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Ceramics and Life in Tandem

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CERAMICS AND LIFE IN TANDEM

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 Art

in

Department of Art and Design

by

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This thesis paper is dedicated to my twin sister Caroline and our mother.

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Abstract

From the ground up, my work emerges slowly. As each coil is added, I am conscious of how my body is interacting with the rich red clay body. Each time I press clay between my hands, the material reacts and changes. It gives me comfort to feel a tangible response as I push my body into the clay. The cyclical process of art making becomes my daily ritual. Each step is repeated over and over again until it becomes ingrained in my body's existence.

As I add coils to my work, particularly the large sculptures, I continuously circle around each clay vessel. Each revolution allows me to get to know my work from a new perspective and grow closer to the forms. These repeated motions are an essential part of how I process and understand my surroundings, they become the cornerstone of my daily routine. As I coil the red clay body upward, my hands leave impressions, mapping where they've been. No area of the clay goes untouched. Each imprint of my fingers records a moment of movement, suspending each pinch forever in time.

My sculptures yearn for company. They exist in a shared space, as if standing next to one another in a loose huddle. Within this huddled group, forms similar to one another pair off. Each twosome has commonalities, but the individual pieces are never exactly the same. Because of the overlaps, the pairings have shared qualities that are open to comparison. Duality is a system that these coupled works emerge out of. This system engages with two similar ideas that are defined by their differences. In order for two opposing viewpoints to exist in a polar relationship, they must be akin to each other at their very core.

Ceramics and Life in Tandem

Introduction

Forming clay with my hands keeps me grounded and in touch with myself. I stay engaged in the studio by making two pieces in tandem. The pair converse with each other as I coil them up, nudging one another in new directions. Experimenting in the studio keeps me coming back day after day. Testing glazes allows me to play with new surfaces and generate ideas for sculptures.

Duality

Duality has always been a part of my existence. From my very first memory, I cannot recall a time that was only me. I had my twin. As fraternal twins, when we were in high school, many people would look at us and say something like “No chance you two are twins. You’re lying”. But the few who saw us as inseparable would look back and forth between our faces and confidently say “Yeah, I see it”. We were different, but much more alike.

Even before my sense of consciousness developed, from the time I was inside my mother’s womb, I had a partner in my twin. I grew up always having someone to turn to when I started to feel lonely, someone to share my experiences with. My whole life was lived in tandem with my sister. Even as kids we always made sure to look after each other. In middle school someone threw a snowball at me during recess. Usually being hit with a snowball would only be a minor inconvenience, but this snowball had some pebbles compacted into it. Next thing I knew, my chin was stinging. Before I could get too upset, Caroline came rushing over to comfort me. She was always there for me, and I tried to always be there for her.

Because I had my twin Caroline in my life, I consistently had a best friend and partner to learn with and develop an understanding of the world around us. I did not have to do anything alone. Being one in a pair is how I lived the first twenty-two years of my life, and it has shaped how I process and understand what is around me. When I was growing up, my opinions could not be isolated. If I spoke to my mom about what happened in school that day, Caroline could share the same, but from her perspective. We were always together, even if slightly separated, so we could constantly relate to each other. Still, I tend to get to know others this way- through acknowledging and accepting duality within relationships.

Duality is a system in which I understand the world around me. This system engages with two similar, but polar, ideas. These two related viewpoints are defined by their differences. But, in order for two forces to exist in a polar relationship, they must be akin to each other at their very core. Their similarities allow for the contrasting features to be easily identified. People are much more likely to compare two things that are categorically similar than they are to compare two things picked at random. For example, it is easier to find similarities and differences in two fruits, like apples and oranges, than it is to two arbitrarily chosen objects such as bench grinders and birds of paradise. These similarities and differences help define the pair's relationship, one that is based on being perceived together rather than apart.

As humans we understand ourselves through those around us because it is a way to relate to one another. Each person's behavior shifts depending on their surroundings. In some cases, behavioral shifts are a way of striving for basic survival. In other circumstances, they may lead to discovering a different facet of oneself. These behavioral

adaptations emerge as coping mechanisms to deal with changing circumstances. The behavioral shifts that I am describing are similar to code switching. Code switching is a system based around adjusting one's communication style in response to varying situations. Code switching is often put into action when people who are multilingual come into circumstances where they switch which language they are speaking. I am interested in picking at the benefits and shortfalls of these necessary switches.

Pairings

My sculptures relish keeping close company. They exist in a shared space, as if standing next to one another. The bonded pairs hover near their mates, always within earshot. In doing so, they support each other. This support comes predominantly in the form of presence. I feel comfort knowing that I have someone close to me nearby, much like my work existing in pairs beside one another. The two sculptures in *Surrogate* (Image 2) linger within earshot. The forms are in mutual agreement that they stick together.

The very first clay project that I designed and made by myself consisted of two similar, but distinct, vases. Keeping the two forms alike to each other was important to the end result because I wanted them to be easily compared. So, as I coil built one piece up, the other vase was always within sight. Now, nine years later, I have continued to work in pairs because the two influence each other and morph as they grow. In this way, my work has grown up much like my sister and I did: together.

Remembrance

Each sculpture emerges from the ground up. As I coil and squeeze the red clay body upward, my hands leave impressions, mapping where they have touched. Each imprint of my fingers records a moment of movement, forever suspended in time (Images 3 and 4). To

me, this record is precious. I am acutely aware of how short life can be and I choose to dedicate each of my hand-built monuments to those I love and those I have lost. They are not only records of me, but records of those closest to me who have made me who I am. My hands' markings in the clay body assure me that I can look back and see the path I have taken.

Body

I design my sculptures by thinking about qualities of the human body that appear at both a micro and a macro level within human-scale. Curves are integral to the body, from the top of our heads to the arches of our feet, our bodies are built out of a series of repeated curving lines. I observe these undulating curves and use them as building blocks for my work. Curved forms leave enough space to reference the human body without directly representing it. The sculptures feel bodily yet avoid being directly figurative.

The large sculptures, such as *Surrogates* and *Conjoin (Arch)* engage with the body on a one-to-one scale (Images 1 and 2). The size is best described as human-scale. The human-scale sculptures are immersed in the same space as the viewers around them, they are not separated from reality by a white pedestal. This allows the sculptures to function as social participants rather than isolated objects that happen to be occupying the same space. The work exists within the same reality as its viewers and asks to be acknowledged as if it is an active participant.

The installation titled *Conjoin (Arch)* (Image 1) is made from two glazed ceramic pillars. Each one is tall enough to reach eye level and they are attached by a satin arch, expanding the piece to over seven feet tall. Both ovular shaped forms show the path that my hands forged as I pinched them upwards. They leave a journal containing a record

of my body's movements against the clay while also evading to appear specifically figurative.

Memories are stored in the body and they have the ability to expand outside of the mind's inner workings. They can spill over into the physical realm, particularly when one's body associates a physical sensation with a certain memory. These stored memories are automatically recalled by the body, similar to the way muscle memory works. They can be triggered, consciously or unconsciously, triggering an automatic physical or psychological response. This response is physiological, as such it is able to affect the whole body from the inside out.

Glaze Tests

Testing glazes allows me to work through surfaces and forms in tandem. Each glaze test expands my library of color and texture. I look at my collections of tests when I am generating ideas for work, and more often I use the tests as swatches to try on forms. The glaze tests function as an essential part of how I produce new work by aiding me in identifying surfaces and glazes that are interesting.

An important part of my glaze testing process is finding colored glaze recipes in books, mixing them without their colorants, and firing a test of them. By removing the colorants, I am left with just the base glaze's texture. The texture of the glaze serves as a muted landscape on which to apply color. The base glaze has potential to be any color, but each material added will change the chemical makeup of that glaze recipe and thus change the fired results.

I start glaze testing by making small, sample-sized forms from terracotta clay. Even though I mix my clay with ingredients specifically for large-scale sculpture, like grog, paper,

and fiber, I always use the same clay body for my tests. This helps me stay as true to the final work as possible and test the limits of the clay. The immediacy of the testing process changes the rhythm up in my studio practice by breaking up the longer duration projects. I can pinch tests, apply glaze, and have fired tests two days later (Image 5). My large-scale work can take up to two months from beginning to end, so tests help me move forward even when I am working on months long projects.

The tests are shaped like a hollow ellipse cut in half standing open side down (Image 5). Each test form is molded using my palm as a template. The result of this process is a surface that freezes a microcosm of my hand's gestures. I scale down the gestures to mimic the surface texture of my large scale works (Images 3, 4, and 5). The palm-scale tests mimic the volume and hand-impressed undulation of my larger sculptures. Movement on the surface of the clay allows for the glazes to flow, pool, and break much like they would on my larger sculptures.

I use my hands-on knowledge of materials to experiment with fired surfaces. I have become familiar with my commonly used materials by observing the glazes when I mix them, as I apply them, and after they are fired. Understanding materials in various states helps me identify specific ones that I prefer to use and their properties. I repeat the glaze testing process frequently so I can try old glazes in new ways and keep my material knowledge current.

Colors

Color can pre-consciously set the mood of a space. It can reach outwards, spreading further than the forms themselves. This allows color to occupy more visual space than the work itself, as illustrated in the work *Nimbi* (Image 7). Colors push to the forefront of one's

attention, begging to be acknowledged first, even before form. They allow for the tone of a space to be suggested in advance of full visual processing. This immediate, gut reaction preempts the processing of other visual cues and bold color allows my sculptural forms to push beyond their physical boundaries.

Bright, pigmented colors have substantial presence. They are unashamed about the space that they take up and, in being so, spill beyond their designated edges. Because vibrant colors spread out, grabbing onto surfaces nearby, they transform the environment around them. Catalyzed by the transfer of one color to another, individual clay objects interact with each other without ever touching.

Most clearly illustrating the phenomenon of color transfer is *Nimbi* (Image 7), an arrangement of circular objects hung on the wall. Each hemisphere hovers off the wall with the support of a conical-shaped slab attached to the rim. Each floating slab is connected at about a thirty five degree angle, ensuring that they cannot be seen from the front. This design allows for each hemisphere to appear as though it is floating off the wall.

Once fired, the floating slab is then coated in brightly colored paint and the hemisphere is hung on the wall. The space between the floating slab and the wall creates a nimbus, or aura, around each hemisphere. The hanging forms are arranged near one another so that their color reflections begin to interact and splash onto the wall behind them. The auras spread beyond the physical boundaries of the clay objects, expanding their presence through diffuse reflection.

Conclusion

My work is a journal of my every day, a record of my life and physical body. My body is a vessel of memories and with every handprint I press into the clay, I also leave some of myself. Sometimes I struggle just to get motivated in the morning, but when I go to the studio I can tune in and zone out the noise. I find comfort in starting a new project and finding a routine for building it. Working in the studio helps me relieve built up tension and clear my head.

My thesis work is the result of three of the most personally challenging years of my life. At times I felt like I wanted to just stop everything but looking back I am grateful that I stuck it out. I have developed stamina and trust in my making process. I better recognize when I must pick myself up and keep moving, even if I feel stuck. I have learned over the last three years that the best thing I can do to pull myself out of a rut is to keep pushing forward.

TANDEM
CERAMIC SCULPTURES BY KATHARINE LEE ROBBINS



Image 1. Installation view with *Conjoin (Arch)* in front, 2021, ceramic and mixed media



Image 2. *Surrogates*, 2021, ceramic



Image 3. Close up of the orange *Surrogate*, 2021, ceramic



Image 4. Close up of *Conjoin (Arch)*, 2021, ceramic and mixed media



Image 5. Test tiles for *Surrogates*, 2021, ceramic



Image 6. *Proximities*, 2021, ceramic

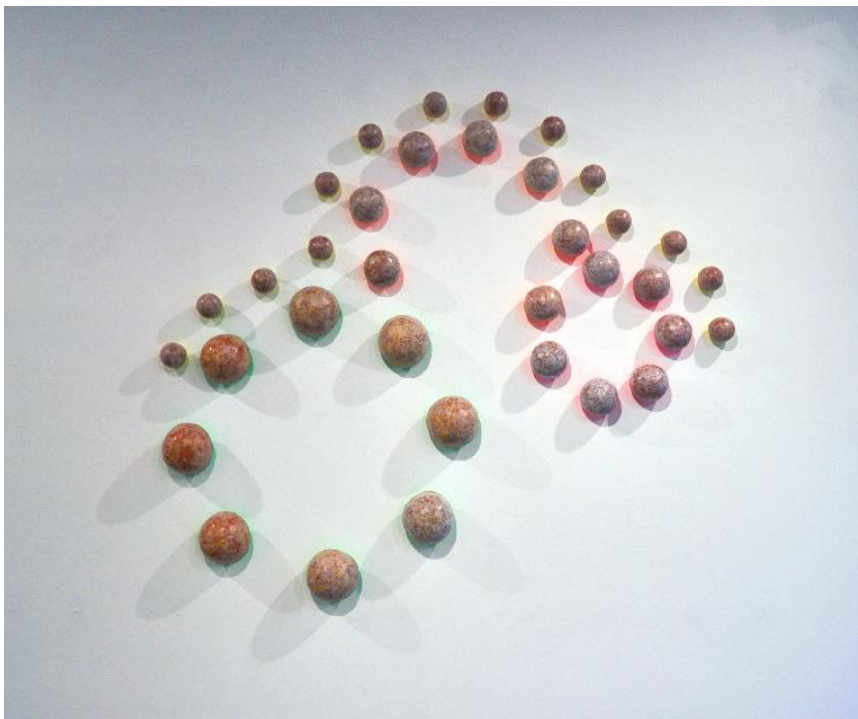


Image 7. *Nimbi*, 2021, ceramic and mixed media

Vita

Katharine Lee Robbins is an artist working in Baton Rouge, Louisiana and Denver, Colorado. Katharine and her twin sister Caroline were born on their mother's birthday in 1993. She grew up in the northern suburbs of Chicago and moved to Colorado in 2011 to attend University of Colorado Boulder. She received her BFA in Studio Art and BA in Psychology in 2016. Katharine then spent a year at Colorado State University in the post-baccalaureate program before moving across the country to attend graduate school at Louisiana State University. She plans to graduate with her Masters in Fine Art in August 2022. After graduation, Katharine will work in her Denver studio and establish herself as an independent artist.