“Within”

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“Within”

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics

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Rochester, NY
April 2015
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Abstract

“Within” is my investigation into the relationship between interior and exterior spaces. I explore the mystery of the inner hidden spaces, both physical and metaphorical. I draw inspiration from organic forms, particularly the body and transitions from outer surfaces to internal spaces. My sculpture is not intended to be a literal representation of the body or other natural forms but instead remains abstract and ambiguous. Outer surfaces curl and fold to become inside spaces; openings reveal hidden structure within.

The sculptures constructed for the thesis exhibition are hand built utilizing primarily coil construction. Each piece was constructed with a particular gesture, concept, or idea as a starting point. For example, one piece began with the idea, “it will curl around and pierce itself,” another with the concept, “inner lobes poke through outer openings.” As the construction process unfolds, decisions regarding the direction of the form are made according to the guiding concept for that piece as well as my intuition.

Ten pieces were displayed on four foot tall pedestals. The sizes of the pieces range from approximately 12”x12”x12” to 36”x36”x36.” This scale as well as the height of the pedestals was designed to encourage the viewer to engage intimately with each piece. The height of the pedestals make the pieces viewable at about chest height inviting viewers to lean in and examine the inner spaces more closely. Pedestals were arranged away from the wall to allow all sides of the work to be engaged.

Both the sculptures and the pedestals employ a neutral grey color palette. Grey was chosen to promote the contemplative nature of the body of work. Grey also removes much of the potential for specific references that other colors tend to invoke thus allowing the viewer to focus on the form alone.
Discussion of Sources and Research

Prior to attending graduate school my work was heavily influenced by highly ornate functional pottery and sculpture with lots of surface treatments such as stamping, slip trailing, and carving to create a surface of complex layered pattern. The work of ceramic artists, Kristen Kieffer and Rain Harris, personal favorites of mine at that time, is representative of the type of work I was striving to make. Ornament and pattern were central to my work and to my personal aesthetic. I responded to repeating pattern and particularly to interruptions in pattern. In this early phase of exploring my artistic voice, Professor Rick Hirsch suggested that I ask myself exactly what it was about pattern that I found compelling. He further challenged me to make work in which pattern was not just a surface treatment stuck onto a form but instead necessary and integral to the piece. I responded by making work in which the pattern ran straight through the very structure of the object. I extruded hollow tubes and scored them together to make a huge block of clay with holes running all the way through. I then carved these blocks into organic forms, each patterned with structural holes. Initially I thought, “Well, no one can say that I stuck pattern on the surface because the pattern runs clear through the block and is part of the structure itself.” When I finished the work it provided me with a closer look at the relationship between the interior spaces of the holes and the exterior skin of the object. The relationship between inside and outside had become more intriguing to me than the pattern itself. Additionally the organic forms that I was carving from these blocks were interesting to me with or without the pattern. Although my work went through many more permutations to fine tune my intentions, the ideas that emerged from making that body of work informed the rest of my work in graduate school and ultimately was a direct precursor to my thesis work.

As the questions I was asking myself through my work changed, the work and the artists who influenced me also changed. On a trip to the Museum of Modern Art in New York City I came across a work called Buraco Preto (Black Hole) by Brazilian artist Anna Maria Maiolino. This was the first time I recall seeing her work and this piece was perfect to me in its simplicity of form and complexity of psychology. I was compelled to delve deeper into her body of work.
In reference to this piece, curator Alexandra Schwartz writes, “This piece—the English title is Black Hole—is part of her drawings-object series from around 1971–1976. It’s made out of paper. But she’s torn the paper and layered it so that it becomes a three-dimensional object—literally a black hole. There’s a lot of play of shadow, light and dark, and it also has this very abstract reference to the body that has a kind of sexual quality to it [...] .”

Seeing this piece was a turning point for me because in it I began to recognize my own artistic intentions. The form is simple but has complex psychological implications. I found myself drawn to the internal space she had created, the not quite visible space in the shadow and it instantly resonated with me. What is at the bottom of this black void? Black Hole helped me to further recognize that negative space, not necessarily pattern, was important to me and my work. I am drawn to voids, concealed interiors not quite fully visible or accessible to the viewer.

Japanese ceramic artist Imura Toshimi is another artist whose work served as a lense to guide me towards my own intentions. His work also makes use of voids and interiors. His

pieces often resembles fragments of a larger piece and they allow the viewer to glimpse interior spaces and structures that resemble something that is typically not visible. Toshimi’s sculptures have something in common with what I was trying to do in my own work but had not been able to verbalize in my original thesis proposal. The description of his work in the book, Contemporary Japanese Ceramics: Fired With Passion, guided me toward vocabulary that helped me to verbalize my intentions. “...Imura is as interested in the interior of his pieces as much as the exterior. He refers to the outer surface as “skin,” which necessarily reminds us that there must be bony structures beneath the skin. Imura is keenly interested in the interaction between the outer and inner spaces, and he refers to a tense equilibrium between the skin of his works and their inner structures.” This short passage helped me to name the parts of his sculpture I was responding to and was trying to develop in my own work. I had an intuitive sense of what I was after, but the structure of graduate school requires that one can clearly express one’s artistic intentions both verbally and in the written word. My difficulty bridging the intent of my work with the verbal and written expression of that intent was helped and inspired by Toshimi’s work and words.

Artist Eva Hild’s work resonates strongly with me. While my work does not resemble hers, I feel that it is attempting to speak a similar language, which led me to study her work more carefully. Her construction techniques, mainly coil construction, are relatively simple and low

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[Image: Imura Toshimi,Untitled Sculpture, 2009 The Victoria and Albert Museum, London]

tech, but because of the large scale of her pieces they require experience, precision, and patience to successfully execute. With superb fluidity her forms continuously fold from interior to exterior elegantly. Her surfaces are simple, sanded smooth and are either all black or all white keeping the focus on the form itself.

Kerstin Wickman writes in Ceramics Art and Perception, “People have always been fascinated by the relationship between the interior and exterior worlds: the dualism between inside and outside, content and form, feeling and shape, impression and expression, explanations and religious concepts. Eva Hild achieves a unity of inside and outside, starting from the inside and employing not the basic geometric forms exploited by so many pioneers of modernism but organic forms from the natural world...What she is trying to do is to visualize something that cannot actually be seen but that is powerfully experienced; how pressure from outside influences our interior.”

Examining her pieces and reading about her work pointed me towards some of the right questions regarding my artistic intentions. Hild’s work inspired me to look beyond the physical object and use it as a mode of expression. Her beautiful forms carry a psychological tension that I was just beginning to explore in my work.

Although I was well aware of Ken Price’s reputation as a game changer in the ceramics world I had only looked at his work prior to graduate school. Once I began working to find and define my voice as an artist I began to really see his work. I came to appreciate it and really love it. Themes that I use in my work are masterfully accomplished in Price’s work. More than one of his bodies of work plays with the relationship between internal and external. Some have a single

mysterious opening on the outside that suggests a hidden internal space. Others are large and amorphous containing an inaccessible void. Price is well known for avoiding talking about particular meanings or themes in his work. As a graduate student struggling with that very thing, I was envious of his privilege to dodge those questions. But reading the following I realized that the meaning and intent of some of his work is not unlike the ambiguity I was striving for in mine. In 2008 Price said, “My work is layered with references, many of which are unintentional. I wanted to leave their meanings open to personal interpretation. What’s inside the viewer seems to be just as important as what the work is.”

These artists and their work inspired me and served as catalysts for the development of my work because I saw in their work something I was looking for in mine. Through trial and much error I worked through many permutations of my ideas that have been visually and verbally articulated so well by others. My ideas are not new or unique in the history of art, but I strive to express them in my own way in my own voice. After much searching and struggle I knew that my thesis work would be about interior space, voids, holes, glimpses into the inner self.

Critical Analysis

With this body of work I explored the themes of “inside,” “looking inward,” and “spaces hidden from view.” As I moved from being drawn to the negative space in pattern, I discovered that what I was really trying to do was look beyond the negative space into a cavity. I wanted to see interiors, inside structures, to see a small glimpse of a private hidden space. At first I was primarily interested in the literal physical interior spaces, but peeking inside objects means that one interacts intimately with that object. I began to become aware of the metaphorical possibilities and implications for this sculpture. As this psychological interior began to develop in the work, I embraced it and fostered it. I began to make the work with the intention of having not only a tension between the inside and outside physical spaces, but also with the public image versus the secret self.

We tend to feel vulnerable when revealing either the physical or the psychological private parts of ourselves. The inside spaces of our bodies are places that are private, hidden, and even taboo just as we keep parts of our minds, thoughts, and inner desires private. Most of us tend to share those parts of ourselves with only a few close friends, family, or partners. To foster the feeling of intimacy and vulnerability in the sculpture, I created forms that loosely reference the body. They are soft and rounded with cavities that gradually transition from outer surfaces to inner structures. There is always a way to look inside, but never a way to see the entire inner space clearly.

My show is called, “Within.” I worked with my thesis committee to select the most appropriate title for this body of work. We agreed that it should be simple, open to multiple interpretations, and have a clear relationship to the work. Avoiding something too esoteric was important as well. Rich Tannin suggested the title “within.” The word precisely references the concepts and themes explored in this body of work. It allows for both literal and metaphorical interpretations and it was immediately clear that it was a perfect fit. The title, “Within,” said everything I wanted to reveal while leaving room for mystery. There are ten pieces in this body.
of work, each of them entitled “Within.” They are numbered, for example, “Within #1, Within #2,” rather than each having their own unique title. The numbers roughly indicate the order in which they were made, however several pieces were made simultaneously so some of the numbers are more accurate than others. I did not want the sculptures to have individual titles because “within” already says everything I want to say in terms of a title. Individual titles run the risk of limiting the interpretation of the work and I wanted to retain as much ambiguity as possible.

For these soft undulating forms with complex interior parts the only material and technique that seemed appropriate was clay. Clay has a visceral as well as a corporeal presence that is essential to the work. It is earth, it has a solid physical presence like flesh. While the content and the themes of the work deal with both the physical and the psychological, the forms rely on their relationship to the body to convey this meaning. Glass and metal are both too foreign to the body to maintain the same thematic content. Wood provides some of the qualities needed but it would be very impractical to make these in wood. Aside from my preference to work with clay above most other materials, this work required clay. Another material would alter the mood and meaning of the work.

Coiling was the natural choice of technique for these particular forms. Coiling granted me the ability to work in a slow, intuitive, mindful manner because it is a slow gradual process. Each piece literally grows larger one coil at a time allowing me to make decisions about the direction of the piece as it is being created. While each piece began with an idea or gesture in mind, I never knew ahead of time exactly what the finished sculpture would look like. This intuitive approach suits me well because I enjoy the process of discovering the piece as I resolve it. Sometimes a piece began to go in a direction that was not working but I was able to cut off the offending portion and continue coiling from that point. This flexibility allowed me to try ideas without wasting a lot of time. Out of eleven pieces created all ended up in the show but one.

To achieve the smooth soft fleshy qualities of the finished work I sanded each piece at the bone dry stage and then again after they were fired. I experimented with fired surfaces such as glazes, engobes, and underglazes but didn’t find them satisfactory for the work. I began to
try paint. After ruling out milk paint and casein I tried acrylics. Acrylics have so many mediums and extenders available that it makes it possible to pour the paint onto and into the surfaces and cavities of the sculpture. A surface that could be applied by pouring was crucial since there were many areas in each piece that are visible to the viewer but are too awkward to successfully apply paint by spraying or brushing.

I tried many different paint colors on test pieces but was not happy with any of them. I wanted the focus to be on the form not on the color. Many color choices increased the odds that viewers would draw conclusions about the content of the work based on the color. If the color were too fleshy the work itself would become literally about the flesh and lose its metaphor. If it were too bright they began to feel artificial and alien. Professor Richard Hirsch suggested trying grey. This proved to be the right choice for this work. Grey allowed for ambiguity just as the title, “Within,” did without leading the viewer too far in the direction of one particular interpretation. The grey I chose coupled with the satin finish of the acrylic made the work appear as though it were clay at the leather hard stage. This supported a soft and fleshy appearance while still not referencing flesh in a literal fashion.

I designed and arranged the gallery space to encourage viewers to experience each piece intimately. My sculptures sat on tall, well lit pedestals placed away from the wall so that one could walk all the way around each of them. The height of the pedestals brought the pieces to chest height of the average person. This made it possible to lean in and peer into the opening and under spaces of each one. To minimize visual noise and allow the pieces to be the focus of the show there was nothing unnecessary in the gallery. The sculpture was set against clean white walls, grey floors, and grey pedestals.
Conclusion

One of the most important lessons instilled in me during my time in graduate school was that everything counts. It isn’t just the form, or the amazing surface, or the great idea. The presentation of the work is critical as well. Everything from the lighting, the music, the pedestals, the signage, the floor, the arrangement of the work, and the editing of the work, contributes to the success or failure of the pieces themselves. My thesis show was a joint show with fellow MFA candidate, Alissa Barbato. She and I worked hard to compromise and collaborate on even the tiniest details that went into making the show space work well for both of us. Everything was considered and decisions were made based on how best to elevate both bodies of work because both would suffer if one of us were selfish with gallery details. We were able to achieve harmony between the two bodies of work by creating elements of consistency throughout the gallery. The most notable of these was that all of the pedestals were the same height, made of the same materials, and painted the same color. This contributed to a visual unity and flow throughout the space allowing the viewer to give full attention to the pieces.

At the opening, viewers interacted with my pieces the way that I hoped they would. Many viewers leaned in and put their faces quite close to the pieces. They looked underneath, they peeked inside the holes, and they spent time with each piece. Whether they saw the things I was trying to imbue, I cannot know. But their behavior suggested that many of them may have experienced the moment of intimacy with the work that I was striving to foster. In this regard I feel that this body of work was successful.

I do not know specifically where my work will go from here but there are some technical issues I would like to continue working to solve. This work was made quickly and many pieces were constructed simultaneously which rarely afforded me the benefit of reflecting on the problems I had with one piece before moving on to the next one. Despite smoothing and sanding them at every stage of construction they were still not as flawless as I was striving for. Minor cracking was repaired with automotive putty but allowing the pieces to dry more slowly coupled
with more supports during the firing should eliminate this problem in future work. While I felt that the painted surface of the pieces worked beautifully, I am still interested in conducting more research and testing to find a variety of fired surface solutions. More time is required to achieve the level of craftsmanship I desire.

I plan to continue working with the themes found in this body of work as there are a lot of avenues left to explore. Although the fast pace of graduate school was great for moving through many ideas quickly, I look forward to being able to examine the breadth of these concepts rather than having to force myself into the next big idea before it feels natural. I can seldom verbalize my ideas before making the object, so it is difficult to predict how my work may evolve from here. I will begin where I left off and I look forward to discovering where these ideas will lead.
Documentation of the Work

“Within”

Within #1
19”x18”x18”

Within #1 detail
Within #2
30”x25”x16”

Within #2 detail

Within #2 detail

Within #2 detail
Within #3
12”x9”x7”

Within #3 detail
Within #4
14”x12”x13”
Within #5
12.5”x7”x8”

Within #3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Various sizes
Within #6
13”x11”x8.5”

Within #6 details
Within #7
11”x8”x7”

Within #7 details
Within #8 two views, 23”x14”x13”
Within #9
25.5”x14”x16”

Within #9 detail
Within #10
30”x30”x19”

Within #10 detail
End Notes


Description List- DVD Images

“Within”

1. WithinSeries#1Caswell.JPG
   *Within #1*
   April 2011
   Earthenware, acrylic paint
   19”x18”x18”

2. WithinSeries#1aCaswell.JPG
   *Within #1*
   April 2011
   Earthenware, acrylic paint
   19”x18”x18”

3. WithinSeries#2Caswell.JPG
   *Within #2*
   April 2011
   Earthenware, acrylic paint
   30”x25”x16”

4. WithinSeries#2aCaswell.JPG
   *Within #2*
   April 2011
   Earthenware, acrylic paint
   30”x25”x16”

5. WithinSeries#2bCaswell.JPG
   *Within #2*
   April 2011
   Earthenware, acrylic paint
   30”x25”x16”

6. WithinSeries#3Caswell.JPG
   *Within #3*
   April 2011
   Earthenware, acrylic paint
   12”x9”x7”

7. WithinSeries#3aCaswell.JPG
   *Within #3*
   April 2011
   Earthenware, acrylic paint
   12”x9”x7”

8. WithinSeries#4Caswell.JPG
   *Within #4*
   April 2011
   Earthenware, acrylic paint
   14”x12”x13”

9. WithinSeries#4aCaswell.JPG
   *Within #4*
   April 2011
   Earthenware, acrylic paint
   14”x12”x13”

10. WithinSeries#5Caswell.JPG
    *Within #5*
    April 2011
    Earthenware, acrylic paint
    12.5”x7”x8”

11. WithinSeries#3-7Caswell.JPG
    *Within #3, 4, 5, 6, 7*
    April 2011
    Earthenware, acrylic paint
    Various sizes

12. WithinSeries#6Caswell.JPG
    *Within #6*
    April 2011
    Earthenware, acrylic paint
    13”x11”x8.5”

13. WithinSeries#6aCaswell.JPG
    *Within #6*
    April 2011
    Earthenware, acrylic paint
    13”x11”x8.5”

14. WithinSeries#6bCaswell.JPG
    *Within #6*
    April 2011
    Earthenware, acrylic paint
    13”x11”x8.5”
15. WithinSeries#7Caswell.JPG  
*Within #7*  
April 2011  
Earthenware, acrylic paint  
11”x8”x7”

16. WithinSeries#7aCaswell.JPG  
*Within #7*  
April 2011  
Earthenware, acrylic paint  
11”x8”x7”

17. WithinSeries#7bCaswell.JPG  
*Within #7*  
April 2011  
Earthenware, acrylic paint  
11”x8”x7”

18. WithinSeries#8Caswell.JPG  
*Within #8*  
April 2011  
Earthenware, acrylic paint  
23”x14”x13”

19. WithinSeries#8aCaswell.JPG  
*Within #8*  
April 2011  
Earthenware, acrylic paint  
23”x14”x13”

20. WithinSeries#9Caswell.JPG  
*Within #9*  
April 2011  
Earthenware, acrylic paint  
25.5”x14”x16”

21. WithinSeries#9aCaswell.JPG  
*Within #9*  
April 2011  
Earthenware, acrylic paint  
25.5”x14”x16”

22. WithinSeries#10Caswell.JPG  
*Within #10*  
April 2011  
Earthenware, acrylic paint  
30”x30”x19”

23. WithinSeries#10aCaswell.JPG  
*Within #10*  
April 2011  
Earthenware, acrylic paint  
30”x30”x19”
Bibliography


