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A Journey into self-actualization

William Rubar

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College Of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

A Journey into Self-Actualization

By William Rubar
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Thesis Statement

The MFA Thesis Exhibition is a presentation of ceramic sculpture. The theme for this body of work is a self-portrait that uses text as an integral part of the composition. The medium is clay, which interacts with the two-dimensional and three-dimensional properties of space. Therefore, it is my goal to establish a union with these dimensional properties. My tablet paintings serve to catalog significant events affecting both our culture and my life, resulting in a self-portrait. These paintings create a dialogue between the emotion of language, passage of time and the properties of space. The preparation of the clay and the construction of the work involve an intense physical interaction, which has been a part of my life since early years. This continued, intentional muscularity is sustained through the mounting of the work onto the wall, and is a part of the self-portrait. Finally, it is my hope that the audience begins to create their own self-portrait as they view this exhibition.
Historical Journey

This exhibition resulted from a series of experiments. The design of the tablet paintings evolved, beginning with a review of existing flatwork. After submitting hollow pillow-forms and clay slab work for criticism, I opted to continue this exploration. Following my first year, I spent the summer at RIT. During this cloistered period, I was free to explore my strengths and weaknesses. I also investigated with various glaze methodologies and clay bodies. The process of working with clay inspired the notion that the tablets would reference the physical properties of stone and the composition emerged from the use of text. Text can be found in ancient writings, performance art, graphic design, advertising, and even from the propaganda of Russian art in the late 19th and 20th century. Contemporary examples can be found in the art of Tony Hepburn, Jenny Holzer, Robert Indiana, James Melchert, Liubov Popova, Robert Rauschenberg, and Edward Ruscha. Their work is significant to my efforts, as it contains the art of language and the strength behind the meaning of words.

Of these artists, those representing Pop Art had the greatest influence on my work. "Pop Art" is a phrase coined by British art critic Lawrence Alloway in 1957. It is a transformation of commercial art into the continuum of fine art. Whether it is the alteration of an object or the transformation of letters, Pop Art is an art of the industrial age. Pop Art's pictorial conventions and roots are the same as those of abstract art. Most artists work in the flat, on the surface usually with closed, two-dimensional shapes having legible contours. Pop Art uses images from popular culture, in such a way that draws general characterizations of the culture, and then changes the context to reflect the reality of human values. The fine art within the popular culture continuum does even more: it instills the idea of predictable, certified meaning, foreclosing any further investigation of the truth. Pop Art shares this fine art/popular culture continuum by making use of the communication of media, yet the spontaneous creation of an image lends itself to fine art's "higher meaning".

Therefore, any attempt to link contemporary American art to the currents of the American culture must include Pop Art. Pop Art functions as the fateful truth. As Roy Lichtenstein wrote, "The world is outside. Pop Art looks at it and accepts this environment, which is neither good nor bad... and if you ask me, how one can love moronization, how one can love the mechanization of work, how one can love bad art, I answer: I see it, it's here it's the world." The Pop Art movement has changed the aesthetic experience, and created a transformed sensibility to this form of art.

Within this group of artists, Rauschenberg and Popova employ similar palettes and compositions. Robert Rauschenberg's work is one of making a wild assemblage and collages of multimedia. He combines two- and three-dimensional space. An art of
many media, these works combine found objects like a bed, stuffed chicken, or parts of bicycle with beautiful passages of paint. His compositions are fresh and exciting creating a dialogue between the two and three dimensions. The strength within Rauschenberg’s composition lies within this dialogue and his use of assembly and collage techniques. Liubov Popover employed similar approaches as Rauschenberg, while restricted to the two dimensional space of cubism. As Camilla Grey states, her work was “often executed on a rough board, and the angular forms-in strong blues, greens and reds- are brushed on in this crude, raw surface, leaving the impression of a lightning-swift movement, a darting, breathless meeting of forces, a kiss-imprint, as it were, of the driving energy around us.” In addition, both artists work exerts a brilliant palette of color, which provides a dynamic composition.

Ruscha, Holzer and Indiana share similar inspirations from popular culture. Edward Ruscha works in the two-dimensional area of painting and creates a composition entirely of text. He is interested in language, and how that language can describe but not depict space. Within a work, he will use a single word or phrase, and portrays this in a way that describes their physical characteristics. Although the composition or the statement is always clear, Ruscha consistently extends an intriguing invitation to understand the meaning. As a result, the audience enters a realm of self-reflection. Text is also used by Jenny Holzer, though often on a much larger scale. She is best known for the lighted billboard in New York’s Times Square. Like Ruscha, she is often inspired by the world of advertisement and billboards, and invites a dialogue with the mass public. Another artist in this vein is Robert Indiana, best known for his piece LOVE. In his own words, he “had no idea LOVE would catch on the way that it did. Oddly enough, I was not thinking at all about anticipating the Love generation and hippies. It was a spiritual concept. It is not a sculpture of love any longer. It’s become the very theme of love itself.” Through his sculptural assemblages he developed his style of vivid color surfaces, involving letters, words, and numbers. Within this form, some sources of inspiration have been traffic signs, commercial stencils, and old trade names.
Tony Hepburn and James Melchert also use text, but within the ceramic medium. Tony Hepburn’s work includes sculpture, drawing and photography. Exploring Hepburn’s work has been revealing, as my work is parallel in so many ways – clay, words, dimensions, texture, repetition and perceptual learning. His gallery best describes these similarities:

“Text (Rhopography)...fused the technologies of the potters wheel with that of the computer. Physical realities and digitized inventions collided, hybridized and prescribed a language out of text and its dimensional reality through centrifuge. Often in these works the word that describes is the thing described.” “...Hepburn adds what might be assimilated sensory perceptions. Like pixelated [sic] images, these projections - nubs - extend the visual and often tactile experience of the object/sculpture while bemusing the viewer. In PPPLANT the letters PPPLANT (in rotational typeface) form a plant-like structure that grows out of a pot. All formed in unglazed black clay the pot is then covered in shiny red glazed spheres. These additions accentuate the experiences of the materiality of the sculpture and the primary sensory experiences of the hand. Touch converges with systematic language - like a child who learns to read by pronouncing words while subconsciously experiencing the physical realities of the thing being read.”

Finally, Jim Melchert’s sculptures on the lower-case "a" is an individual exploration into type similar to my own experimentation, especially the alteration of letters. Again, from the gallery Revolution:

“This body of work expanded his conceptual approach to working and his use of text in visual art. The series itself became a diversion for Melchert, an idea be embraced in his Game series of 1967. Among the many works created are Pre-a (consisting of two bags of unfired clay), Ex-a (a ceramic work that was flattened after being formed, a ok (of oak), Projected a (a slide projection work that incorporated the environment) and Precious a (a small glazed and lustered work presented under a vitrine on a red velvet plinth)."
In summary, all of the above work lays the foundation for my tablet paintings. Here are some of the elements of this foundation.

- Text serves several purposes and significantly contributes to the compositional elements.
- Text as a subject matter within itself invokes an emotional response.
- Use of type encourages the direct association with intent and the composition.
- The use of type or language in art is inclusive within every culture.
- The significance of text is two-fold to state what is obvious and ambiguous.
- Type is omnipresent in society and is used to further its goals.
- The true test of the art is that it continues to clearly communicate its message, even when placed in an unrelated physical setting.

Therefore my art is inclusive and reflects the inspirations from many communities. During my investigation into the power behind language, I have found that it remains a universally accessible vehicle. Use of text and language enables a narrative; it assigns a label, which has association for the spectator, therefore inviting the audience into my artwork. Indeed, language dominates the visual arts and artistic expression. Without words or labels, you do not know what you are reading. Therefore, to deny the relevance of language in art is to assume everything is self-explanatory. Associations to art are deliberate; while the word or force of language may be ambiguous, it still contributes to the cultural context of art and may serve as a universal translator.
Technical Review

I have organized this section into two parts: first, the use of clay as the medium and the basis for the design concept and, second, the physical process and related technical challenges I encountered. The technical issues are presented in their chronological order. During this chronological narrative, the iterative nature of design concept, clay body, glaze and firing process will become apparent.

The initial overall design concept was perfectly suited to the medium of clay. The pieces would resemble large canvas paintings, specifically self-portraits. Each painting would explore through text my personal meaning of a specific emotion. The clay tablet would be much like that of a canvas, yet I would also manipulate and interact with the medium in three dimensions. Further, it would allow for a rich interaction between the two and three-dimensional spaces. This complexity would be supported by clay, and lend itself to meditations on my physical, mental and emotional selves – as well as a consideration of the past, the future and the current moment. As such, clay seemed well suited to the narrative of my human life. Moreover, clay offered permanence once the object was fired; no other media has displayed such longevity, from erosion, aging and the passage of time. The physical composition of work from clay remains intact. On a personal level, I had a personal affinity for clay, related to its dependability, therapeutic benefits and its dynamic, responsive elements. Clay enabled me to communicate. Built within it, clay has form, life and enables a physical interaction; as such, clay instilled within me a voice of self-expression, even more than acrylic, plaster even oils.

The idea of using text originally came to me through a childhood memory of building blocks. As I formed individual letters, I would recall those blocks, be cast back into childhood and remember events of my youth, during my time of innocence. The events I recalled from my past would suggest the use of a naïve viewfinder, like that of a child transforming his self-portrait into maturity. I wanted to capture the symbolism of these building blocks in my work, specifically their play and learn qualities, and more specifically, their affinity to puzzle solving. The appearance of letters on each piece would physically echo my definition of the selected text. This definition would be expanded upon using both two- and three-dimensional letters. This reinforced narrative would invite the viewer into my self-portrait and enable them to reflect upon their own journey.

As discussed later, technical challenges affected the design concept: tablet paintings evolved into smaller pieces resembling grave markers. The similarity to weathered stone would be achieved both through the surface quality of the clay and the glaze appearance. This reference to gravestones would reinforce the concept that my work records my life events.
The work process I used greatly affected the final selection of materials and methods, as well as the content of each tablet. Each tablet was completed through glaze firing before another was begun. This supported a thorough investigation of form, composition, clay body and the glaze, as I did not have large investments in a single approach used over several tablets. Also, this method of construction dictated the composition of each individual piece. I would reflect on my present state as I built the tablet, and the specific text to be used would emerge.

The physical process of making a tablet painting involved the paddling, layering, compressing and forming of the clay with equal amounts of pressure; this created the mass of the tablet. Then the work was placed on wooden boards for drying. The cone 04 clay body that was finally selected was an inert body with little ball clay. It could dry in a variety of settings, from rapid heat exchange for small components, to slow environmental changes for pieces requiring work over multiple days. The fast-drying aspect allowed me to complete the process quickly when needed, such as for rapid experimentation. For instance, I could make a letter 2 inches thick in one day and bisque fire it the next day. In this manner, hand building was similar to my experience as production potter.

As I began to construct these self-portraits, I hand-printed text onto clay, by inscribing letters into partially dried clay. I quickly discovered that I did not like the appearance of my own handwriting, and moved on to mechanical means of generating text. This was largely influenced by the omnipresent merging of technology and printing on RIT’s campus. As a result, I had more control over the text’s edge and surface, which allowed for clarity within the works’ composition. I used several methods of producing letters to achieve this. First, I used an old printer’s press to make individual letters. In addition, I carved out letters much like that of a relief, stamped letters into the tablet, and stacked or layered letters.

Once a tablet was complete, I could test the effect of bisque firing upon the initial clay body, which had a high percentage of ball clay to address properties fundamental to the sculptor. The desired 3x5-foot size dictated that I use the largest gas kiln available. Using a gas kiln also meant that I could use the cone 10 clay bodies, which would give me the greatest degree of glaze firing temperature flexibility. The largest gas kiln was a car kiln with a 2-story stack. However, it developed that the available carbide kiln shelves could not be used: their largest size was 2 feet square, they were thin, and were not clean. As a result, the pieces were fired on the brick floor of the kiln. The kiln fired unevenly, driven by the 4-story flue and inconsistent burners. This resulted in the pieces warping during bisque firing. The influence of a warp not only altered the appearance of the work, but also created a distraction for the viewer. In parallel, I began glaze testing on the cone 10 clay body, using glazes suited to various firing temperatures. It developed that cone 04 glazes had the properties I needed, but did
not fit the cone 10 clay body. I subsequently tested lower cone clays and selected a cone 04 clay which gave a good fit.

At this point, I moved on to the electric kilns, with cone 04 clay body. The electric kilns had two key advantages: there were a larger number of them, they had equal heat distribution and they were not used for high-volume elective glaze firing. This latter point meant increased availability of higher quality shelves. However, the pieces had to be downsized, since these kilns could handle a maximum of 3 feet square. I reduced the pieces to 1x2 feet to make up for lost time and to stay within the dimensions of a single kiln shelf. Nevertheless, I felt that some of the design elements were compromised. For example, the smaller size also drove a reduction in my aggressive handling of the clay for desired surfaces. Even at this reduced size, kiln shelves added to the problem set. To accommodate the kiln posts, even these smaller sized pieces had to span 2 shelves, which resulting in sagging. The pieces could not be made smaller and still implement the design concept. This turned out to be an opportunity, as it resulted in strengthening the design concept from paintings to grave markers. Fortuitously, the low firing process would also yield the desired stone-like quality finish for the work, which would have been diminished during high firing. These combined steps resolved the technical problems in bisque firing and reunited it with the design concept.

As mentioned above, I chose cone 04 glazes particularly because they could give the required stone-like finish. My hypothesis, later validated, was that the extra time to find one glaze base that could handle all the colors and textures would be rewarded in its contribution to unifying all the works. This proved to be the case; the base for Vantene Moss with minor additions of colorants provided the basic colors needed. Through experimentation, I found that variations in application techniques and small adjustments to firing temperatures provided the necessary variations in texture and color. Additional attention was paid to developing the black glaze, which played a major role on the type. This glaze needed to provide high contrast to the stone-like texture, while still being very legible. After testing glazes, Richard Hirsch provided me with the successful formula. Further, the black glaze played very well against the subtly colored ones, supporting the relationship of burial markers to the printed page. Where needed, a red earthenware slip was used under both glazes to achieve additional depth. The increase in firing temperature from bisque to glaze did not pose any additional challenges.

Having summarized the technical aspects of my work, we can move on to the content. Found throughout this exhibit are the words “agony” and “search”, produced with various techniques. In addition, the words are not portrayed in a standard printing format, with same size letters read left to right. These unexpected, sculptural portrayals are essential to the content of each tablet. For example, in one piece, the word “agony” appears as “YnoGA”. This is intended to invoke a child’s response to
language and the tumultuous emotional issues embedded in the word. In this context, "agony" struggles with several feelings: the conflicts of self-doubt, insecurity and the anxiety associated with life decisions. Each other tablet employs similar text manipulations to convey the message. Here is a brief explanation of the assembly / content for each tablet.

The narrative continues with a "search" piece. The word has been disassembled, with the E, A & C in large capital letters; the other letters are much smaller and lower case. The letters are scattered over the tablet, with different orientations. In addition, the piece has very low relief. This arrangement draws in the viewer to unscramble the word. At the end of this effort, they experience the meaning of the word: the journey has become easier, a vehicle for expression uncovered. However, as they progress to other tablets, they may sense that the search for one's self is on going and can be difficult.

The triptych piece, "indifference" readily supports a dualistic sense of apathy. This piece has letters randomly clustered across the first two panels, with large empty areas. The upper case letters are the same size. The third panel unscrambles the letters, spelling out "INDIFFERENCE". The first two panels suggest children's building blocks, left scattered after play. As the viewer struggles to find order in these letters, he reaches the last panel, which provides the answer. The unscrambled word, indifference, dulls the sense of accomplishment. On a deeper level, this panel portrays my non-resolution of a failed relationship - abandoning it. In this act, conflicting feelings collide, such as fond memories from the relationship's beginning with anger and sorrow at the end. These contrasting emotions result in apathy and indifference.

The next triptych piece, "chaos", is an assemblage of hundreds of the component letters, in both upper and lower case. These small letters are crammed onto the three panels in multiple layers and skewed stacks. The word "chaos" is never laid out in its proper order. In addition, the panels vary slightly in size, and have non-squared corners. Coming to this point in the exhibition, the viewer may feel confident that he can unscramble tablets. However, he will probably meet defeat on these panels. Underlying this triptych is my sense of multiple feelings colliding so rapidly that I struggle to identify any of them, given the inherent limitations of language.

The next tablet has as its foundation the same assemblage of "chaos" as the previous triptych. However, this background has been interrupted in two ways. First, in the center, "DECEIT" is spelled out vertically in much larger letters. It is set against and empty field, which is a slender oval. Above the word is a second circular space, with nothing in it. As a result, there is an upside down exclamation point, partially incorporating the word "DECEIT". There is no transition from the stacked layers to the cleared areas; this creates a large, sudden sense of depth. The viewer may
experience frustration when he sees another chaos-based tablet. This frustration often turns to anger, as he reads deceit and begins to wonder if he has been lied to from the beginning. This reinforces the self-portrait, particularly the demise of the relationship.

The final triptych, “en search”, expands the use of sculptural techniques and space. The first panel has “E” and “N” inscribed in large black letters on an otherwise empty tablet. These two letters are not in order and are skewed. The second tablet contains the “s”, “E” and “R” of search. Part of this tablet also has empty areas, however the “s” has been repeated numerous times to create an elevated drift, stretching diagonally across from the panel. The shape of the drift suggests the letter “s”. This repetition of a single letter has not been seen on prior tablets. A single “E” and “R” are inscribed on the empty areas, using the same font, size, color and skew as the first panel. The third panel completes the phrase, with the letters “A”, “H” and “C”. The first two letters have the same characteristics as the prior panel. The “C” uses bas-relief for the first time, and stands in stark contrast to the other letters inscribed on the blank field. Additionally, the surface of “C” is not parallel to the panel’s surface; the plane of the letter is slanted, with the terminals partially embedded in the panel.

In its entirety, this triptych references the en (d) of one search and the beginning of another. “S” is the first letter of the word “search”. The very shape of this letter can suggest movement, with many twists and turns; in this manner, the shape suggests the nature of a search. This subtle tie to the word “search” is highlighted throughout the panels, through the repetition of the letter “s” in many formats. The search concept is also reinforced by using construction techniques seen in prior tablets. At the same time, the use of new techniques, such as the “s” drift and the raised “C”, support the idea of a new search. This positive progress is also echoed by the flow of elevation in the panels. This elevation starts with inscribed letters on the first panel, and increases through the elevated "C" on the last panel. As the elevation increases, the viewer physically backs up, and gains an overall view of his journey the tablets.

The letter “C” also reinforces the progress of the search. In its physical appearance, it gradually emerges from the field. In this way, it subtly suggests a play on the word “see”, with the message becoming clearer as the viewer journeys through the exhibition.

Looking at the tablets as a whole, they do not simply occupy space, they travel vigorously through space. This is accomplished by the transition from the first tablet, which is two-dimensional, through the final tablet, which actively moves into three-dimensional space. This change in space is an integral part of the dialogue between the overall message and the viewer. This, coupled with the multiple layers of construction and meanings, helps to create the sense of a journey as the viewer travels through the tablets.
This vibrant use of space, culminating with the outward movement of the "C", provides a bridge for the viewer from the tablet paintings on the wall to the sculptures on the floor. In addition, the continuity of the viewer's journey is enabled by the continued uses of prior forms, glazes and composition.

The first sculpture is entitled "YnoGA". This jumble of the word "agony" is scattered across a black tablet. This form recalls the memory of a child’s abandoned building blocks from the first triptych. The backward spelling of the word invites speculation. In part, it represents the beginning of an arduous journey. The horizontal orientation of the sculpture supports the concept that the journey is also long, extending from childhood through to maturity. The use of the word "agony" highlights the self-doubt and insecurity associated with self-exploration. This is bolstered by the presence of the word "no" within the jumble.

The final sculpture, "serene", consists of two horizontal sets of upper-case letters, one lying on top of the other. The bottom letters spell the word "serene"; the top group consists of each letter of "serene", flipped diagonally in order. The leaning, stone-like letters are set on a matching tablet; they appear like dominoes at rest. "Serene" is dramatically opposed to the "agony" sculpture in several ways. To begin with, the words "serene" and "agony" are antonyms. This difference is reinforced by the use of glazes. "Agony’s" glazes provided high visual contrast, through the stone-like letters set against a black backdrop. In comparison, "serene’s" appearance is subtle, employing the stone-like finish throughout. In terms of letter arrangement, "agony" is spelled backward, versos the repeated flipped image of "serene". The sum of these differences serves to emphasize the meaning of the "serene" sculpture - the journey’s end at a calm and peaceful place.
Clay Body

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clay Body</th>
<th>Red Earthenware Slip</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>^04 Clay body</td>
<td>Red art clay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawthorne bond</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyanite</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talc</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spodumene</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grog</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kyanite</td>
<td>Goldart clay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OM#4 ball clay</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talc</td>
<td>5</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Glaze Composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Black Glaze</th>
<th>Base Glaze: Vantene Moss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nepheline syenite</td>
<td>Pedalite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gerstley borate</td>
<td>Spodumene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barium carbonate</td>
<td>Lithium carbonate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17.8</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flint</td>
<td>Gerstley borate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPK</td>
<td>Zircopax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.1</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithium carbonate</td>
<td>Granular rutile</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>10-20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Colorants:
- Manganese dioxide: 10
- Black copper oxide: 2
- Black iron oxide: 4
- Black cobalt oxide: 0.5
Thesis Review, Critique and Analysis

This exhibit is a self-portrait, using letters and words to provide a narrative journey through thoughts and feelings. In its entirety, the exhibition is quite remarkable. First, it is an honest depiction of my emotional journey over the last 6 years. As the viewer traversed through my self-portrait, he was able to relate it to his own journey. In addition, it displays the growth I have made as an artist during my MFA experience. Visually, the collected pieces present a well-balanced composition. The overall visual balance was achieved through concise measurements, attention to edges and marriage of surface to glaze. Another strength lies within the design concept. It is very scalable, and effectively supports both larger and smaller pieces. Finally, the technical issues I resolved in these pieces would have overwhelmed me prior to my degree work. This progress in my technical ability was enabled by my individual studies, the support of my peers, and the guidance of faculty members. As a result, my vision of the tablet paintings became a reality. I look forward to further exploring this work in the future.

In retrospect, there are opportunities to improve on these pieces. In the future, I will provide pedestals for the “agony” and “serene” floor sculptures, so that they appear to be dramatic tabletops on legs. This would be a vast improvement over the current configuration of the base tablets lying on the floor. This change would continue the rise in elevation from the wall tablets, and reinforce the vigorous use of space.
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