Expressions of duality

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Expressions of Duality

by Daniel White

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Date: August 19, 2002
And even if you were in some prison the walls of which let none of the sounds of the world come to your senses—would you not then still have your childhood, that precious, kingly possession, that treasure-house of memories?

-Rainer Maria Rilke
Letters to a Young Poet

I’m leavin’ my fam’ly
Leavin’ all my friends
My body’s at home
But my heart’s in the wind
Where the clouds are like headlines
On a new front page sky
My tears are saltwater
And the moon’s full and high

-Tom Waits
“Shiver Me Timbers”
Original Thesis Proposal

For the graduate thesis I will investigate duality, as it exists in the realm of ego and humility. This is an inward investigation to become aware of how it exists in me. Duality has been of special interest in my life through growing up in two culturally different families with one owning ego and the other humility. The dualism experienced resulted in an internal dialogue deciphering between the two. I am convinced that the diffusion of ego through humor towards a more humbled approach to life is an important foundational block for fully becoming aware of who I am. Humor can be a very serious affair communicating universally through a surface camouflage hitting levels and crossing lines many other forms of dialogue cannot. This structure was ingrained in me through my father, a trickster, who in essence trained me to follow. The trickster personality was of special interest to Pre Columbian America and consisted of a person with dualistic traits. The trickster set a humorous trap for a lesson to be learned and was a physical example of who we are at our worst or our immaculate best.

To communicate this idea in ceramics I am currently working in a plane format using slabs. This allows me to work with the physically dualistic aspects of front/back or two-sided, which set up visual and content comparisons. Containers are also feasible with the inside/outside emphasized through glazes, texture, and other media as well. The challenge is presenting this work in an aesthetically pleasing way to lure the viewer in visually to examine the layers of meaning underneath. The expression of layered humor is ageless but the timing and the way it is presented is crucial to its effectiveness.
The artist Tom Waits has a song in which he knowingly describes appreciating people and places only by moving far away from them. This particular song has a touch of the bittersweet black humor that goes beyond surface concerns to the core of introspection/reflection. I’ve recalled this song periodically through my graduate experience as I too sought my own core. What I found there was my families; forcing me to look both in the eye and realize I’m looking at me.

My mother was one of the only ones in her family not to have a white-collar existence and it affected her profoundly. It was obvious from a young age that her family cultivated a sense of specialness. The social bracket she grew up in of course reinforced this. No details were left untouched, as their houses were anything but casual. As I grew older I began to see the pressure and influence had not only on my mother but me as well. In order to go over to my there houses a complete wash was involved and a change of clothes was required even if it was just to drop over. I began to notice my behavior and personality change when I was there. I became a participant delusional in my belonging. They say,” presentation is everything”, and it is only recently I can appreciate such a statement again.

When you are young it is easy to be wrapped up in the grandeur and the money. It is easy to feel that you will get to know you’re family better as you get older but it wasn’t what I expected. The laughter heard when I was younger revealed a sadness later on as the wine flowed. It is a family trait to mask and I too learned it well. No matter the
success something dark and unknowing crept at the back of my thoughts. I saw the whole family as a mask but I could not see what it was doing. I was given a false sense of reality. I found that I had absolutely nothing in common with these people, their quest for materialism, or their “perfect” presentation of themselves. It is sad when you’re 15 and realize this because in a way you feel guilty about the very thought, even though its true.

Finally, and with my best wishes, my parents divorced. Unfortunately I had to live with my mother and began to truly see what the pressure and influence did through her dive into addictions. The darkness took over. I delved into my own world where I couldn’t be affected by the everyday. This will later start a focus point in my work. It is the tension between growing up and staying young, dealing with issues of both.

After two years of dealing with the out of control my father picked me up to live with him. In hindsight it reminded me of an initiation rite of passage Robert Bly talks about in his book *Iron John*. The son spends the early part of his life with his mother. Around 15 or so the father arrives to take the boy to live with the men for a while. Usually older men armed with ceremonial spears accompany him and it is a serious occasion. The women know this and theatrically beg the men to not take the son. It is useless for the boy has to go off to forge a bond with men, learn the sacred history, initiate himself worthy of being a man of the tribe and literally leave childhood behind. This is how its been done for thousands of years and mine took place in a suburban
apartment complex. He came, I put my belongings in the truck and moved in with my father. It took less than an hour.

After I moved in with my father I began to hang around the men that were his friends. I began to spend more time at his auto shop not to learn how to work on cars but rather to drink coffee and learn a few wrong jokes. Always there was a story. This was pivotal in the transition from the mother’s house to the father. From jokes and stories and listening to the old men I learned about unspoken rules of manhood. One is you don’t look back; something might be gaining on you. A second one is that no matter what you’re situation is someone else has it harder. These and others are universal truths but it’s who told me them that fit into my context.

The road of the high and low both serve equal and important functions in the development of a fully rounded person. It is usually one's family that one learns the intricate details and circumstances of life. To have two extremes to learn from has been in my best interests. And if you would ask me about it I’d probably now just have a big laugh over it, a sure sign of working itself out.

**Historical Influences**

I found some my interests drawn to Outsider art after I arrived at graduate school. In this work I found a freshness and breaking out of the traditional box. There is an
intense passion for the work by the artists of this genre, particularly a man named Henry Darger. Darger created a fifteen volume set of text and pictures titled *In the Realms of the Unreal* spanning 41 years that was worked on every available waking minute of his life. Darger was a schizophrenic who sacrificed his life to a dream, and by all accounts his work proves this. On the other hand I saw in his work an unyielding intent, work that compels and repels at the same time, and a singular conviction that allowed for unity depth and vision².

The fifteen-volume set tells the story of the heroic Vivian sisters who battle evil at every turn. It is no doubt Darger’s psyche on display here as he tries to grasp his own demons putting these child-hero characters through every situation good and repulsive. It is this push-pull scenario that draws people to this obscure man’s work. It is a juxtaposition between a Golden Children’s book and WWII³. What endures about Darger is his inventiveness, his belief in what he made, and believe it or not beautiful renderings executed that display an agonizing awareness of moral contradictions in himself and the outside world. At the time I found his work I was beginning to solidify and come to terms with my aesthetic context. The dualities existent in Darger’s pictures and the seemingly innocent imagery that carries loaded information appealed to my tastes. I began to align myself with other artists who share these same traits (minus the mental illness).
As I began my search for duality I searched universally and came across the trickster, that great “heyoka” of Native American lore. A mythical figure he reminded me of brer rabbit in the old Uncle Remus stories back home. In order to make this body of work I had to come to terms with my dual nature. It seemed every character trait I have comes with its opposite. So it is with the trickster who embodies character trait polarities. He claims irresponsibility in many of his actions and will self-sacrifice to get a moral across. He is a student of chaos and disruption though dark humor.

The basis for the stories is not what is the truth but rather what is the right thing to do. The trickster embodies excessive ego for the benefit of the story. John Huizinga refers to the trickster as a marvelous instance of the player referring to the stories taking place in a state different from everyday life. This state of play allows the beginning and consequences to take place on its own ground and time frame creating in the end meaning.

No other influence had such a profound effect on my thinking than the book Iron John by Robert Bly. It is a straight shooting book for men based loosely on the medieval tale of Iron John. The story involves a young boy (our child-hero) who encounters a man imprisoned at his father’s castle courtyard in an iron cage. While playing in the courtyard one day the golden ball (ego) rolled into the cage. The man will return the ball once the boy lets the man out. Of course the key is under his mother’s pillow. He has to steal the key to get his ball back. This is the foundation for the book. Stealing the key from the
mother is the path towards manhood; only today a softer male has emerged scared of his own wild qualities enabling many to take back the key. The retrieval of the key involves the initiation rites of manhood, it involves being with the father, and the creation of a healthy masculinity that is centered. The personality of the trickster, according to Bly, is seen as an important step as it helps round out a complete person⁶.

I felt a strong pull towards this book for the clarity and direction it gave. It gave understanding into the events of my life and why my art had an underlying current of manhood going through it since I have been in graduate school. It started with the grandeur of childhood when I was young and as I entered my early 20’s I encountered a road Bly refers to as the road of ashes, descent, and grief⁷. It is the dark, nourishing road that usually happens during the searching period of one’s life before that “one precious thing” arrives. The abandonment of the high road favored by my mother’s family enabled me to make my own decisions that ultimately led me to my precious thing, ceramics. Perhaps this body of work is my way of finally getting my key back …I like to think so.

The Early Development

One of the first ceramic artists I was newly drawn to was Charles Krafft. I encountered his work at the Syracuse National 2000 trip to the Everson Museum as a first year graduate. His body of work, The Porcelain War Museum Project, combined blue
and white willow pattern on top of a porcelain made war weaponry. He laid this patterning over a slipmolded grenade creating a haunting juxtaposition between war and domesticity. This blue and white decorating is perhaps the most endured form of decorating in Europe and Asia. By putting it on a weapon he plays a nasty tune of content and culture. This thought provoking marriage between death and domestic imagery realizes the potential for ceramic reference and its history through a postmodern lens.

The goal since I begun the graduate program was to combine form and image into a cohesive statement. I came into the program making large “crock”s that had incised slip drawings on them. Basically I used a form to draw pictures of many varieties on. While the pictures had continuity to them, I secretly knew that there was no true intent. I resolved on finding this along with form and image. It would take over a year.

After a year of trial and error I settled initially on a two-sided form. The very first involved a physical plane that featured characters on both sides. On one side of the vertical slab a display of trickster mayhem was displayed while the other side was more reserved. At this time I was looking at Akio Takamori’s envelope vessels from the late 80’s. They functioned as much as 3-D Images as they did vessels. The form adjusted to the drawing complementing each other with as much ease as the line and color. This was my blueprint but I soon learned it wasn’t the right one.

It was decided between my professor, Rick Hirsch, and I to use the vessel as the duality metaphor. The duality being addressed for the thesis at the time was ego and
humility. The vessel metaphor would incorporate the inside and outside using texture and glazes. It ran off course though using drawings to represent the duality involving a new and improved trickster and an unwilling victim. The inside was cast aside as I referenced an inside with a lustrous metallic glaze. Front and back went together more successfully this time around. During this time the use of earthenware as the clay body was introduced adding a new warmth in color and serving an important role later on as the material for the weeble wobble. Under glazes, commercial glazes, as well as slips were introduced initiating growth and breadth technically. On the other hand serious, relevant issues were concerning the committee and at the end of the first quarter of thesis year there was no form or image.

Inspiration comes in many ways and this time it was a post card. It was that of Leopold Foulem. I would walk by and be drawn to its use of a simple but thought out sculptural form with decoration. The decorations were ceramic historical motifs unifying a form and image in a fresh conceptual way. Like Krafft earlier, Foulem used existing (even industrial) imagery and decided this could work over the caricature drawings that were on the vessels.

The Final Body of Work

It started out as a light conversation but the more time that was spent thinking about it the more it made sense. If you had playful imagery you need a playful form. The form
was the weeble wobble made by Hasbro and the rocking back and forth motion would be the metaphor representing the experience of growing up in two families that were different culturally and through social class structure.

The weeble wobble has its origins with the Romper Room show. The original was the large Romper Room Punching Clown and the weebles are tiny versions of these bop bags. The early weebles,1970’s, were egg-shaped with imagery in plastic\textsuperscript{10}. For this body of work I concentrated on a more personally familiar version dating from the mid-80’s. Since they didn’t sell them anymore I went on to E-Bay, an online auction source, to obtain these little gems. I found myself in a bidding war over nine weebles for four days (much to the amusement of my peers).

The first thing that was done was appropriating the object into clay. Earthenware seemed the logical choice as it has been a use oriented clay for millennia. I enjoy its underdog history as a serious clay and decided for a toy it was perfect, no bells and whistles. Earthenware also has a reputation of being replaceable\textsuperscript{11}, probably in part as the popular material for flower pots thus taking away the fear of a weeble breaking, a natural occurrence in ceramics. The second course of action was finding how it tilts and doesn’t fall over in clay. The third was a return to the wheel for the best execution of the weeble. I was finally using the wheel as a tool. The early clay weebles were trying to achieve this with round heavy bottoms. I had some successes with some good wobbling but over time more pressing issues needed to be addressed such as decorating.
Instead of borrowing decoration from ceramic history, a decoration (hereon pattering) was needed to fit the duality and my two families. In the beginning of the year I was discussing ego and humility on a universal level but later connected it to my mother and father’s family. For my father’s side I chose the icon pattern plaid flannel. It is a common pattern that implies working and casualness at the same time. It also has an enduring quality, steadfast against change. For my mother’s side I chose the white-collar icon pattern pinstripe. The pin stripe has leanings towards business and in some cases a reflection of status in the workplace or society. I chose the blue with white pin stripes for the duality.

The original emphasis on ego/humility for the proposal in the end was included in the dualities of serious/light hearted, father/son, social class structure, and courage/fear. This helped choose the colors and patterns for the weebles besides the plaid and the pinstripe.

As time went on the weebles became larger from one to two feet. For the making I would wheel throw the forms, and later assemble the forms from two thrown pieces. This working in multiples allowed for quick results and the ability to work on opposing dualities at the same time. In the serious/lighthearted duality I used a metallic black glaze for first weeble and for its opposite I would randomly apply under glaze and glaze with no specific plan (or guarantee). This duality surfaced in the graduate show with a serious weeble on my mother’s side and a lighthearted weeble for the father’s side. For the social
class structure there was continuation of the plaid and pinstripe, the pattern version of ego and humility. The plaid was matte and the pinstripes were glossy on a large weeble in front of the group with an accompanying weeble beside it. It was important to me to show equal amounts of both of these patterns for they coexist in me. For the father/son and courage/fear weebles facial expression as well as patterning told the story. The father has two sons one in each family representing before the division. The courage/fear is a reflection of the decisions I make concerning people and the effects of having to stand by it or yield.

The weebles exist in the context of play. Like the trickster stories the realm of play exists outside the realm of normal cognitive reality. It has its own rules, time, and space. This context uses everyday life and human events as the source of its creativity. Usually feats and action happen that normally just wouldn’t take place. This is a place of neutral ground and of the imagination. This is the place I decided I could talk about my duality. In this realm I can present an arming issue in a humorous way utilizing push/pull like Darger of earlier. The nature of play allows the representation of something real without the complication of details and limits. Like the process of making art it can be unpredictable and spontaneous for it allows the room for it. All of this is not meant to be an escapist route but more of a carefully controlled delivery. Walking up to the weebles thinking they mean one thing the viewer leaves with another. This delivery can also include the taboo of cute, a word used to describe them. Making this work in itself is
considered taboo in the South. Telling such a truth can bring pleasure, for it’s a relief to recognize it.

For these above reasons the context of play effected how the weebles would be displayed in the graduate show. It was a question of whether the pieces would look like ducks out of water on pedestals. The pedestals in the installing made them look out of place, even more it wasn’t saying what it needed to say. I decided to go with a floor plan. I did not realize the shoes I was now trying to fill as it was now a matter of effectively occupying a space in the middle of the gallery floor. I was perplexed at having to arrange sixteen large clay weebles in a unifying arrangement. At first they were arranged next to a wall. Tile was bought to be used as a dividing line and help carve out an imaginary boundary. Arrangement after arrangement was done. It was a crash course in gallery installing and how important placement can be. After three full days I was at a standstill. Since this was the first time out of the studio space the objects just needed time and observation. A breakthrough finally came the day before the opening and the resulting arrangement spoke what it should. The pieces were spread vertically down the middle of the gallery floor. In the front of the show were three weebles side by side: one flannel, the other blue and white, and a weeble with both pattern icons representing the self. Walking past, the weebles were separated by their respective families on one side or the other by a tile “line.” Behind the three weebles was the duality of the father/son. I chose to have two sons on both sides with one father. On the mother’s side was a son desperate for the
viewer’s attention (acceptance). Next to the father was a playful son talking into his father’s ear saying this is not the true son. Moving along the next was a weeble grouping of the two families. On the mother’s side I put four weebles side by side, three black and one patterned. The color black and stiff arrangement refers to the darkness of earlier experiences and the social class structure that seems unapproachable.

The patterned weeble is a humorous take on formal pajamas versus on the other side cowboy and Indian pajamas. This duality although specific allowed for whimsical breathing room. On my father’s side the weeble grouping consists along with the cowboy and Indian pajama weeble: three playful weebles of random color arrangement, a small plaid weeble, and the courage and fear weebles. The courage and fear weebles has the fearful one looking on at the other dark weebles while the courageous one confidently has his back turned asserting independence. The amount of weebles on this side is to imply preference. At the anchor we have a pinstriped and flannel weeble representing resolution and completion.

**Assessment**

In the end I believe I found out what I needed to. I was happy with the resulting form and image solution and the ability to express something personal. This image/form synthesis was a working goal that began early in the first graduate year. The show itself
enabled me to explore a new approach of setting up and display. The display in the middle of the gallery floor demanded that I give up hesitating about showing something personal as there was no place to hide and in the end nothing left to hold back.

Much learning took place in the installing. I hesitate to call it an installation for the planning of the presentation was unclear. This teaches the power of planning. There was however an initial idea of arrangement that involved presenting in twos but it expanded once they left the studio space. The installment tested and took everything I learned to be able to see it through making it one of the last great lessons of graduate school. In future exhibitions the space, content, and the objects presented will be more carefully considered. The content and intent will focus on one duality rather than four at the same time. It was a challenge to juggle four dualities deserving of equal attention. You can't say it all at once it seems.

After the oral defense I realized that more was talked about than just the work. The subjects ranged from the nature of being an artist to the potential of fear holding one's work back. This withholding was a challenge to overcome. In a short but well spent two years I was able to find this and many other truths out allowing my core to surface. It is this core and graduate experience that will propel me ever forward down the road.

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1 On page 86 Bly describes the passing from the mother's house to the father's house through the example of a tribal custom in New Guinea. Armed with spears they take the boy away who until then lived exclusively with his mother.
2 Art Brut by Lucienne Peiry page 286. This singular conviction by Darger was instrumental in creating my own conviction in my work.

3 Peiry page 286. This is in reference to the imagery he copied out of advertisements and incorporated to his own imaginary landscapes. He kept detailed records of every fictional battle.

4 Redefining American Literary History Andrew Wiget pages 86-87. In this chapter he focuses on the trickster as teacher in storytelling. Often he is the complete definition of dualistic impulses and traits.

5 Andrew Wiget page 94. Huizinga suggests that play is older than culture and that play helps evaluate life.

6 Robert Bly. This last paragraph is collective information gathered from the first chapter of Iron John, The Pillow and The Key, pages1-27.

7 Iron John, Road of Ashes page 79.

8 Mark Del Vecchio Postmodern Ceramics. Pages 110-111 decoration meets form(object) referencing the history of ceramic ware with the issues of modern issues at the same time.

9 Postmodern Ceramics. Pages 139. The term envelope was borrowed, whether or not it is Del Vecchio’s own word is unknown.


11 Postmodern Ceramics. On page 189 Del Vecchio refers to unglazed terra cotta being known historically as “the lowest grade of peasant pottery.”

12 What is Art For? By Ellen Dissanayake Pages 77-78.
Bibliography


Technical Information

**Earthenware Clay Body 04**

- Red Art 65
- GoldArt 10
- OM4 Ball Clay 10
- Talc 7
- Nepheline 7
- Syenite
- Bentonite 1
- Grog 5-10

**VanTyne Base (revised)**

- Petalite 20
- Spodumene 10
- Gerstley Borate 50
- Zircopax 25
- Whiting 3

**Glossy White Opaque 04**

- Ferro Frit 3124 80
- EPK 8
- Zircopax 12

Stains: Red 10%
- Yellow 10%

**White Slip 04**

- Feldspar 100
- Flint 100
- E.P.K. 100
- OM4 50
- Nepheline 50
- Syenite
- Gerstley 12.5
- Borate

Used in collaboration with:
- Spectrum Underglazes
- Spectrum Metallic Glazes
- AMACO Glaze Pencils

- The ceramic weebles consist of a two-part construction of wheel thrown forms. The added benefit of grog to the clay body allowed better throwing as well as durability during the firing. After the initial construction and trimming white slip was applied to the surface. When the piece was almost dry underglazes were used to decorate the white surface. The underglazes could be mixed like acrylics and diluted for washes and shading.
- For the weebles that were “figures” the top was underglazes and clear gloss while the bottom was a glaze base formula. Quite often a glaze pencil was used to draw or highlight a face. Decoration on these were done pre and post-firing.

- For the patterned weebles several approaches were used. Some had a solid commercial black metallic glaze that was sprayed on. Some were underglazes with a clear gloss on top. Some incorporated two base glazes. Perhaps the most interesting were the ones that had an assortment of all the glazes and underglazes in an unplanned application.
Charles Krafft
Porcelain War Museum Project
Frag Grenade 2000
Porcelain
h 5.25 in.  w 2.5 in.

Henry Darger
At Calmarrina Undated
Tracing and Watercolor
h 24 in.  w 37.75 in.
Collection de Art Brut Lausanne

Akio Takamori
Aphrodite and Eros 1991
Porcelain
h 11.25 in.  w 21 in.

Leopold Foulem
Small Terrine with Porky Pig 1996
Ceramic and Found Objects
h 8 in.  w 12.25 in.
Weebles-Father’s Side (Dimensions variable)

Weebles-Father/Son Duality (Dimensions Variable)
Weebles-Self Portrait-Mother and Father’s Side (Dimensions Variable)

Weeble’s-Mother’s Side (Dimensions Variable)
Weebles-Self Portrait/Resolution
(Dimensions Variable)

Weebles-Group Shot
(Dimensions Variable)