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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis submitted to the faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In candidacy for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

**Responses to Significant Personal
Experiences**

by

Mazin Siraj Adam

June 15, 2006

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Responses to Significant Personal Experiences

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Date: June 15, 2006

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Table of Contents

- I. Abstract
- II. Acknowledgement
- III. Introduction
- IV. Beginning
- V. Middle
- VI. Reassessing the Idea
- VII. Process of Making
- VIII. The Arsenal
- IX. Artist
- X. References

Abstract

The thesis project consisted of two sections. The first of these sections is the creation of twelve conceptually related sculptures installed in the Davison Gallery at Robert Wesleyan College. The second half of the project exists in the form of this written thesis, which will explore various ideas, processes and concerns associated within the individual sculptures and the prevailing concepts inherent to them all. With both the sculptural work and the written thesis I am exploring the personal significance of my past and culture on my work.

for my mother and father,

Acknowledgments

All new journeys in life are filled with people and situations that enhance the experience. I would like to recognize everyone who has helped me during this process, offering guidance and encouragement.

First, I would like to thank my mother and father. This thesis project would not have been possible without them. They have been a continuous source of strength and inspiration. I would also like to thank my friends and peers who have spent sleepless nights in the studio, compassionately sharing their thoughts and their hands. They were dire to the completion of my thesis.

I wish to extend special thanks to my thesis committee members, each of whom challenged me to think conceptually and push further the parameters of my art. I am personally grateful to Andy Buck and Julia Galloway for showing immense support and compassion throughout this thesis project.

And lastly, may I offer sincere gratitude to Rick Hirsch. I have grown to know you as a teacher of great strength, sensitivity and honesty. It was an honor to work with you and a privilege to learn so much from your wisdom, insight and experience.

Introduction

"The essence of sculpture is (for me) the perception of space, the continuum of our existence. All dimensions are but measures of it, as in the relative perspective of our vision lie volume, line, point, giving shape, distance, proportion. Movement, light, and time itself are also qualities of space. Space is otherwise inconceivable. These are the essence of sculpture and as our concepts of them change so must our sculpture change."

Isamu Noguchi

I am not a sculptor nor have I ever claimed to be an artist. I am simply someone who creates as a reaction to firing synapses in my mind and underlying need to stay busy with my hands, which in turn keeps my brain busy. I have learned over the past couples years that in order to bring a sort of order to the chaos in my life I use art and the process of creating art to bring stability and silence in the ever present noise. I make objects that embody numerous different concepts.

Making objects gives me satisfaction, which is incomparable to anything else. It is in the manner in which, I can distill an idea into its simplest most universal mode that I find most intriguing. I believe that all life is in a constant state of flux. Personal relationships to each other and the world that surrounds us is an underlying theme of my art.

Throughout the work there is always a contraction back towards relating parts and pieces. I bring human connections and personal connections to my work through the use of erotica. Meaning, I believe that there are some very basic human conditions that all mankind can relate to, certain universal modes

that all being can on the most basic level connect with. One of these few modes is the notion and impression of the erotic. Maybe due to its taboo quality in certain contemporary culture, or the fact that almost all of society has participated in a version of the erotic concept, what ever the predominant consensus is, the result is the same. The erotic is embedded in all of us and this was a connection I wished to investigate in the thesis work.

The act of personal creativity can be viewed as somewhat of a selfish act, which fulfills no real service to the humanitarian aspects of being. But as selfish as it may be, this creative action is one that I feel most comfortable in. It is the space in my mind where I have reactions to the environment of this world where I compose new ideas and thoughts, to build upon. It is these thoughts and ideas that become the birthplace, a womb, for a piece of art I create.

Mazin Siraj Adam, June 2006

Beginning

Upon first arriving to graduate school at RIT: School for American Craft I was not intimidated by the thought of being challenged to think about the work I created, I was accustomed to this mode. But rather what I feared was my inability to choose a specific idea worthy of pursuing.

Everything I create starts with an idea. An idea, to me, is the most essential component of the work. Art is so intuitive and responsive to the state of mind that the artist is in; every thought, intended or overlooked, comes forth in the end result. The portfolio I had submitted to graduate school and wanted to pursue in graduate school was based on traditions in clay having to do with utility. The pots I was creating at that time had little to do with utility and more to do with the ideas that fueled them. Architecture, male female fit, and symmetry were just a few ideas I was dealing with.

An important time in my graduate school exposed itself when I had to choose whether I was going to continue working in the context of utility or move into a realm where utility was of no concern. Where idea and form became more important. Creating pottery allowed me to work within a set of parameters. The end objective of the pots I was creating was to function in their inherent utility over all other components. I felt that the pots I was making made visual structures and social meaning take a back seat. At that this time in my work I was more concerned with the idea, and everything else was just an automatic function of how I made things. After numerous attempts of pushing my ideas

onto objects, which didn't really mirror them, I decided to drop utility and let form manifest itself.

Middle

I no longer felt the burden of having to make something work correctly. What was correct became the new question. I felt like I no longer needed to try and fit everything into a box, I could freely create. Now I was concerned with the big question: What was I going to create and how was I going to create it? The most logical and basic answer I came up with was to create objects, which had similar ideas, and themes that I had previously used in my pottery. Now I could focus solely on process, idea and find new meanings through the journey.

"Concepts appear and disappear. How easy it is to lose track of them in the myriad relationships, of depth to shallowness, of volume to plane, of density to clarity, small to large, palpable life to something dead...These pieces all started out as lessons- how to cut and how to relate to place. The three-dimensionality of the whole. The weight of the piece to the earth was my primary concern- the origin of my name."

Isamu Noguchi

My first reaction to this new mode of working was to get as primal as I could. I figured if I used an extremely basic language in my art, I could then reach a wider audience. I decided to use coil and pinch processes in the new work I was to make. They seemed to be as rudimentary as any process I have found in clay. Mind you, when I use the words primal and rudimentary I do not mean to say that they are easy, rather quite the opposite. I found, these

processes to be very honest, they reveal everything in there mark. Now that I had my process I moved further in my pursuit of making a sculpture as simply as I could make it.

The end result of this experiment ended with the creation of a structure, which was a three-dimensional four-foot wide triangle. The triangular shape was created because the triangle is one of the most basic shapes. The triangle has significant meaning to me. It symbolized my family, which consisted of three main parts, the pyramids that have always mystified me, and personal peak. This sculpture allowed me to approach my art with a new fresh perspective; where personal significance became the objective of my art . This breakthrough was a personal peak for me.

“The Power of Myth-People say that what we’re all seeking is a meaning for life. (I) think that what we’re really seeking is the experience of being alive so that our life experience on purely physical plane will have resonances within our innermost being and reality, so that we actually feel the rapture of being alive.”

Joseph Campbell

My original thesis proposal was to create a body of work which death with idea of myth. I have always been intrigued by cultural anthropology. Only through the rediscovery of our past have we been able to move ahead. Mythology alone was too broad of a theme; I needed to be clear and specific. This did not mean that I completely dropped the ideas dealing with myth, both personal and social. My past history and present relationship to existence, were also included in my thesis investigation. The proposal/artist statement, which I did get approved, was:

Clay has been used for the creation of ritualistic objects in many different cultures. The Egyptians believed that woman and man were created on the potters' wheel. In India, Hindus believe that Lord Shiva took the mud from the River Ganges and used it for the birth of humanity. Each culture has its own structure and significant device, which it uses with metaphorical reference and importance.

The intrinsic value that hand made objects encompass is extremely important. Objects created by human hands possess an aura of spirituality. These objects have the ability to create connections, which are related to all aspects of private and public history.

My intention is to create sculpture that references cross-cultural sacred forms. Through the use of phallic and yanic shapes, forms, and symbols I want to elicit an immediate, personal, and bodily relationship between the object and the audience. I believe that after the physical connection occurs, there is a moment that the individual is allowed to further explore his or her own spirituality.

There is a dire need for objects that call for a personal reflection. Only through this connection can we truly preserve our cultures and rituals. My sculpture is a catalyst for this ritual of rediscovery. By working with the juxtaposition of two forms, being opposite or similar, I have suggested the ideas of support systems and intimate relationships between two beings. Through this juxtaposition I want to further echo the human connection to ritualistic objects.

Reassessing the Idea

After taking the logical steps of revisiting past ideas and cultivating new themes, I again had to simplify and decipher the strength and focus of my thesis. The major themes I wanted to investigate and materialize were concepts about humanity's connection to ritual through objects, the idea of objects which symbolize and exemplify our connection to myth, and the connection I see between all thing and the human body, the erotic.

There was no way that I could ever do these potent ideas justice with just one body of work but that is why I say that my thesis was an investigation into these deep waters. The erotic was something I had always touched on through the pieces I made dealing with fit. But never had I openly stated that to myself and thus this acceptance became an important aspect to my work. I was very aware of this notion that I was no longer hiding my insecurities and wanted to make it even more obvious, so I even included direct correlations to sex and the sexual (erotic) concepts in my titles. But this was as direct I wanted to be. I felt that being too obvious left no room for growth. There is always something more intriguing about abstract art which leads to individual journeys.

The erotic seemed like a notion that everyone could relate to it was something that had been used in myth and art. It seemed the more I thought about it the erotic seemed to show up.

Process of Making

“The making of sculpture becomes a ritual when the sculptor becomes as one with it and the parts fall into its whole as if in a trance.”

Isamu Noguchi

The process by which I created my thesis exhibition work was not limited to any singular language. I threw cylinders on the wheel, which are sometimes altered and connected. I used cardboard molds to pound clay into, and pinched up walls where necessary. A building process was not going to be the determining factor in the work I created. I felt my ideas were too strong to be held back by traditional means of clay fabrication. I did what I needed to do to get the point across.

There were many times when the scale of the pieces did take a toll on my esteem, there were countless losses and failures. But none went without a lesson learned.

“Different shapes displace different amounts of weights and volumes given the character of their mass. There’s an intangible quality to a gravitational field. The degree to which I can articulate it through edge, boundary, centering, dislocation, mass and volume, is the degree to which I can point to an experience. To articulate a gravitational field is one way of constructing a place, but it has nothing to do with the logical process of putting something together.”

Richard Serra

Scale allowed me to deal with how personal someone was willing to get. If the piece was small and detailed a person would be more inclined to come right up to it. If it was large and simple a person would be more prone to stand off a bit. Scale allowed me to be more attune to the environment that surrounded the audience. The idea of objects embodying human emotions can

be employed by the use of scale. A small object, which suspends a large mass is viewed as surreal. How the weight of a large dark entity is felt on a small bright object was a very interesting thought for me to investigate.

The clay I used to create the sculptures was a mix of reclaimed stoneware. This was done so that the importance of clay came down to the most primal factor, that it was clay. I did not want the focus to be on what type of clay it was. At the time, I felt that this was the best way to be honest with my ideas.

For the surface I wanted to deal with depth and layering. I wanted the surface to be one with the form. I intended the glaze not to function as glaze over a piece of clay, but rather the opposite. I wanted it to seem as if the form was constituted entirely of glaze. To achieve this illusion, in certain cases I had to multi fire pieces from cone 10 down to cone 021.

The layering of three or four glazes over each other built a rich weathered surface. The use of lusters, allowed me to denote precious value when I needed too. The terra-sig permitted me to give the surface a soft skin like feeling. At times, the smooth terra-sig played as an excellent polar opposite to the gritty and textured cone 04 glazes. Melting glazes lower and hotter than they should be, became an excellent methodology for me to follow in creating surfaces for my exhibition. What was generally a mistake , became a desired effect. Allowing me to explore the marriage between surface and form, which I had never taken the time to investigate before. The ironic part of it is; I learned that recreating mistakes that are desirable are even harder to achieve than the regular anticipated result.

The Arsenal

"In the theory of relativity there is no unique absolute time, but instead each individual has his own personal measure of time that depends on where he is and how he is moving."

Stephen Hawkins

The exhibition consisted of twelve stoneware sculptures, each installed in a strategic manner. They occupied space parallel to the significance they held in the visual story. These twelve sculptures were composed of three different series: Lingam, Exodus and Mosquitos. Each series had its own concerns. Working in a series allowed me to be concise and accurate with my ideas. Before, I felt like I was pushing all my ideas onto one piece, which is a lot to ask from one sculpture. To make things clear and focused I created these three different series. I found that it was more interesting focusing on one idea for one piece. Each piece then became significant, because without it the whole story would be changed.

"When created materials are placed in the context of designed objects and environments, it is possible to see how the maker was motivated to express meaning through materials. The meaning is guided by desire for the juxtaposition. Carried too far it becomes reminiscent of the riches from the past. The association with imperial power may unfortunately become an additional stimulation for some ideologically disempowered people. Displays of wealth through materials is still concerned with power relations and can move the object beyond physical creativity.

When one works with materials and ignores context, there is one less layer of meaning. But it is not possible to create a thing and not find it in a context of sort. The context may offer a function or purpose against which the juxtaposition of materials and skill can be evaluated. Much of creativity comes from an appreciation of materials, how they are worked, how they fit, their strength and durability, environmental impact and appropriateness to circumstance."

Stephen Hogbin

The Lingam series consisted of five sculptures: Foundation Bipod, Crux Being, Announcement, Untitled 1, and Untitled 2. Foundation Bipod was the second largest piece in the show (44"x23"x13"); it was in this piece that I realized the power of two over one. Two small pieces are so much more powerful when put together. In essence, two large pieces put together could have more power. They could occupy more space as one. This was the aim for the Foundation Bipod. Visually the piece was composed of two large oval shaped vessels turned forty-five degrees towards each other and connected. The part that was fascinating to me was the section where the two oval forms met and one seemed to fold over the other.

The Lingam series is rooted in the lingams found in Hindu mythology. These lingams found in temples all over India and around the world, represent the male and female, counterparts together. The male phallus, commonly a vertical line, is placed through the center of the yoni, commonly a horizontal line with a dot, form embedded in the ground or on a pedestal. The Lingam series allowed me to reflect back on the culture that I come from. This work permitted me to visit my personal past and its internal relationship to a country and culture I feel so distant from.

This series, and thesis exhibition, allowed me to personalize a sort of distant but personal history. I interpreted a historical and socially significant symbol (the lingam) into an individual story. The lingams I was creating visually represented an internal and private mantra. They signified and sustained my creative existence. The lingam series physical represented the way I was feeling, either close and connected; or split and holding together at the smallest point.

The surface on the lingam series, along with the other series, was one where the outer shell was to look weathered, worn away. The inside, or area alluding to the inside, was to be soft or shiny something of a mystery to be found. That is how I felt about the culture I came from. At times I can relate to my culture on some levels and others I find myself watching and observing. There is so much rich old history in the culture of India that at times trying to relate to it can be overwhelming. Trying to read a book that has taken thousands of years to write is not easy to do in twenty-seven years. The Lingam series consisted of the largest sculptures in the exhibition. They were placed in the center of the gallery, with no walls to constrict their visual voices.

The Mosquitos series consisted of four wall sculptures: Protected Phallic, Receptive Yanic, Untitled (Variation #1B), and Untitled (Variation #2U). These hermaphroditic pieces crawled up the walls. They reacted to the flatness of the wall by bending themselves into shapes, which called upon references to the phallus and other human, mainly masculine, body parts. These objects signified humanness by relating to the human torso. The manner in which they were built added to the effect of ribbing. A skeleton behind the dermis.

The Mosquitos were placed along the sidewalls of the gallery, slightly above head level. These objects were coupled, Protected Phallic with Receptive Yanic, and Untitled (Variation #1B) with Untitled (Variation #2U). Each object masculine or feminine had its counterpart.

I have always associated a line and a dot as being a masculine and feminine symbol. On these Mosquitos that I made, I gave each one a gender by placing a signifier on it, a line or a dot. On the external and physical level they all

seemed similar but really they were different. The area denoting a gender was always dealt with in a polar opposite manner. The focal point of each Mosquitos was this area that dealt with gender. I used saturated colors for the Mosquitos to achieve a quality of elusiveness. Rubbers were used because of its ties to fetish. The idea of fetish helped glorify them.

The use of universal and basic components is a common theme in all the work I create. I feel it is easier to convey a message using simple universal visual cues. Less to me says more. The phallic symbol is one that all cultures and humankind can relate to on a sub-conscious level. The use of the phallic is dated in history everywhere. Thailand is littered with revered phallic symbols that stem from Buddhism in that region.

The Exodus series consisted of three sculptures: Support Arrangement, Blue Seed Origin, and Untitled (Nothing to Support). Blue Seed Origin, was the only sculpture which I used luster on. The origin of any work is one of the most significant things that can happen. To exonerate this moment and idea I used a socially recognizable clue, luster. The overall surface of the pod was a layered yet washed away blue hue, which coagulated in sections creating clusters of growth and crystals. This added to the idea of origin.

The sculpture Support Arrangement dealt with the idea of support. This sculpture allowed me to reflect on the integral support system that is in place for each, and everyone of us. If any part of this support network, which is in a continued state of constant flux was to fail, the entire arrangement might come to an end. The sculpture played this out in a very literal way. The base holds two components; the larger component has been placed precariously on the

smaller object. If the smaller object were to fail, this moment of paused interaction would cease to exist. In the sculpture Untitled (Nothing to Support) a large rectangular wall piece has a stream of red glaze flowing down the center with a impression of something that was, but no longer is, remains. The objective of this sculpture was to raise the question of what was there? It was also to emit a feeling of loneliness, of one element missing another. The box like shape was chosen for its relationships to the ideas of being rigid and immobile.

In all the work I created for my thesis exhibition I used the three universal shapes found everywhere. The circle, triangle, and square. These three symbols have many different social meanings that are very basic and easily understood.

“There are many ways in which elements may add up to become something more than the sum of their parts.”

Isamu Noguchi

The triangle has been used for a symbol of man repeatedly in history. The “V” like symbol or the inverted symbol of man represents woman. The circle is a shape with no end or beginning, similar to some views on the origins of the universe. The square is the symbol for protection and fortification. So many of the renaissance architectures played with the arrangements of the circle and square to build the perfect dome. In the same vein, I have continued to play with the arrangements of these shapes to create my own personal dome.

Artist

"I think at certain (you) feel the need to extend your self in various ways, but (you) never get too far out of your own backyard. Right after that I found that I was much more interested in the disciplines that had always been closer to me and more self-reflexive."

Richard Serra

There are countless modern and contemporary artist that I admire, and hope to some day draw akin to. Artist such as Brancusi, who called upon the stripping away with nonsense and getting right down to the essence of form. Isamu Noguchi, whose honesty to material and use of material resonated on primal level. Noguchi felt a tear in his self, the self he was trying to discover and reveal in his sculptures. This is something I feel a direct connection to. Noguchi was a pioneer in modern sculpture, where abstract being took on personal significance.

Contemporary artist such as Anish Kapoor have had a great impact on my work. The way he employs myth through industrial fabrication, which is masked by a mass of color, intrigues me endlessly. Kapoor has been able to use his culture as source of inspiration in a very metaphorical way. His way of dealing with internal space is executed in a precise manner. The illusion of depth he creates can lead someone back to the beginning.

Richard Serra's work has always inspired me. His rejection of utility in art is something that still makes me think twice. His use of contemporary means of fabrication for bigger than life sculptures sets a precedence for scale. His use of industrial material and neglect for human touch reaches out to a different realm,

where idea and process rule and end result mean little or nothing. Serra was not afraid of reaching into his past for inspiration for his art. I hope to be able to use my past as such a depth.

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