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**Rochester Institute Of Technology**

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
School for American Crafts  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts  
Metal Crafts and Jewelry Design

# ***Palpable***

John K. Archer, BFA, RN

October 21, 2012



# ***Palpable***

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# *Palpable*

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# ***Palpable***

***...a dedication...***

**To the many people, places, and experiences that have brought me to this destination on my journey, I thank you.**

A special thanks to Dora, who took a personal interest in my work and support of me as a student and friend.

Friends, classmates, and students at RIT; seeing your art and hearing your stories had positive impact on me daily. You have all been an inspiration to learn from. Thank you.

Len Urso, thank you for teaching me valuable lessons during my graduate school experience.

Juan Carlos Caballero Perez, thank for your care and guidance during my graduate experience. You have a voice of reason and address most issues with a smile. Thank you for that.

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Alex Miokovic, your undaunted dedication and devotion to me and my process right to the very end has been an exceptional example of a leadership and mentoring. You are a true scholar.

**To my Family, here and gone: none of this would have ever come to pass without your love and support.**

Uncle John, you have been a true and real gift in my life. As a surrogate father after my father died, you were present in his absence at times when I needed him most. I thank you and I love you.

Betsy, Lisa, Tyler, and Max; how four people have come together in such a loving way is amazing. I feel grateful to be a part of our incredible family.

Mil and Fil, you are at the top of the list. You both have loved and supported me without reservation, even at times when you were not quite sure what I was doing. I love you both and deeply appreciate your tender care.

Lynda, marrying you has proven to be the best decision I have made in my life. You stand beside me with love and support of all I do. Your care of me is more than I could ever ask for, or imagined. You have provided the opportunity for me to pursue higher education and higher aspirations in my life. You have never stopped encouraging me. You are my partner and my love. Crazy.....I love you...today.

### **To the dearly departed...**

Dad (Paul A. Archer), getting reacquainted with you when I did was a gift I gave myself. It's all about timing. You never stopped loving me and I know that. I miss you and I will never stop loving you.

Pachew (George A. Rose, my grandfather), the pride I have felt from you with every accomplishment I have achieved was overwhelming. I love you and miss you. Also, thank you for showing how to use hand tools and how to be a man. The skills you taught me have stayed with me to make the person I see in the mirror every day.

## Biography

I was thrown into the world in 1963 during a dark cloud of American history. The president had just been shot and was being buried on the day I arrived. John F. Kennedy became my namesake. Complications abound. The Vietnam War started in 1965 and ended in 1975. Ten years my parents worried about whether or not my brother or I would have to serve. To complicate the situation further, my parents divorced in 1972. After attending five elementary schools, I managed to study and graduate from one high school. Not thinking I had enough money, or being encouraged toward college, I enlisted in the United States Navy. I spent six years serving the country during the Cold War. Filling my life with rich experiences seemed to be the goal. From time to time my life would spin out of control. Somehow, maybe though the grace of God, I managed to survive and to find out more important facets to this life.

I have traveled far in life's journey having made many explorations along the way. I have worn and still don many hats such as husband, artist, sailor, nurse, son, brother, teacher, uncle, student, nephew, lover, friend, person, and human being. Some of these hats I wear in different capacities now exemplifying the flux of life. The hat of the artist is the one that I keep coming back to (or it keeps finding me) and this hat provides the energy and passion for making art. Each of these hats has been important in forming the person I am today and they continue to inform me of the world, and help shape my relationships. The hat of the artist is the equipment that has brought me to a new, RIT destination on my journey.



# *Palpable*

## **I. ABSTRACT.**

**To provoke intrigue using simplified, whimsical, playful (toy-like) forms with recycled materials that convey complex, possibly dark, relationships to foster a curiosity of innocence lost and deliver a deeper meaning.**

To me life is an exercise in exploring the human condition; specifically relationships. From the day we arrive we establish relationships with everything in our world, even before we arrive, if we count the ten months of uterine swimming. The sights, sounds, and touch of lights, voices, and caress all play a part in our connection to the world. My thesis work focuses on the connections among interpersonal relationships, childhood, and natural cycles. My use of the term 'interpersonal relationships' refers to more intimate relationships, like family and good friends, rather than referring to casual acquaintances, like the bank teller or the coffee shop barista. For me, the meaning of natural cycles is the ability to grow and/or decay. Relationships and steel share the idea of natural cycles. A relationship may grow, then through lack of attention fade away. The same holds true for steel. Without care and protection, steel will rust and decay. The art work reflects these themes and how I have made them into lasting configurations.

The goal of my thesis is to explore and examine interpersonal relationships through child-like figures that express natural cycles in the human experience. Metal sculptures utilizing recycled, surplus, and “up-cycled” materials illustrating past or current associations in order to obtain a better understanding of special connections. *Urban Dictionary*’s definition of up-cycled is; “using ordinary objects to make something extraordinary” (Up-cycle, n. d.) I produced compositions that suggest the figure, or objects, while translating personal relationships for the viewer. Once encountered, the physical manifestations create a forced visual dialogue to which the audience could respond to and possibly question. With reflection, the audience may examine themselves through the work, possibly sparking a relationship or childhood memory of their own that the art draws out in them.

My challenge was to physically manifest these mostly intangible intimate relationships and childhood memories. Using figures, or compositions that suggest the body and objects, I help the viewer by interpreting and translating the relationships into forms that interacted with the audience. By constructing a physical as well as visual dialogue between viewer and form, the objective is to stir-up intrigue and to promote self-examinations of our experiences and our relationships.

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## II. DISCUSSION of SOURCES and RESEARCH.

Everything I come in contact with has an influence on my life, and these memories have ultimately infused into my work. The simplest joys and pleasures of a routine day can be deeply inspiring. In my undergraduate program I was asked to think of my inspirations in regard to art-making. I was also asked to show how images or people influenced the artistic decisions I made. To pin all that responsibility on a handful of ideas would be unjust to the complexity of events and situations of the everyday that affect everybody's work. Here is a short, incomplete inspirational 'trigger' list of what has sparked my imagination;

neon signs;  
dirty fingernails;  
new fallen snow;  
cracked sidewalks;  
the taste of a sweet, gritty pear;  
sounds of a bowling alley or roadside diner;  
the pounding sound of large raindrops on the window sill;  
the feeling of pitch dark unable to see my hand in front of my face;  
the smell of bloated road kill or a fresh spritz of skunk;  
the visceral feeling I get riding a rollercoaster;  
a gentle kiss on the nape of my neck;  
working in the studio;  
a walk in the woods;  
the smell of traffic;  
textures of sushi;

elevator music;

riding a bike;

crowds;

and even the act of typing these thoughts on the screen or the arrangement of them to look like a Christmas ornament inspires me.

My experiences, as well as some artists, have influence my work. Taking a critical look at some of my aesthetic heroes and heroines, I find that I am drawn to works with a larger scale, a playful nature, and the durability of the materials used, usually steel. All the artists who have influenced me reference the connections to relationships, childhood, and natural cycles that are crucial to their work. Richard Serra, Louise Bourgeois, Tom Otterness, and Jenny Seville all have aesthetic and conceptual qualities to which I find parallel to my own.

At the top of the list making sizable sculpture of core-ten steel, Richard Serra is a prime example of a driving force in my work. Serra's art incorporates two of my three themes which include relationships between people and natural cycles. "Time and movement became really crucial to how I deal with what I deal with, not only sight and boundary but how one walks through a piece and what one feels and registers in terms of one's own body in relation to another body" (Serra, n. d.).

In the above quote, Serra references the relation of one body to another. I, too, attempt to place people in relationship to my work to elicit feelings. With regard to eliciting emotion, Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981) is the piece I think of most readily. The sculpture was installed in 1981 and caused such strong negative feelings with the people in power, the site specific work was

dismantled in 1989. This proves that even something so large, heavy, and steel became ephemeral with its demise.

Tom Otterness looks at the particular relationships between individuals, as living beings, that are capable to view works of art and between those individuals as they directly interact with the actual works of art. However, Otterness includes the childhood theme as well. My own aesthetic strives to be similar to Tom Otterness which initially grabs the viewer's attention using safe, simple, child-like figures that convey deeper meanings after contemplation. Some of Otterness's work translates old fairy tales to inform the public of current events. "Whether ankle-high or giant-size, Tom Otterness's roly-poly figures are whimsical, fantastical, and not as innocent as they may seem" (Sheets, 2006).

Utilizing cast bronze figures, Otterness brings about a reaction between the figure and the viewer establishing a relationship. Whimsy and fantasy give way to figuring out the depth and thought of Otterness's offering. Making objects in a similar way, I feel my work shows the viewer a deeper understanding of portrayed relationships.

Similar to Otterness, Louise Bourgeois captures and offers the viewer a connection between personal relationships and her own childhood. Bourgeois captures many of the elements I struggle to achieve; scale, materials, and relationships. Her spider forms oddly reference her mother.

"In 2001, thousands of tourists saw her work 'Spiders' when it was exhibited on the plaza at Rockefeller Center for 2 1/2 months as part of a Public Art Fund program to promote outdoor

exhibits in New York. It featured a 30-foot-high spider, 'Maman,' carrying a basket of eggs, flanked by two smaller spiders (Peltz, 2010).

Bourgeois suggests that the spider *is* her mother in *Maman*, (2001), and that the spider her mother has protective, sheltering, and nurturing qualities safeguarding her eggs. Nonetheless, her work and concepts evoke a certain emotional intrigue due to her use of titles. During an episode of *Art 21* Bourgeois was quoted, "My childhood has never lost its magic. It has never lost its mystery. It has never lost its drama" (Wegman, 2001). I feel close to this statement and its connection to my childhood. I allow myself to think in a naïve, innocent way to express my ideas regarding relationships.

Finally, Jenny Seville offers large strokes of paint on large canvases to develop a feeling of flesh. This flesh becomes a metaphorical presence in the material of paint in itself and in the representation of her subjects as well. As a contemporary painter, Seville creates an uncomfortable closeness and, therefore a confrontational image. Due to the sheer scale, she creates imposing work that interferes with the viewer's personal space. Although my aesthetic draws mostly on the natural cycle of steel and rust, when I have added color, I attempt to create the layering of pigments, primarily black, white, and red paint I find in Seville's work. Instead of using brushes like Seville, I have used rubber gloves applying the paint directly to the metal. In this way, I have eliminated the tool of application and I have used enamel paint in my attempt to mimic the layering of pigments that Seville masters.

All of these artists; Serra, Otterness, Bourgeois, and Seville demonstrate strength of image and exhibit interest through materials as well as concepts. It is these aforementioned aesthetic

qualities I attempt to show in my work. I believe I have achieved success in my own work, yet realize there is much more to understand in accomplishing the degree of resolution these artists have achieved.

Another source of inspiration to my thesis work is drawn from the ancient Greek caryatid figure. I remember learning about them in an undergraduate art history class years ago, and they have found their way back into my current work.

A caryatid is typically a female human figure carved in marble, literally 'standing in' as a pier, [column](#), or [pilaster](#) supporting an [entablature](#) (Caryatid, n. d.). These special supports are found in Greek architecture like the [Erectheion in Athens, Greece](#) (Caryatid, n. d.). Historically, caryatids symbolize the women of Caryae, who betray the Greeks by allying themselves with the Persians. The victorious Greeks enslaved them (Caryatid, n. d.).

As a deliberate exchange, I substituted the material (marble for steel), increased the number of figures per column (one instead of two), and introduced ambiguity of sexual identity (instead of all the figures being female), yet never losing track of the concepts of structural *support* and *history* bring to the work. Simplified figures of steel take the place of the majestic marble women who were carved in antiquity.

Summing up the conditions that influence my art, I have found a multitude of inspirations. From the banality of the everyday, to historical architecture and contemporary art, I have drawn on all that I know to make the best physical expression of interpersonal relationships, childhood, and natural cycles.



### III. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Making sense of the making is an ongoing and omnipresent process. The interpretations of the recipe are never quite the same, so the flavors are constantly evolving. My work has moved through a variety of tastes and aesthetics. The stories of concepts unfold as the materials and process laid the path for interpretation of connections. Interpersonal relationships, childhood, and natural cycles are told through toy-like forms of steel to enrich my experience as well as, hopefully, the viewer's experience. The progression of my work has gone from propane tank forms to oversized beads that formed gigantic jewelry. From these large beads, representational human figures evolved to capture my efforts and dominated the thesis work.

In a fast-paced world of my own making, moving from one arena to the next requires not only a physical relocation, but also a rethinking, slowing, or speeding up. It is a mental and spiritual move through time. Making adjustments, thinking and moving with a renewed purpose and adaptation to the new environment all require time and energy for assimilation. The connections I make in both time and space not only aid the physical, but also the metaphysical adaptation to the new situation. The time it takes to shift gears is occasionally much too short to be fully prepared for the next event. Sometimes the time needed doesn't exist at all. Yet, my relationships with people, my childhood, and natural cycles are dynamic, and continue to change constantly. Celebrating the constant flux is the key I believe to grasping the world.

For me, sketching is paramount for capturing the sometimes illusive thoughts that run recklessly through my head. Drawing captures the relationships and pins down images or concepts passing through my mind. Once in the studio, I leave the drawings behind and grow the images that I have in my head. My hands physically manifest the vision within my head that I have secured to memory and sketch.

Throughout my life, I have felt a continuous drive to create, a calling of sorts to the aesthetic realm of possibilities that art offers. In early childhood my talent was recognized and rewarded. Later in life as a young adult it was discouraged and thought of as impractical, and definitely not a way to make a successful living. After figuring out that I have always been an artist, I had already served six years in the military and practiced over fifteen years as a registered nurse.

My responsibility to self-expression allows me the freedom to think and create like a child. I deliver physical connections between figural objects and visual relationships between figures. I also feel a responsibility to myself in creating in a way that is personal to me, yet universal enough for everyone to share. I feel that in this balance of universality and personal information I will be able to validate myself through my art, because I was unable to confirm my previous artistic efforts after childhood.

## a). Process

Initially in my graduate program, I was making figures, large-scale beads, and steel ball-chains only to realize the clasp connector had become the focal element in my work. The

transition, joint, or connection was more relevant than what was on either end. The connector is a utility object and metaphorically becomes the relationship between the two ends. It is similar to the proverbial glue that holds relationships together. These relevant ideas form around the spaces between the objects, situations, and people and incorporate transitions and relationships into physical objects. By producing work that is easily understood in form; it is my goal is to persuade the viewer to think about their connection to the work and to the multiplicity of resulting relationships. Producing a variety of works with a thread of connectivity allows the audience to choose the object that makes the best connection for them. Sometimes, the work vies for attention either by literally reaching out to the viewer with limbs or pulling the viewer in for closer inspection of surface.

I invent objects and figures that express relationships, and connections that I have made to myself and to others as a child. Relationships draw on conceptual or abstract ideas that have challenged me to manifest them physically. I enjoy large-scale toy-like objects that initially attract the eye and then, stimulate emotions and the intellect. Using bright primary colors was my initial way to bait the viewer with a false sense of security. As my ideas changed, colors gave way to exposure of the raw materials, rust, and coarse welding beads of assembly. Capitalizing on the effects of bare metal and welded scars, I felt a certain honesty to the materials I used, instead of covering them up with pigments.

## b). Studio

Coming up with and developing ideas is a fast and furious process. I moved quickly from thinking to making in transition from idea and sketch to the assembly of materials. I enjoyed

the physicality of the construction process in the studio; welding and fabricating art. The immediacy of cutting, grinding, and welding metal was very satisfying to me.

Relationships are not physical entities, but a term used to describe the pairing and interactions of two or more things. Integral relationships form between my hands with the tools, the materials, and heat as I work in the studio. I was engaged with gravity's gift of weight and submerged in the heat of the process. Employing the equipment, my hands allowed the tools to transform the material into the imagined objects of my sketches.

Even with the chaotic appearance of the studio, what happened is actually a departure from chaos. I know the routine of the studio. I had worked there for quite some time. The tools met the material with my body skilled at the angle, force, and direction of movement both the tool and the material must take. The steps I took were dancelike and rhythmic. The world melted away and all that was left is the material, the tool, and me. The three of us danced, drew breath, then danced again. The movements and steps change and flow with each new piece I made. These simple steps of gratifying work centered my person to create a better understanding of what I am doing in this life.

I noticed that when I got to the moment like that I feel like a child in the studio; I pull out the materials, I plug in the tools, and I turn on the equipment. **I begin to play.** The work I assemble lives on as a documentation of the playing I do in the studio. Occasionally I lose track of the power of play. I try to maintain an awareness not to let myself forget the importance of play and remember Louise Bourgeois' statement regarding childhood which rings true for me every day.

## c). Material

### **Steel**

In Serra's *Tilted Arc*, steel can be seen as an ephemeral material. Mined from the earth and smelted into iron, steel takes form only after exorbitant amounts of energy in the form of heat and force. Once the steel is fabricated into a physically manifested object, I know that my sculpture will stand up to the test of time and the elements...to a point. When metal is exposed to the elements of weather forms iron oxide (or rust) and reverts back to the ore from which it came.

Recycled, up-cycled and surplus materials are important to me in an effort to decrease my carbon footprint. Up-cycled as I use it here refers to the raising of an object's value, favorably from trash to treasure. I feel the need to do my part to protect the planet. Used materials live a new life yet bring with them the scars, coloration, and characteristics from past lives. New materials do not have this elemental past. Although, I have not been a purest in my endeavor to utilize only reclaimed resources. Sometimes there was a need to make certain shapes and therefore was forced to use new materials.

During my life I have traveled to many places and have had many wonderful experiences upon which to reflect. Stories from my past keep resurfacing to retell themselves at opportune moments. The following is one of those stories from my time in the United States Navy that I remember fondly as the 'rock' seminar. This story illustrates a natural cycle of steel as a material, which is an important theme in my life and my thesis.

I remember the seminar like this...

***U.S. Navy” ‘rock’ seminar”***

***I was sound asleep while attempting to complete some self-paced module tests during my stint in the United States Navy. As I woke up, there was a smiling proctor who said, “Archer, why don’t you take a break?” Upon returning, the proctor, a Filipino chief, gave me what I remember as the ‘rock’ seminar.***

***The chief explained that I was a rock, physically similar to those containing iron ore, metaphorically complacent and lazy. Yet I had the possibility of one day becoming steel. Fascinated and intrigued, I became more awake as he spoke. For my life as a rock, instead of the energies of heat and force, came the military in forms of boot camp, training, and schools. With luck and hard work, he continued, I would become strong and hardened like steel. My new life as steel would not completely change me, because once I was out of school and into the fleet he told me, I would once again become complacent and lazy. I would allow corrosive forces to break down and rust away layers of effort the U.S. government bestowed on me. Rust, he explained, is basically iron ore; essentially I would, through decay, become the very rock from which I came. Through the experience of this story, the allegorical importance of metal has stayed with me for all these years.***

I believe part of the element of the natural cycle of steel lies in my short lived childhood. I make my childhood through my work to compensate for what I feel I have missed from a family that experienced divorce. I was nine when my parents separated leaving me feeling incomplete at an impressionable age. Therefore, I created my art in the permanence of steel as

something that cannot easily be broken or taken away. Now, I have forged lasting, steel-like relationships with round edged figures that will not hurt me. Steel is permanent. Steel is also ephemeral. Understanding this concept may make my efforts futile.

## d). Form

### **Round**

I have long admired the shape, feel, and physicality of solid looking round and cylindrical hollow objects. These shapes and tangible things remind me of toys or safe bobbles to touch and hold. The standard sized propane tank for outdoor grills I found to have a satisfying quality and appeal for me. Reconfiguring standard sized propane tanks into beads and figures was a first step to utilize and deconstruct the original form. The continuum of circular shapes without sharp edges expresses a toy-like quality of safety and childhood.

One day in the studio I realized most everything I was putting together was round. I was welding one round object to another round object; round pipe to round propane tanks, round hemispheres to round pipe ends. All the elements were round and welding them together described most of the activity in the studio. Even the welded seam forms a half round welt on the surfaces of the pieces coming together. The tangibility of the form enticed me to touch the piece without harm. In turn, that touchable quality begs to be safely handled by the viewer. Safe rounded edges and toy-like shapes and forms create a feeling of comfort to the work.

Using rounded forms, I believe all the thesis work shows a certain degree of animation of static sculpture. Implied motion through the use of external circular apparatus gives

***reciprocal*** / a feeling of movement and/or the potential of movement...backwards or forwards.

Backwards, to discover a history, and forward, to view the future, are being viewed in the present moment as a thought of the implied motion.

## **Straight**

Straight lines have a direct correlation to the straight forward emotion that the extended limb on a body while also representing exertion or drama. I think of certain Olympic athletes at the point of dismount of their routine; arms straight, upward, legs straight angling the body forward. The position accentuates a dynamic and dramatic posture. My figures use the 'straight' limbs to create animation and a flare of drama within their static life. Some of the work literally reaches out to the viewer for attention and the possibility of establishing a relationship.

## **Figure**

The figural tank forms I made from propane tanks had a feeling of novelty which arose for me. As the first figures emerged from the studio and were exhibited in public places, people have responded positively. One day a professor looked in the window to see one of the early, brightly colored figures of my investigation and asked, "Are they yours?" When I answered, "Yes," he said, "They make me happy." This situation is a great example of what the viewer can bring to the art. I am glad my sculpture had the aesthetic quality that produced happiness in a viewer. Apparently he was drawn to the combination of whimsical form, bright color, and rounded elements. Something new and definitely different was seen by the audience, a something that is not quickly figured out. I believe if art can be 'figured out' it can also be



dismissed or forgotten as quickly as it is resolved in the viewer's mind. If the intellect is stirred just enough, the observer will not be able to figure it out even while looking directly at the art, and better yet the viewer continues to contemplate about it when they are no longer in the presence of the work. In this scenario, success is had!

## e). Surface

As mentioned before, I initially painted the figures bright, solid colors to grab the viewers' attention. As my work progressed, paint became merely a decorative element. I started to paint the forms because I believed something was missing, some absent aesthetic element that needed to be there to complete the work. Soon others posed the question 'why paint?' ...I couldn't answer. Eventually, material honesty took precedence to a surface I felt initially needed something more. Revealing the connections and displaying the aging, or rusting of the steel was important to me. Without hiding my construction, I felt I was being honest to the steel and the beauty found in steel's raw, exposed surface.

The bare, raw materials tell of an aesthetic past, construction, and of aesthetic choices of what stays and what is physically removed by grinding it off. I have used this mode of operation throughout my process. The propane tanks that I have incorporated had remnants of their old purpose that were ground off because the reason for these purposes no longer existed, literally leaving scars in the form of grinder marks of what had happened in the past. Metaphorically the marks can be seen as psychological scars. Then, with the caryatids, I started drawing and painting lines and images to find I didn't want them either. In the same way, I ground the lines and images off instead of painting over them. Now, the grinder marks became

telling scars of what I had put there and decided to remove. Documentation of the evolution of the piece is now evident on the surface, either from removing original material or my imposed designs. Rusting of those ground areas became purposeful in translating a timeline, or aging, of the art's life, simulating the natural cycle of steel.

For me, resolving the problem of surfaces has been aesthetic growth. I was not initially content with the surfaces I had made. I felt they were unfinished, but through investigation I have found a resolution which allows the honesty of the material to speak for itself. Covering the surface up or hiding it is not what was needed in the work.

The surface of my work signifies a non-perfect state correlating to the human condition. All the personal baggage that a person brings to the relationship is now in the form of rust, old paint, and scratches remains intact. As flawed as the individual is, there is beauty in the bond between the two individuals who are in relationship. We are not perfect, yet the point of connection, as in *Reciprocal I* and *Reciprocal II*, where two forms meet, becomes a bright, shiny, surface. Once again the art explores the relationship, demonstrating that with all our imperfections our connections to one another can be pure. The surface also exposes the form to its bare and raw material. The colors appear as rust layers and pigments from a past use. The welds tell tales of heat and assembly. The rusting speaks of age and aging as we do during our time on earth. The metal lives a life, or many lives, of care or deterioration, of maintenance or decay. The surface mirrors our daily existence and choices we make in our lives, of recklessness or caution, of idleness or exercise, of French Fries or fruit. This example further sheds light on

our decision-making process revealing good choices and bad choices. Either can be correct for the given moment and desired outcome.

## f). Concepts

Strong relationships between people and natural cycles with a particular connection to childhood are the basic premises of my thesis. The figures are made from steel for a lasting quality and a sort of guarantee of a relationship that cannot be obtained in a human pairing. The figures relate to one another and take on a permanence that I did not find in my childhood experience.

Metal, specifically steel, chose me as the medium of my work. Reflecting on my Navy service on board a steel ship as a sailor, I became aware of the safety and security steel can provide. In my eyes, steel is an authority figure. Learning to manipulate steel has provided me with a certain confidence that allows me to stand up to and question authority. Even as a child, I learned steel held the qualities of strength and durability. The exterior exposes past use information on recycled materials through marks and paint. Rust reveals imperfections and a timeline in the natural aging cycle of the steel.

Toy-like forms in rounded, safe shapes are a continuation of my childhood. Using heavy, durable materials like steel is an adult translation of those juvenile relationships. Relationships for me as a child seem transient and disconnected. Going to five different elementary schools, I learned early on that friends, better yet relationships don't last. Not limited to friendships as my old classmates faded with each new school, time, distance, and silence allowed family to

fade away as well. As an adult, I struggle to keep friends close. As an artist, I have chosen to make steel partners, relationships, and friends that will not fade away. I manufacture the human relationships I have had, that will now last.

The size of the figures evolved from the proportion of the propane tank bodies to the size of tubing that have been use for the limbs. The slightly awkward forms are suggestive of how we exist and functions as humans, awkwardly. With this formula, the beauty and grace lie in the gestural posing of the characters, or combinations of figures. The taller work towers over the viewer when examined closely. I feel intimidation gives way to large toys and imposes the viewer in a child's perspective of the work. In the gallery, *Laugh* and *Play* can be viewed from a variety of vantage points. In the studio, I found such fun positioning, and repositioning, the removable elements and rearranging them, much like a child with an adjustable toy. Reverting to childhood is a release while in the studio. Washing away the concerns of the day and capturing the moments of an ever-fading youth.

*Caryatids*, *Reciprocal I & II*, and *Tandem* all form a union of figures through positioning. The responses received from various viewers to the work seem to be aimed at the relationships formed and not the formal elements of design or craftsmanship. Curious to know the reasoning behind the coupling of two figures within one piece, viewers asked a variety of questions relating to the relationships the figures share as well as the viewer/art relationship.

### **Ambiguity**

The figures take on an ambiguous appearance to illustrate the possibility of multiple readings. Far too many times people are judged related to sexual orientation or gender.

Relationships exist between everyone. This pairing or partnering is not a conservative view and reaches all; young, old, male, female, straight, gay, transgendered, bisexual, and whatever race or religion you may find or to which one aspires. My work does not identify with specific gender traits nor does it dispute them. My figures are purposefully ambiguous. Ambiguity stands in for universality for all to relate to, enjoy, and ponder.

Connections to others are the most important elements in the world. The time, space, and feelings that exist between events, objects, situations, and, most importantly people, are the transitions that are important to my work. These connections may formulate as physical or metaphorical relationships. Whether we choose to address the relationships we have with one another or not, these conditions exist between all people and things; the art with the environment, the viewer with the art, the art with other art, the environment with the viewer. These all become interactions with one another, or the associations the viewer makes with the work.

During a critique my classmates offered their opinions and certain emotions they attached to certain pieces. One classmate felt that the work imposed a feeling of being *'strangely uncomfortable'* or *'unsettled'*. Creating work that provokes interaction and relationships with the viewing audience to me is a success. I like the idea of being uncomfortable to evoke change and ultimately to grow.

These comments regarding the evocation of feelings is not something the work has brought to the viewer, it is what the viewer has brought to the work. I accept this as a successful interaction between the viewers with the work. The encounter between objects and people in

the world can have lasting effects. The fact that a piece of art has invoked, or provoked, certain feelings is I believe at the core of what art is, as well as what my own art is all about in a much broader context.

## IV. CONCLUSION

### a). The Body of Work

From early on others have viewed *Reciprocal I* as a darkly portrayed sexual act. I appreciate and agree with this reading, but offer the audience another possibility to think about. For me *Reciprocal I* translates an inner struggle, therefore the figure is wrestling with itself. I like to offer other views of interpretation.

*Laugh* happened rather quickly. The sketches informed the studio time what needed to be done. The evolution of the form through the various scaled stages seemed important, but all the while the length of limbs remained the same giving the entire sculpture a feeling of growing with certain control.

*Face plant* to some is a one-footed work. I feel the orientation of *Face plant* abstracts the figure and balances it despite the challenges of gravity. It truly encompasses sculpture as fully viewable to all vantage points and something is to be gained from all angles.

*Tandem* came together as one step captured in time. It is the movement of the figure through space in a single direction. Seeing the figure in both positions at one time, *Tandem* becomes not unlike Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, in which the figure remains in

view through the movement in time. This work, as well, has been viewed in a sexual context since the two figures are facing the same direction with their bodies pressed, or should I say literally welded, together. I understand and agree with this possible interpretation.

With ***Reciprocal II***, one opinion felt the upright figure was assisting the upside down figure as a gesture of support. This view was fresh and innocent. While ***Reciprocal I*** is entwined in a wheel, the figures in ***Reciprocal II*** stands unaided and unfettered except to its own grip. The positioning is also as previously mentioned suggestive of a sexual posture.

***Tumble*** was conceived as a lawn ornament. Perfectly sculptural in any position, tumble can be posed in a variety of ways and move across an area, visually changing in its journey. In a sense ***Tumble*** becomes a metaphor for adaptability, easily assuming any position with equal balance. ***Tumble*** has become a personal reflection of the adaptable positions I have placed myself in.

***Play*** was the last sculptural work produced for the MFA show. It is an explosion of thoughts and ideas I have had throughout my graduate experience. A small figure soaring above, a double figure, an animal body, an animal head, a bead, and wheels, all stemming from the large angled tank serving as the base. A vision of sight, color, and activity displaying the amalgam of my time at RIT. Small additions of color pulled the elements together and created places for the eye to rest. ***Play*** truly encompasses the idea of sculpture in the 'round'.

The ***Caryatids*** got lost in the architecture. Transcending the gallery, the placement of two of the five ***Caryatids*** beside the building's entry doorway, the caryatids seamlessly became part of the structural architecture. I find it settling and comforting to think they would find a

niche that suits them, not contrived or forced into the environment, but melding into it. Ideally, I believe in the proper setting the columns would make the flow of the figures more apparent. Due to space in the gallery at the time of the show, the proper setting was not available.

The supporting figures physically move through a progression of relationship that humans share. Once again the relationship is depicted and now in its various stages. The series of five columns proposes the physical movement and natural cycle of the figures through one another and a metaphoric transition of an evolving relationship. ***Caryatid I*** suggests the meeting of people face to face in gaze or conversation. ***Caryatid II*** deepens the relationship to metaphorically becoming of one mind, and physically sharing one head to visualize the relationship. ***Caryatid III***, takes the figures to a physical relationship, hence they share one body. ***Caryatid IV*** separates the two and completes the involvement in one another, allowing for each to move away. Each now faces away from the other. ***Caryatid V*** is the parting of the couple within the piece and series taking only the memory of the meeting with them. The two forms physically leave the space away from the other, one up and one down. Their lower limbs are the only connection left as they each enter other spaces and other relationships.

## **b). Implications for the Future**

Life is said to be a journey not a destination. My art career is a journey, and the MFA program is one of many destinations along the path, not the endpoint. After much reflection, I believe life's destinations are just as important as the journey. Understanding how I got there and what I learned, explains where I am going and how I will get there. Each destination provides the map for the continuation of the journey. Childhood, interpersonal relationships,



and natural cycles are all significant parts of my journey, giving insight to my life's direction and implications of these themes in my art.

The culmination of my art through the MFA program can be seen as a cycle of encouragement. Throughout the years I have been encouraged and discouraged. Outside inspirations have waxed and waned, even though the internal desire to make art has never faded. Rekindling my artistic desire in my undergraduate program and stoking my passion in my graduate education have brought me to the realization, this is who I am and this is what I am meant to do.

Childhood had an important impact on me as an artist and has significantly influenced my art. Childhood was a destination on my journey that shaped my art without a mature understanding of all that was happening. Early on I learned to nurture my own aesthetic abilities. As a child, I escaped the everyday with drawing and play. During this time, I became acutely aware of relationships that did not support me or encourage me. Moving forward on my journey and away from childhood, I understand that play is a substantial and driving force in my art. My love of art as a child, led me to pursue my BFA as an adult.

The title and story of my BFA solo show, ***'learning to stand'***, reflects a transition in my art career from no awareness of the impact of childhood on my art, to some consciousness of the influence childhood had on my art. I was learning how to stand; as an adult, as a man, and as an artist. These ideas have evolved into my MFA efforts. I feel the concepts for my BFA show were undeveloped, or at least underdeveloped. The same themes emerged with a clearer focus as to the underlying meaning of my emotions. I revisited these concepts for a reason. The

implications from my BFA program lead me to the RIT and the master's program. Initially I stumbled, but found with further examination a thoughtfully planned approach to clarify the themes I needed to express. The idea of play and creating toy-like objects has helped me resolve childhood issues and has lead me understand the value of relationships.

Today I choose and I shape my relationships with a mature understanding and awareness of their importance in my life and in my art. I consciously seek out nurturing relationships.

Prior to beginning my BFA, I revived and nurtured a relationship with my father who had been absent from my life since childhood. My father was an artist. He romanticized building an adobe house in the New Mexico desert and dreamed of monorails and commuter trains, long before those ideas were in vogue. I have gained awareness of my connection to his sense of creativity and his passion for art. Through his death came a wave of familial spirit and hope. In addition to reestablishing a relationship with my father, I have also reconnected with my Uncle John. As an adult, he has provided me with love, encouragement and support of my art career. Uncle John attended both my BFA and MFA shows in support of me as an artist, and as a family member worthy of admiration and attention. He is a true mentor. Now, I have a better understanding of what family support is all about. I have received no greater gift in this life than the gift of family, especially from my father's brother, John E. Archer.

My awareness of the importance of interpersonal relationships has been expressed in my art through the figures I have produced. Their form, positioning, and surface treatments provide a narrative to aspects of my life. The figural forms I have made in safe toy-like shapes have served as approachable, comfortable, and whimsical characters that offer the viewer, in

the end, possibilities of deeper meanings. The positioning of figures in my art has allowed me to work through thoughts and help me better understand the closeness of intimate relationships. I have created figures with 'scars' on their surfaces to let the viewer know that the past was real. These fabricated figures also serve as a platform for the expression of my past and of the scars I carry. I feel the importance of this mature reflection of my past.

With the heightened awareness and the expression of relationships in my art, I have also come to understand the connection between relationships and natural cycles. Both have enduring qualities and both have transient qualities.

Natural cycles are everywhere. Tides rise and fall. Birth and death are daily events. Steel reverts back to nature through a natural process of rust. The permanence of relationships parallels the permanence of art and steel. With neglect, each has its ephemeral qualities and with care each marks its ability for longevity. Relationships may fade as quickly as they began. The ephemeral nature of art has become apparent to me in my MFA work. Steel art will rust and decay in time. Art and relationships share a transient state. The art I have made in my MFA exhibits permanence and a solid nature, and also exhibit the ephemeral characteristics of rusting steel.

Realizing the impact of natural cycles has made me aware of my carbon footprint. I have taken small steps to decrease my carbon footprint by using discarded propane tanks and surplus materials, when I can. I have come to understand the importance of recycling materials. My efforts may be small, but I believe they will have impact over time for a brighter future.

The MFA program is another destination that has helped me with an increased awareness of childhood, relationships, and natural cycles. I have come to understand each of these concepts as a destination on my journey and the awareness has made them travel companions as I move forward. With these destinations in mind, I have also become aware of the next part of my journey to both make art and teach art.

**I am an artist.** I share through art. I want to share my art with audiences that are available to receive it. I believe art is for everyone and should not be confined to 'white walled' museums. I will seek opportunities to create and share my efforts through public art works. I will look to calls for art and commissions for public art works to fulfill the on-going desire to translate my view for myself and the community.

**I am a lifelong student and educator.** I share through education. I have discovered and realize the importance of learning and teaching in my life. Obtaining my MFA is only one destination on my journey, a mere pit stop on my way to bigger and better academic and experiential endpoints. I will seek out opportunities to educate others in artistic arenas. In addition, I will use the skills and experiences I have gained in this program for learning and teaching opportunities.

As I have begun the next part of my journey, I have realized that it is easy to be busy and let time fly by. Life gets in the way. Responsibilities cloud my passion. I can easily get caught up with domestic responsibilities and have little time to work in the studio. After my BFA, life and responsibility crept back in quickly and stealthily. I was in a quandary of desperately seeking the discipline of studio time. During my MFA program the time for studio work was ultimately built

in. Even then, courses, homework, and teaching schedules collided on a regular basis. Not to mention family, friends, and outside events. Then it dawned on me that I have a responsibility to the studio.

My journey has arrived at its destination of MFA completion, allowing me to start my next journey with a renewed awareness and understanding of the importance of making art and teaching. My completed thesis work can now be seen as a metaphorical spring board into the future of my art. The ideas, concepts, materials, and thoughts have only begun to make themselves apparent. My sketchbooks still contain the ideas less developed and concepts not yet realized. Continuing the exploration toward the next destination has begun and is the next challenge I face. Commencing.

## V. DOCUMENTATION of the WORK

a). High quality prints

# THE WORK

- 1. Reciprocal I*
- 2. Laugh*
- 3. Face plant*
- 4. Tandem*
- 5. Reciprocal II*
- 6. Tumble*
- 7. Play*
- 8. Caryatids*

All photographs represented here were taken by ETC Photo on location in Bevier and Vignelli Center Galleries, at RIT campus.



**1. *Reciprocal I*, 2012, welded steel, paint**

**3'3"dia. x 2'1"w**



**2. *Laugh*, 2012, welded steel**

**7'10''h x 4'8''w x 4'9''d**





***3. Face plant, 2012, welded steel***

**3'4"h x 5'4"w x 3'0"d**



**4. *Tandem*, 2012, welded steel**

**4'7" h x 2'3" w x 2'2" d**



**5. *Reciprocal II*, 2012, welded steel**

**4'3"h x 1'8"w x 2'2"d**





**6. *Tumble*, 2012, welded steel,**

**3'6" h x 5'4" w x 4'2" d**



**7. *Play*, 2012, welded steel, paint**

**10'h x 10'w x 10'd**



**8. *Caryatid* (typical), 2012, welded steel**

**9'3" h x 1'0" dia.**

**Caryatids arranged V, I, II, III, IV. Forward view.**

**Each of the five Caryatids shares the same dimensions.**





***Caryatid (typical), 2012, welded steel***

**9'3"h x 1'0"dia.**

**Caryatids arranged V, I, II, III, IV. Profile view.**



***Caryatid II, detail***





***Caryatid IV, detail***

**b). DVDs (see attached)**

**c). Description list of images (see attached DVD)**

**d). Bibliography**

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