Propencity

Alissa Barbato

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Propency

by
Alissa Barbato

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Committee Approval

Chief Advisor:
Richard Hirsch, Professor, Ceramics, School for American Crafts, Rochester Institute of Technology

Associate Advisor:
Richard Tannen, Professor, Wood, School for American Crafts, Rochester Institute of Technology

Associate Advisor:
Jane Shellenbarger, Assistant Professor, Ceramics, School for American Crafts, Rochester Institute of Technology

Department Chairperson, School for American Crafts:
Juan Carlos Caballero-Perez, Professor, Metals, School for American Crafts, Rochester Institute of Technology.
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I. Abstract

I am interested in developing ceramic sculpture that explores the dynamics of group behavior and how the perception of an individual drastically changes if there are a thousand versus one. Thematically, I am equally interested in exploring how and why people come together. Another topic I will investigate is how the environment affects their interaction. Finally, I will consider the affect on an individual when encountering a large mass of individuals.

I will establish a visual vocabulary of ceramic forms to abstractly represent individuals in the groups. These sculptures will range in size but will mostly be on a small, intimate scale. Each object will be subtly unique, slowly building in number to produce a form or presence vastly different than the individual unit. The surface treatment and overall structure formed by grouping the objects will relate the feelings and emotions associated with and inspired by an individual’s experience in a crowd. Through creating several different compositions, I will investigate methods of representing instances of individuals congregating. One such approach may include relating the experience of an individual as a member of a group and another with the individual as an outsider. Another scenario I will consider is the different reactions of individuals to crowds; one person finds crowds overwhelming while another is energized by their presence. Through these explorations I will convey the different affects of a group on an individual.
II. Sources and Research

The process of researching my thesis and examining my sources for content and ideas was an on-going process throughout my time at RIT, continually evolving as I honed in on the exact content and form for my final body of work and exhibition. My sources and research, while varied, eventually fell into three main areas. The first source of inspiration to me was nature for both aesthetic aspects and content. However, as I experimented with making objects, I realized the work for my thesis exhibition needed to draw on my second main source: personal experience. Utilizing my own experiences allowed me to relate specific ideas that contained a deeper content and emotional basis than was possible drawing only on the abstract content of nature. Simultaneously, I was looking at the work of other artists, both historical and contemporary. This exploration helped me to put my work in context as well see how other artists actualized similar ideas and concepts. This research allowed me to view my work not only through the lens of Ceramics, but in the broader context of Sculpture.

The search for specific content and meaning in my work proved to be an elusive endeavor. I have never been interested in making work that had a direct personal narrative; having always been attracted to sculpture that is abstract and minimal. I began making work that abstractly represented nature, *Swarm* (Figure 1). I felt this piece was successful as an individual piece, but did not have strong enough content to inform a body of work.

![Figure 1. Swarm, Alissa Barbato, 2009.](image)
During the creation of this piece I was researching artists and was continuously drawn to artists that created large sculptures comprised of many small pieces, such as Teresita Fernandez and Tara Donovan. I was attracted to the formal elements and scale and use of multiples in Fernandez’s *Epic (August 21)*. Fernandez states that “there are always two scales functioning in my work simultaneously. The big, immersive physical piece is often made up of small, accumulated elements that can only be absorbed up-close and intimately.” This was a notion I was strongly attracted to yet had a difficult time determining the content for the type of work I was interested in making.

Tara Donovan’s work subscribed to some of the same notions of Fernandez in that her work consisted of groupings of many, often hundreds, of a single object such as a toothpick or a pencil. Amassing vast quantities of an object transformed them, creating pieces that mimicked life forms or cities. Donovan’s piece *Colony* proved to be influential on my final body of work in many ways. Comprised of thousands of pencils, the piece formed a sprawling mass in the gallery, suggesting a colony of bacteria or urban sprawl. Donovan described her work as being about how people relate to each other based on their physical situation. I explored many different directions in my work, but ultimately this concept became one of the central themes in my final body of work.

Following *Swarm*, I decided to switch gears and think more about form and began making singular objects. I was heavily influenced by artists such as Ruth Duckworth, Helga Natz, Constantin Brancusi, Jean Arp, and Matisse. I was attracted to the volumes of information that each artist could relate through a minimalist vocabulary. Arp’s and Matisse’s figures proved to be especially influential on my final body of work; just a slight bulge and then narrowing created a form that was undoubtedly the human body. This exploration of creating
singular objects was not successful in the end result, however it was fruitful in helping me to develop a visual vocabulary. It was not until I finally was able to draw upon my new form vocabulary and combine the aspect of Swarm that I found most successful and appealing, creating one large piece out of many pieces, with a personal narrative that I found the content for my thesis.

In addition to researching artists whose physical work influenced me, I also explored artists whose concepts I responded to, such as Louise Bourgeois. Her work was quite varied and I responded most strongly to her pieces that dealt with human figures. One quote that particularly resonated with me and proved to be influential on my final body of work was “People feel each other, perceive each other, turn toward or away from each other […] fated to work together as part of an ongoing phenomenon […] always perceiving other and adjusting to them.”xii Her work influenced mine in that she was able to address these concepts without being directly referential to a specific person or event.

The final group of artists that influenced my work came to light as I was creating my final body of work. I was thinking about American Realist painters and their portrayal of city life in America.xiii Particularly, I responded to works by Edward Hopperxiv and George Tookerxv and how they portrayed people in mundane settings in city life and evoked feelings of loneliness despite being in a city surrounded by other people.

Prior to beginning my thesis and throughout the process, I was constantly taking pictures of objects in nature as a way of creating resources for color and texture. Continually fascinated and inspired by the combinations of color and texture found in nature – vivid green moss on a cliff-face, orange and red starfish clustered on a rock – I catalogued these images for later use. I was also drawn to combinations created by man-made objects interacting with nature, such as
glassy aqua blue water next to a yellow stone building and rusting fencing running through green and brown trees. These studies provided me with a jumping off point into the vast depths of ceramic glaze and surface testing. Attempting to replicate my favorite natural surfaces taught me how to manipulate glaze color and texture as well as lead to me to explore alternative surfaces outside of traditional ceramic media.

It was through researching painters, specifically American abstract painters, that I was able to see how color could be utilized to convey emotion and led me to explore surface treatments outside of ceramic surfaces. Viewing a Mark Rothko color field painting\textsuperscript{xvi} is not solely a visual experience. Due to the vastness of the canvas and depth of the color an emotional response cannot help but be evoked. I saw this translating to my work since I knew that I would be creating a large group of pieces thus creating a field of color. Milton Avery was another American abstract painter that influenced my research into color surfaces for my work. Through his use of color, Avery creates a mood and ambiance in his work.\textsuperscript{xvii} I knew I needed to use color to create a mood or feeling in the gallery. Viewing in person the work of Helen Frankenthaler helped me start to connect painting techniques to surfacing techniques in ceramic sculpture. Through painting on unprimed canvas, the paint in Frankenthaler’s paintings became part of the canvas, not merely a coating on the surface. I have always been particularly drawn to the depth that this technique created in the paintings. I knew that any surface I used on my sculptures needed to be a part of the piece and have depth; not merely be a coating on the surface.

My continuous research process helped to inform and formulate my ideas, forms, surfaces, and techniques. I felt it was vitally important to have conducted such broad research, however this did not help my biggest and most constant challenge: focusing in on one personal and meaty concept for my final body of work.
III. Concepts and Process

The process of creating the body of work for my thesis was much like my research process: a continual narrowing down of my interests to hone in on one idea as well as bringing in personal content. Once I was able to identify the personal ideas that resonated with me as well as would appeal to a larger audience, the physical work materialized. My research demonstrated that I was interested in groups and creating large-scale pieces out of many small units. I identified that my personal connection to this abstract concept was my experience living near and working in a large city.

City-life evokes many feelings and responses in people. Some are energized, others intimidated by the number of people and sights and sounds. There were limitless experiences that I could have explored and illustrated that related to the feelings of people in a city. I experimented with many different compositions and ideas within this broad concept. One vein that I explored but did not ultimately materialize into a finished piece was an individual’s role and feelings when in a large group. Instead I chose to focus on situations that many people experience together and the overarching emotions that these situations create in people. The scenario I drew from stemmed from living near and commuting into a city. Having spent over three years fighting the Washington, DC traffic and public transport, I was intimately aware of how being in these group experiences affected me as an individual. Also, I had a sense of the emotions and behaviors of groups in these situations. I had finally identified very specific content that I would address and so began the exploration of how to actualize these ideas. This process was fairly quick as I was able to draw on the extensive and varied technical research I had done in the previous year and a half.
Aesthetically I have always been drawn to abstract form with little to no decoration or ornamentation and solid fields of color. Conceptually, using an abstract and minimal visual vocabulary to portray my ideas appealed to me since it is all but the antithesis of the situations I was depicting. City-life is rife with visual stimulation; one’s senses are often overloaded when travelling through a city. Most subways are covered in graffiti, cars clog the streets, and people of every shape size and color fill the sidewalks and subway cars. I felt I could relate the feelings created by being in a city without the visual noise of a city.

As I experimented with different ideas and ways of working in my time at RIT, I kept coming back to the idea of using multiples. There is something extremely beautiful about masses of object or organisms or people and at the same time repulsive and extremely disconcerting to me. This perfectly addressed the feelings I had when commuting within a city. There was sometimes something natural and comforting about being in a group, but at the same time, in me, evoked feelings of claustrophobia and futility. My experimentation into different ways of working and handling clay allowed me to quickly determine how I would create the hundreds of forms that would represent the people in my scenarios.

Throughout my research and experimentation I held true to the notion that volumes of information can be relayed through limited means. A slight bulging and narrowing reminiscent of an hourglass undoubtedly invokes the human form in the eye of the viewer. Subtle differences in posture and orientation tell vastly different stories. I employed these techniques to create my figures. They would not be realistic people with defined features; this would go against my aesthetic sense as well as the concept of the piece. I did not want the focus of the work to be on the individual but instead on the group.
Clay was the ideal medium to quickly create multiples of a form with subtle differentiation. I used a foam mold process that allowed me to handle and manipulate each object in the forming process. This method allowed me to quickly create similar pieces yet gave each form a unique posture and gesture. I used two different sizes of forms to create the three sets of figures for the three final pieces in my exhibition (Figures 2 and 3). This decision was made through determining the final space the pieces would need to occupy in relation to their surroundings.

The environment of the pieces and their installation in the gallery was as vital to the piece as the figures themselves. I needed to create a group of people that when gathered would recreate a specific scenario and feeling. I chose to use mixed media in two of the pieces to create the environment. Steel proved to be the ideal material to create a subway-like atmosphere. The steel tubing was cut into cubes that could each house a clay figure. The units were left separate to allow for ease of transport as well as flexibility in installation and arrangement of the pieces. This method of working allowed me to experiment with different sizes of forms and configurations as I was in the process of creating, rather than having to commit to all details before beginning the piece (Figure 4). To create a
sidewalk, concrete slabs were formed. These provided the base for one of the pieces and again helped to create a city-like atmosphere. The gallery space was manipulated by adding walls to create spaces for the pieces and to allow for the installation of the pieces in a corner that was vital to the content (Figures 5 and 6).

The final and most elusive piece of the puzzle was determining the surface treatment of the clay forms. Throughout my time at RIT I continuously tested surfaces, creating boxes and boxes of test tiles. I finally determined that like the forms, the surfaces needed to be minimal yet contain subtle differentiation and depth. The color was vital to the success of the pieces since color has such profound influence on emotional response to a piece. Having researched and been heavily influenced by American Realist and Color Field painters; I finally decided to utilize paint as a medium in addition to ceramic surfaces. This freed me from the constraints of ceramic materials and opened up a limitless color palette. Through many, many tests, I found that using a fired on base of a colored ceramic slip and then spraying
on a different color of acrylic paint gave me the depth of color and surface I was seeking (Figure 7).

The creation of the final pieces for my thesis exhibition relied heavily on my research conducted throughout my time at RIT. My explorations both intellectually and technically gave me the resources to draw upon to conceptualize and create my final pieces.
**IV. Conclusion**

My final body of work, *Propencity*, consisted of three pieces: *Commutte*, *Rushing Hour*, and *Hurry up and Wait*. As described in the previous section, each piece was comprised of many individual units installed in groups to illustrate the different concepts of each piece. All three pieces dealt with my experience working in a large city and the feelings of futility and monotony that I experienced.

*Commutte* (Figure 8) abstractly represented the experience of people commuting on a subway. My experience taking the DC Metro every morning was of being in a sea of office workers, jam-packed in a subway car yet not interacting. There was a loss of individuality and personal space was encroached upon, yet everyone had walls built up around them, not engaging with each other. To create this feeling, approximately 120 individual clay “people” were aligned in rows each housed in a steel cube. The figures were in close proximity and the gesture of the forms indicated some interaction, yet the pieces were physically divided by the steel. The blue color of the figures helped to create a sense of gloom, monotony, and depressed futility.

![Figure 8. Commute. Alissa Barbato, 2011. Photo: Elizabeth Lamark](image)
Commuter was the first piece viewers encountered in the gallery. It was installed parallel to the entrance so that the viewer was forced to walk along the almost 18 foot length of the piece; thus creating a sense of movement. In response to the piece, a friend from the DC area also intimately familiar with commuting on the Metro, gave a shudder and stated that she felt that way every morning. This confirmed the success of the piece in relating my personal experience as well as others being able to relate to and identify with the piece.

My hatred of traffic and its futility was depicted through Rushing Hour (Figure 9). The figures in this piece were created and installed in such a way that they were literally crushing each other in their haste to reach their destination: a corner of the gallery. There was no release once the destination was reached. The figures in the corner were the most disfigured as a result of the onslaught on the other forms. The bright yellow color of the forms emphasized the energy and movement I was attempting to relate. But there was also a slightly vile and grotesque tinge to the yellow to create a sense of disgust rather than the joy that yellow can evoke.

Figure 9. Rushing Hour. Alissa Barbato, 2011. Photo: Elizabeth Lamark
The third piece, *Hurry up and Wait*, was the final piece in the exhibition that the viewer encountered (Figure 10). It was installed in a long line in the rear of the gallery, perpendicular to the entrance. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer could see roughly half of the piece – a line of dark red figures standing on concrete slabs atop waist-height grey pedestals. The posture of the figures indicated that they were waiting in line and there was some interaction of the figures yet they still remained rigidly in a line.

Figure 10. Installation view of *Propen*city. Alissa Barbato, 2011. Photo: Elizabeth Lamark.
Once the viewer reached the rear of the gallery and turned the corner formed by *Rushing Hour*, they finally discovered the figures’ destination: a concrete arch (Figure 11).

![Figure 11. *Hurry up and Wait*. Alissa Barbato, 2011. Photo: Elizabeth Lamark](image)

There was no exciting reward at the end of the figures’ interminable wait, merely a passage to more waiting. I received a variety of responses to this piece including some finding humor, albeit it humor with a sense of irony, in the situation. While unexpected, I was pleased with this response as it illustrated that others could recognize the situation and yet had responses that did not exactly mirror my own.

*Propencity* successfully conveyed the images and feelings that I sought to relate to the viewers. There was quietness and subtly to the figures yet due to the groupings, installations, and colors considerable emotions and responses were evoked. The best indication of success of my work was the response of art critic Janet Koplos to viewing *Propencity*. She stated: “it made me think and it made me feel.” That is always my ultimate goal in creating art.

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xiv Marker and Hopper. (1990) *Edward Hopper*.


V. Bibliography


VI. Documentation of Work

Image 1 – Installation of Propencty. 2011
Image 2 – Commute, 2011. Ceramic, steel, acrylic. 42”x10”x204”
Image 3 – Commute. Detail
Image 4 – Commute. Detail
Image 5 – Commute. Detail
Image 6 – Rushing Hour, 2011. Ceramic and acrylic. 14”x48”x48”
Image 7 – Hurry up and Wait, 2011. Ceramic, concrete, acrylic. 16”x8”x168”
Image 8 – Hurry up and Wait. Detail.
Image 9 – Hurry up and Wait. Detail.

Photo credit: Elizabeth Torgersen-Lamark