28"

Stoneware and oxide washes, sand and red clay soil, stains and oil paint

An installation of three large character busts with desert patina, mounted on pedestals of simulated desert rock. The characters represent a man in his fifties, a man in his late seventies, and a woman of very advanced age and deeply lined face. The ancient woman's face is partially removed, simulating the process of desert erosion. These three collectively symbolize erosion of human life and memory.

### ***Palimpsest***

28" x 30"

Unfired stoneware, screen door, and old wood steps.

Installation consisting of a self-portrait reliquary bust, embedded with significant text relating to my life and experiences. As with a palimpsest manuscript, earlier inscriptions are partially eroded and overwritten by later text, but still visible. The figure's cupped hands sequester an object of personal significance. The bust is mounted on old wooden steps in front of an old wooden screen door reminiscent of my childhood home.

### ***Black-eyed Peas***

12" x 12" x 12"

Earthenware, sand and red clay soil.

An installation of 6 fired, earthenware figures set into red clay soil and sand that represent my ancestral East Texas family, the Gibbs. They were truck farmers and made their livings from the red clay soil of Cherokee county.

### ***Smoker and Mabel***

16" x 10" and 17" x 11.5"

Cone 10 Stoneware, oxides and stains.

Two portrait busts of characters that represent family members that have interesting faces that show the patina of their lives, from life choices such as smoking and attitudes.

***Bayou Woman***

16" x 10.5"

Porcelaineous stoneware, oxides and stains.

A portrait bust of a bayou fisherwoman who shows the signs of making her living outdoors with a rough patina that mimics desert varnish, weathered by sun and rain.



## Erosion and the Passage of Time

"Life is all memory except for the one present moment that goes by so quick you can hardly catch it going".--Tennessee Williams, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*

We are subject to life's eroding forces. We fade away.

While researching the earth's erosive forces, I realized that desert hoodoos are natural metaphors for erosion and time passage. Hoodoos are rock formations that occur in desert canyons such as Bryce Canyon in Utah. Rising from dry basins and badlands, these tall spires of rock develop as a result of three weather processes, water, ice and gravity, which continuously work together to erode into unusual shapes. Over a time span of 10-15 million years, this slow, gradual process has produced these mystical shapes that tell a story of the earth in geologic time.

Such erosive forces of nature, like rain and wind, can be compared to the aging process that people experience. Using this analogy, I created "Remnants," three hoodoo-like sculptures that embody the passage of time and the ephemeral quality of human life – erosion of the human body and mind. This installation consists of three forms: a man in his late 50's, outwardly whole and hearty but experiencing progressive loss of memory, a man in his late 70's showing the signs of aging and hardened by life, and an old woman, with an aged face that is deeply lined and fading; half gone from memory. Made from stoneware, textured and stained in oxides similar to those found in the desert, they mimic eroding desert hoodoos.



Image 1. "Remnants"

“WW”, the largest of the hoodoos, depicts a man in his 70s—a fictitious character study based on a composite of my grandfather and the film producer Werner Herzog. Among his circle of friends and family “WW” is considered a formidable man hardened by circumstances in his life. Reading the countenance of his face makes us believe he is angry at the world. We can only guess what life events caused him to look so fierce and unapproachable. WW is not unlike a hoodoo: the shapes that a hoodoo assumes is based on the hardness of the rock and determined by its history. At some point in his past, events played out that formed WW’s outlook on life, possibly leaving emotional scars. We do not see what caused this hardness, but the effect is very visible in “WW” through his rock-like expression, downturned mouth, his frown and especially his gaze. Some people protect themselves with a hard exterior, a shell of protection. “WW” has a shell of granite.

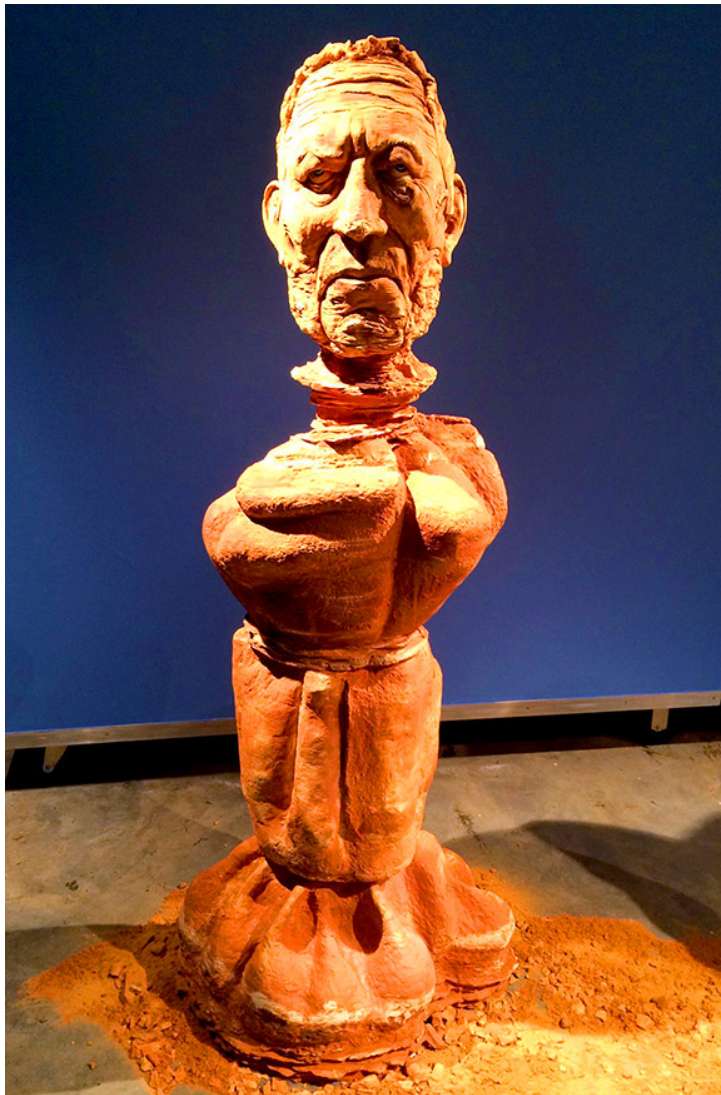


Image 2. “Remnants: WW”, full

The second largest hoodoo “Ron” portrays a great friend who is dealing with the effects of aging, yet he is only 56 years old. Ronnie Blackwell is well known for his vast knowledge of birds, butterflies, plants, music, literature and many other subjects on which he can easily give lectures at a moment’s notice. He recently was diagnosed with early onset Alzheimer’s which is ironic considering his incredible memory for details. I created a monument to his amazing memory and his courage in the fight against this degenerative illness. For Ron’s hoodoo, erosion is not visible; his face is young with only the hint of aging.



Image 3. “Remnants: Ron”, full



Finally, I created a hoodoo of my grandmother, Gerry Jones. Besides being an incredible artist in her own right, she was a gifted teacher with eternal optimism and endless patience. I was highly influenced by her love of art and nature; she was my mentor and close friend. She passed away 15 years ago at the age of 84. I remember the kindness of her blue eyes, her soft, wrinkling hands that taught me to paint – but her other features have become faint in my mind. Compared with “WW” and “Ron”, Gerry’s hoodoo shows advanced erosion, symbolizing her age and my fading memory of her face.



Image 4. “Remnants: Gerry”, full

The many layers of desert hoodoos possess a variety of shapes and textures because they were originally formed under different circumstances. For example, limestone, siltstone, dolomite and mudstone make up the four different rock types that form the hoodoos of Bryce Canyon. Hoodoos wear away differently because of their dissimilar composition from varied beginnings, like streams or lakebeds. Each rock type erodes at different rates, which is what causes the undulating shapes of the hoodoos. As people deal with their present lives based on their past, every layer of a hoodoo is the shape that it is because of its past. Circumstances helped shape who we are.

Hoodoos have a definite form but the appearance of permanence is an illusion. We will likely never see a change in them in our lifetime because of the extremely slow process that carves them. They appear to be permanent but in fact are in a continual process of change and diminishing. Erosion can be a metaphor for change but people change over lifetimes whereas the lifetime of the earth changes in deep geological time. (John McPhee) These changes take place over millions of years.

Our perception of our lifetime makes us feel that life is very long and slow moving – especially when we are young. As we age we begin to feel the high speed of time going by. We feel like hoodoos, slowly disappearing, hardly noticing our aging. Like the readily erosive mudstone in a hoodoo, our bones begin to weaken and crumble. These formations echo the fragility of the human body but unlike the hoodoo, we don't have a million years on Earth. My work, "The Erosion Man" is a flash movie that documents the figure of an aging hippie that has been subjected to the elements – rain and wind, as it returns to the earth. It is a humorous look at how quickly we disappear from view.

For the average person, a million years is a long time. Geologists think that a million years is a short time. The human race has only been around for a tenth of a million years. It is humbling to think that we are here for a blink of an eye – just a blip on the radar of time. In one way we feel insignificant, in another we can think we exist forever. It is hard to grasp the concept of "millions of years" and the age of the Earth as 6 BILLION. Ancient desert hoodoos are just one of Earth's natural wonders that remind us of how long it has been around and how ephemeral we are.

## **Memory, Memorializing and Monuments**

Like our bodies, our memories fade as well. Memory makes us who we are. If we could not remember the people, places and events in our lives, we could not manage. As we age we experience gaps in our memories and accept them as a normal part of growing older. An example of gaps we experience is forgetting details about people who are no longer in our lives. We remember friends and family from our past, but their features often fade once they are lost to us through death or living separation. Sometimes we retain selective memory regarding these loved ones, remembering only their expressive eyes, their contagious smile, or softness of their hands. Whether through the passing of time or separation it is inevitable that we forget some things about these friends and family. We cherish the memories of them but memory is ephemeral, because we are ephemeral. People work very hard to remember those they lose in death. They create memorials for them, honoring their memory in many different ways, like plaques, statues, gardens, and reliquaries, even scholarships. We feel the need to make something permanent to make sure no one forgets our loved one.

In “Remnants” the hoodoo sculpture, “Gerry” was created to both honor and memorialize my grandmother. I cherish the memory of my grandmother as my hero, mentor and close friend. I represented her as a hoodoo in partial decay to represent the gaps in my memory about her. I chose to make her eyes realistic, yet the rest of her in stone -- this speaks to my fuzzy memory of her deeply lined face except her kind sweet eyes that always showed approval and love, one of her greatest assets. She was a perpetual optimist and eternally patient- attributes I readily remember. Although I need a photograph to remind me of the shape of her face, Grandma’s eyes are still vivid in my mind.

My friend Ronnie Blackwell is a hero, and his hoodoo is a living monument to his kind and generous personality and his renowned memory. As explained before, this hoodoo also represents the courageous fight he is making with Alzheimer’s disease. Many of us know someone who has struggled with this degenerative illness and know how it affects memory. With this sculpture, I concentrated my attention on Ronnie’s eyes: kind and full of the joy of life’s experiences. They are ever present in my mind of what is most remarkable about his appearance – except maybe his beard!



Image 5. "Remnants: Ron and Gerry"



These hoodoos are reminiscent of the giant sculptures carved into the granite at Mt. Rushmore National Memorial of past U.S. Presidents that we deemed most remarkable. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Thomas Jefferson were of course all great American heroes and we monumentalized them forever in the side of a mountain. They are icons of our culture. In like fashion, I have monumentalized my personal heroes in these hoodoo sculptures as well.



Image 6. "Remnants" profile

Nostalgia is another type of memory: it is a longing for happier times, carefree childhood memories or as a young person. I have been fortunate to have many fond memories of my East Texas family. The installation "Black eyed Peas" reminisces about my ancestral ties to the Gibbs family, a close-knit, humorous bunch who farmed the rich, Texas clay that I played in as a child. These great memories have contributed to my attitude about life. Most especially influential was the time I spent with my father. In his short life, my father, a



musician, songwriter and cartoonist, made an indelible impression on me as a child. Losing him at 8 cemented those memories and drove my ambition to be just like him. I wanted to become an artist and believed that not only did I inherit his talent for drawing, but also that he was watching over me and guiding me to this end. My mother gave me all of his drawings, recordings, his albums and most especially his songbook that contained the songs he wrote while he was alive.



Image 7. "Black-eyed Peas" installation



Image 8. "Black-eyed Peas" detail

The words and ideas contained in these bits of nostalgia that I have kept for 46 years have been permanently stamped into the fabric of my soul. I memorized every song in his songbook, though too young to understand most of them. (Bob Dylan styled). Nevertheless, throughout my life I saw connections between the words he said and the events and people that came into my life. They influenced many of my life decisions, such as career choices, college majors, even likeminded friends. Although they have faded, these words still remain part of me.

Other strong influences early in my life formed my opinions and beliefs. My mother brought my sisters and me to church every Sunday until we left home at 18. She made us read and memorize whole chapters of the Bible, which are still with me to this day. My mother was an avid reader and I adopted her love for books. I was very fortunate to be exposed to many good books during those impressionable years. Many of these texts -- scriptures, poems, songs and books-- have never left me and I believe have formed who I am.

In my sculpture, "Palimpsest" I have created an autobiographical reliquary with a surface reminiscent of a palimpsest. It is a self-portrait formed of stoneware and embedded and covered with the texts of my youth. The palimpsest is a manuscript or writing material on which the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing, but of which traces remain. Like the palimpsest, these words and texts of my youth were written on my soul. While some have faded and beliefs may have changed with new books and ideas, they still influence my life now. When crisis or major events occur, or when counseling my son about life, these deeply inscribed words shine through, the preserved memory of them still alive in me.

"Palimpsest" was made to simulate an archaeological 'ruin' found in an abandoned house. Its rough texture weathered by years of neglect but the texts are still legible. The reliquary chamber is inside clasped hands that contain a relic, a memento from the past that has meaning only to me. You can read all of the text and learn much about me, but I retain a small part that remains private and mine.



Image 9. "Palimpsest" full



Image 10. "Palimpsest", detail 1



Image 11. "Palimpsest", detail 2



## Physiognomy: Visible and Invisible Patina

Aging is sometimes sped up by decisions we make in life, i.e. vices such as heavy drinking, sun worshipping, or the effects of professions such as working outdoors or coal mining. We see people every day whose faces reflect the lives that they have lived. We tend to read them like a book, assuming that we can tell if they have “lived well” or struggled with vice, tragic events or setbacks. Many times we judge their character by facial appearance, which has been labeled physiognomy. Is it really possible to accurately judge a person by the lines, wrinkles, sags, discoloration, or age spots?

Our society today, as many before values youth, health and beauty, not considering that aged skin is also beautiful. The patina of age on humans is not valued, although old finishes on furniture are highly valued. We’ve missed something along the way. When we encounter others that appear to be struggling, do we try to empathize or immediately judge them to be panhandlers, alcoholics, druggies, etc.? When we see people that seem to be young except their faces are leathery, sunburned with deep wrinkles, do we classify them as low class or think they’ve just had a rough life?

Physiognomy is the assessment of a person's character or personality from his or her outer appearance, especially the face. It is considered a pseudoscience that has risen and fallen out of fashion over the centuries. Akin to what we now call profiling it judges or regards particular people as more likely to commit crimes because of their appearance, race, etc. Both physiognomy and profiling seek to examine the relationship between facial features and qualities of mind or character by their configuration or expression. While we are not always conscious of it, our natural tendency is to quickly assess the features of others, placing them in acceptable or unacceptable categories, not taking the time to consider what is the underlying truth.

As a reflection on this subject, I have created a series of ceramic faces and busts -- character studies that show the visible and invisible patina: the marks that life leaves on our physical body and our souls. In the installation “Life Leaves a Mark”, I sculpted a biker’s face and mounted him on a salvaged wood beam that mimics the worn patina of his face. I’ve also created three busts: “Mabel and the Smoker”, an old-timer/chronic cigar-smoker and his aging wife of 50 years, and “Bayou Woman”, a bayou fisherwoman whose patina reflects years of outdoor work, all mounted on smoky kiln bricks. These faces exhibit the wear and tear of life through wrinkles, age spots, and sunburn the patina of life due to profession or life choices. My hope is that the viewer will study their facial features, the gaze and posture of each, and *ponder* them. Questions the viewer can ask himself are:

What life experiences do you think have affected this person?

Do they appear to be in good health?

Do they seem happy, sad, mysterious, mischievous or a combination of emotions?

I do not try to answer these questions with this installation. My intention is to stimulate questions that make us think more about how we judge by appearances.



Image 12. "Bayou Woman"



Image 13. "Life Leaves a Mark"





Image 14. "Mabel and the Smoker"



Image 15. "Mabel and the Smoker" and "Bayou Woman" installation



Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another. With technology a major part of every minute of our lives, we have lost our ability to empathize, to see others around us and try to understand their plot in life. Does the pressure to process information speedily make us miss those details and quickly judge and move on to the next thought? Do we live in a post humanist society where our senses are dulled by electronic beeps and headphones that tune out the world? In this age of the 15-second commercials, and split second decisions, we might be missing a lot while life buzzes by at a dizzying speed. I believe when we slow down with our hurried schedule, lay down our cell phones and iPads, and just take in life around us, we still have the ability to empathize with our fellow man. The weathered surfaces of these face sculptures help knit together the underlying theme of human patina. They display simulated erosion showing the effects of time and the elements that every living thing experiences on earth.

## Conclusion

There is an old English proverb that states, 'the eyes are the window to the soul.' Many different poets have used this proverb including William Shakespeare. It is basically stating that by looking deeply into a person's eyes, you can tell who they truly are on the inside. My sculptures are also about looking into the souls of those who surround us in life as well as those we don't know and learning to empathize by not quickly judging one another. This sentiment is nothing new; as old as the Ten Commandments but worthy of a second look. They are about placing value on the relationships we have with our family members and friends and cherishing the short time we have with them. It's making lasting memories of *our times together* because they are the most valuable things we have in life.

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## Artist Statement

The common thread in all my work is time—its passage, effects, and remembrance. My clay figures are meditations on the effects of time and decision. This is reflected both in my treatment of physiognomy and of surface, what I call patina and invisible patina: the seen and unseen effects of time and consequence on the physical body and on human character.

Physiognomy is “the assessment of a person's character or personality from his outer appearance, especially the face [or] the general appearance of a person, object or terrain...” The visible attributes of character expressed by my figures--joy, regret, jaded cynicism, the accumulated effects of age--are metaphorically echoed in my use of technique and material, for example, my use of oxide washes where oxidation equals rust, tarnish, fire or weathering, my use of surface texture, exploitation of the characteristics of clay, which dries, crumbles and cracks over time, and layering of media as in geological strata.

I believe that the two hardest things to achieve in human life are an understanding of one's self and an understanding of or empathy with any other person. Only I can know where I have been and what I've experienced. Self-awareness comes with a struggle. Equally true, each person I encounter comes to me with an entire history of life experiences and past decisions of which I am ignorant. These figures are visible expressions of this reality.

## Vita

Georgia Godwin is a native-born Texan (1960), relocated to the Deep South in 2002 in Mobile, Alabama. She has pursued several careers, including interior design, drapery fabrication, graphic artist for the Tyler Morning Telegraph/Courier Times as well as graphic designer for Sullivan St. Clair Advertising, Mobile, Alabama. "Fare Thee Well" is Georgia Godwin's final show as an MFA candidate at Louisiana State University's School of Art and Design. Godwin received her undergraduate degree from University of South Alabama in 2010. Her ceramic work has been recently published in two Lark Publication books, *500 Figures in Clay, Volume 2* and *Ceramic Sculpture: Making Faces: A Guide to Modeling the Head and Face with Clay*. Recent exhibitions of her works include: "Icons and Stories: Selected Works by Georgia Jones Godwin" at the Alabama School of Math and Science, "Shared Expressions: Bay Area Art Partners", 2011, Mobile Museum of Art, Mobile, Alabama.