ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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in Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

INTROSPECTION WITHIN THE ORGANIC
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Chapter 1
Introduction

Art should have a life line and an energy. Art should not be merely design, but should have a personal link to the artist. As the artist, I was trying to find answers to questions about my work and life. What do I want to portray through my work? How has my life influenced the ideas I am creating? Why was nature so relevant? Why was it important for me to make art?

Graduate school gave me the opportunity to look for the answers to these questions. It has been an experience that has taught me a lot about myself. Actually, this time has showed me how much my life has influenced and affected the art I create. I cannot hide behind a facade. All that makes me the person I am was present in my work, one way or another.

Technical proficiency in bench working skills has never been my forte. I realized that these are skills that I should work on and build upon, but as for a thesis I had no desire to pursue that path. My heart was into creating, thinking, and exploring new directions. I found that working sculpturally allowed me to think, create, and to explore. I had no real boundaries. I finally felt as if I found a way to look for the connections between my life and my art. I could now begin to express myself not only with words but with my hands.

The thesis was a time to experiment and explore; to search for answers to questions whether they be technical, artistic, or even
personal. The most exciting part of this time was the realization that I was just beginning my search. It was a time to search for my roots and a time to move ahead towards artistic and personal growth. It was a time to discover what my work was about, where its foundations lie, and where the work was leading to.

Chapter 2
Foundation

In order for one to understand where the ideas for my work stem from, I feel it was necessary to give some background information. Certain aspects have been consistent throughout my life; my family, a good home, and much of my time spent outdoors. These factors have provided me with guidance and support throughout my entire life and has played a large role in my thesis body of work.

Pinpointing the most important influences throughout my life was very difficult. I can say truthfully that my childhood has provided me with an important basis for my thoughts, ideas, beliefs, and attitudes. In the beginning my brother, sister, and I were allowed to live as children did; running, playing, hiding, imagining, creating, laughing, learning, and making mistakes. Life has changed dramatically since then, but many of the things I have learned as a child have remained with me. Much of what I think about, base my decisions upon, and most importantly what I create are derived from these constants.
Chapter 3

The Work

As children we all go through life waiting to grow up; we try to escape from our childhood into adulthood. As I learn more about my life and as I turn from child into adult, I find myself wanting the life I had as a child. I remember safety and warmth. I remember peace and solitude. I believe that all people are in search of places where they can be themselves, where they can reflect, or even just be still. It is natural to want a place where you can laugh or cry, scream or be silent; a place where it does not matter how you act or think.

In the beginning, the main objective was to create 'envisioned environments': areas that provided me with these feelings. My intention was to "explore and experiment with the creation of organic sculptural forms that integrate with, enhance, and also reflect personal environmental/spatial concerns."¹ I did not want the design to dictate the look of my sculptures. I wanted my memories and visions to be shown in my pieces. The work was about those times I spent in the woods, making nests within the bushes, walking along the trails, and sitting by the campfires. The work was a search to find that peace again and to share my memories and thoughts through sculpture. There was a need to have and create art that reflected these images of serenity and peace.

When discussing the work in the body of the thesis I did not feel it was necessary to explain in length the techniques used. The actual processes I used to create the work were very direct and basic ways to

work the metal: sheering, forging, binding, wrapping, fusing, burning, soldering, and welding. The direct and simplistic ways of working the metal were relative to the ideas behind the sculptures.

When stumped I tended to turn back to the sketchbooks and rummage through the scrap boxes. New forms, ideas, and inspiration came from doing this. Turning back to what I knew helped me to gain new insight, helped me to move on and make my visions more concrete.

When I was younger, the way to work with the materials was important to me and still remains just as important. The way I handled materials as a child is directly related to the way I worked with the metal, how I thought about working, and ultimately what I had to become in order to produce the visions in my mind. I had to revert back to the habits of my childhood. Basically, I had to become that child again in order to create the visions in my mind.
Originally I had the idea that creating 'ideal' hiding places and secretive retreats was what I wanted to achieve. I wanted the work to have a presence; one that seemed safe and comforting. The first sculptures, Hut (fig. 1) and Untitled (fig. 2) were examples of my attempt to create places that had this presence.

The smaller scale of the sculptures was important in relation to the ideas behind them. Places that had provided me with a peacefulness were not large open areas but rather small and familiar ones. I also wanted the work to be curious in order to make the viewer search within the pieces. With Hut and Untitled, I found myself reminiscing about the way I used to crawl inside the bushes, searching for the perfect place to make a nest of my own. These were the hide away places that I once found solitude in.
**Untitled**

The third sculpture, another piece left *Untitled* (fig. 3 and 4), was a transitional piece. The making of *Untitled* relied heavily upon the techniques I had been using to create the previous sculptures; the forging, burning, texturing, and coloring. New elements were used to enhance the organic feel of the piece. Sheerings of sheet copper were translated into long 'grass' and 'weed' forms. The discovery of the new 'grass' members transformed my visions into sculptures. The forms became less abstracted and more literal. I was able to see my ideas take hold in a physical state rather than in just an intellectual one.

*Untitled* was very different than all of the other work in the series. It was the only sculpture that had a defined plan from the beginning. It tended to be the most formal, to use the term loosely, because my concerns were with the aesthetics of the piece. My intention was to focus on the simplicity and beauty that I had found in nature.

The sculpture was not about a specific place or memory, but rather dealt with the importance of nature. *Untitled* symbolizes a large withered leaf full of color and character, cradled within a gathering of twigs. The woods, fields, and wildlife were very sacred parts of my world. I tried to create, very simply and literally, a piece that represented the beauty I had found in nature.
Nesting

Nesting (fig. 5) began as an exploration of two different directions: forged leaf forms and 'grass' or 'weed' members. The binding and wrapping of the copper sheerings was a new experience for me therefore I found myself not knowing the direction the piece would take.

The process of binding and wrapping, thrashing the 'grass', pulling and manipulating came very naturally to me. My childhood was beginning to repeat itself. I was creating the places that were a part of my memories, but was using metal instead of branches, twigs, and weeds.

Nesting actually came about as a result of stumbling upon new elements and forms. The sculpture was about how everything in nature falls into place, whether it appears to be haphazard or not. The sculpture and work had also begun to follow suit. The links between my memories and my art had begun to fall into place to, just as the elements of nature have.
**Fire Basket and Mouse Trail**

To discuss these pieces separately would not do either one justice. I worked on both Fire Basket (fig. 6 and 7) and Mouse Trail (fig. 8) simultaneously and found that to be the best way. The pieces began to feed off one another. Insight, ideas, and inspiration were given to me by working on the sculptures at the same time.

Fire Basket and Mouse Trail began as scraps from the previous pieces. I started to create larger scaled bush forms, but did not have a direction planned for either one. I felt that in order to make these sculptures I would have to change my work habits and mind set. The last sculpture, Nesting, made me aware that there was a need to put more of myself into the work in order to draw more inspiration and direction from my memories. I worked the metal as I had worked with the bushes and twigs when I was child. I secluded myself and focused on creating.

Fire Basket and Mouse Trail were both about the times I spent in the woods camping with my family. Fire Basket derives its title from my favorite time of night; the time my family spent around the campfire. There was always a warmth about the time we spent around the fire. The warmth had much to do with the fact that I was with my family and in the environment we had a love for. The idea behind Mouse Trail was different than that of Fire Basket. There was a trail that my brother, sister, and I used to walk along at night where tiny creatures hopped across. The field grass was quite thick making it impossible to find them. For many years we tried to catch the little animals, thinking they were toads, but discovered that they were mice.
This was always a mystical place, where the movement of the mice would cease as soon as we entered their territory.

I had many good memories of places like the campfires and trails, bushes and fields. To create about them seemed so natural. In the past year I had learned so much about myself; my ideas, roots, and path of my art. I had found an importance in remembering the places and memories I had always found happiness in. More importantly, I had found a need to create art about the sacred moments of my life.
Fig. 7
Chapter 4

Influences

It takes a certain kind of individual to inspire and impress me when it comes to the arts. Throughout my college experience I have found two individuals whose work has made an impact on the direction of my own: Carolyn Morris Bach and Andy Goldsworthy. Both artists have very distinct and personal styles, and both seem to be very real people. Their art is not mainstream, slick, nor does it fit in any certain category. Their work contains life and energy; their own insight and visions. It is difficult to verbalize the amount of inspiration they have given to me, but I can say that they have both provided me with the motivation to pursue the direction I know best.

Carolyn Morris Bach was the first metalsmith to toss out any preconceived notions of how I perceived the jewelry market. I had assumed until that time that jewelry had no real place in the fine arts; that most jewelry lacked personality or any real meaning. When I saw the work of Bach for the first time, I had realized that I was very wrong. Bach's work was perhaps the most intriguing, straight forward approach to jewelry that I had ever seen. Her aesthetic sense had not been dictated by the marketplace. It had a very distinct primitive and or ethnic influence. I felt a kinship to her style and to what she had to express. It was said about her work that "often the pieces have or refer to actual or ritual uses. Gathering, containing, rites of fire are all suggested by her new vessels, which are seemingly meant to hold things, but perhaps secretly or with reverence. They are hung or set
on three and four-legged stands, much like twigs lashed together for a campfire... She seems to have wholly absorbed and synthesized the essence and imperfect beauty of the primitive cultures she so deftly draws inspiration from.² My naive preconceptions of how metalwork should be were no longer valid. I realized that the artist can only decide where the boundaries for his or her work can be set. Growth only happens when you put aside the old and look for the new.

Andy Goldsworthy was another person who helped me see that art need not have any predetermined boundaries. Goldsworthy is an artist native to Scotland who creates works of art with nature. I was in awe of the way he created. Goldsworthy had a sensitivity to nature that I had never seen before. The best way to explain his work is with the words he has used himself:

"For me, looking, touching, material, place and form are all inseparable from the resulting work. It is difficult to say where one stops and another begins...

I stop at a place or pick up a material because I feel that there is something to be discovered. Here is where I can learn...

Movement, change, light, growth and decay are the lifeblood of nature, the energies that I try to tap through my work. I need the... earth as my source...

The work itself determines the nature of its making. I enjoy the freedom of just using my hands and 'found' tools- a sharp stone, the quill of a feather, thorns. I am not playing the primitive. I use my hands because this is the best way to do most of my work...

What is important to me is that at the heart of whatever I do are a growing understanding and a sharpening perception of the land."³

Goldsworthy knows how to work with a variety of materials, and the way he works them simply amazes me. The work had integrity and purpose, even if they appeared to be studies of colors created by leaves

or construction problems with sheets of ice. He creates from both his heart and mind; that was very evident in his work. His sensitivity to nature and creative intellect is what impressed me most.

Fig. 11

Early morning calm
knotweed stalks
pushed into lake bottom
made complete by their own reflections

DERWENT WATER, CUMBRIA
20 FEBRUARY & 8-9 MARCH 1988
Broken pebbles
scratched white with another stone

ST ABB'S, THE BORDERS
1 JUNE 1985

Fig. 12
Chapter 5

Conclusion

As I have grown I have realized that everything one says or does, feels, and creates stems from somewhere or something. In that sense, my art is a very personal vehicle for communication. It is an opening of myself: my memories, my feelings, and my life. Creating is a mere reaction to and reflection upon my foundation and center in this world.

Many of my ideas stem from a time when the world seemed pure; a time when creativity was natural, uninhibited, and a true form of communication. The roots of my work are in the forests and fields, in the dirt and brush, and with those who mean the most to me. All that has made me who I am now: that is what my work is about.

As I continue on with my life I have become more certain that creating will be an important part of it. My future holds a place for producing art whether it be for a living or just for peace of mind. Materials and process will change and become more diversified, but the roots of my work will continue to center themselves around the memories and places of my life.
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