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Amalgamation

I can imagine no terminal point of human inquiry into nature, ever.
-Lewis Thomas

My work explores the concepts of morphology, communication of emotion through gesture, and the form and surface relationship of ceramic sculpture. In biology the study of morphology focuses on the form and structure of organisms; for the purpose of this project I reference artist Bonnie Seaman's interpretation that juxtaposes two bodies of characteristics side by side, such as anatomical and botanical. I use the ideas of segmentation and budding as central structural characteristics for my sculptures. These biological concepts apply to many different organisms, yet I combine them within my singular species. The surface of the sculpture is inextricably linked to the structure, acting as one living form. The structures reference organisms ranging from the obscure to most recognizable, interpreting them into a human emotional landscape. As a result, the final installation piece exhibits the diverse ceramic organisms partaking in ambiguous interactions, communicating with one another in a new environment for the viewer to experience.

The world consists of a massive quantity of living structures and organisms, some so small or large that they only seem to exist in textbook images. We take snippets of visual information from the mold in our bathrooms to the grasshoppers found in a field. I try to reflect on my daily encounters with the environment, taking note of the small yet significant moments. The content for this project stems from my personal experiences, my natural surroundings, and investigation into particular organisms and artists.

Ever since I was a child I have enjoyed being outside. I occupied myself by collecting bugs, diving into the dirt, and fantasizing about my fathers' rock and mineral collection. I wandered aimlessly thinking about the creature's previous life before trapping it inside my glass jar. Cats and dogs were not allowed in my house because of my parents' allergies, so naturally I became passionate about insects and wildlife living in my backyard. All of nature's organisms interested me, including the mold that grew in the corner of my bathroom. These childhood experiences were constantly reinforced by my parents' science teacher philosophies and directly relate to my fascination with forms that repeat and grow.

My interest in nature roots the inspiration for my sculptures. These roots expand and take form in biological organisms such as deep-sea vent tubeworms, yams found at farmers market, insect anatomical diagrams, and the human form. The segmentation in the minute Springtail insect and the stacked sections of tubeworms relates to the separation of segments in my organisms, while the swollen segments of my organisms are similar to the bulbous yams I eat for dinner (fig. 1). I reference the human body, observing the ways in which fat swells and folds, also looking to my own self for ways in which I express emotions through body language. By connecting all of these separate ideas I combine my interests in the biological world into an imaginative visual landscape through creating a new species of ceramic sculptures.

Diversity in height, weight and gesture produces an opportunity to fully explore my ceramic organism's physical forms. Some are short and stubby, while others are tall and lean. The number of segments per organism varies from three to fourteen, while the change in diameter from adjacent segments ranges from slight to obvious. The organisms share a common set of characteristics creating a visually unified group; each consists of bulbous segmented sections in the body, an orifice, a horizontal-lined texture cut into the surface, and an organic

figurative gesture. The biological aspects within my work, and that of other artists, provide metaphors for human life and situations. I observe similar tendencies in the works of contemporary ceramic artists Bonnie Seeman and Jason Briggs whose interests lie in biological forms and meticulous attention to surface and work process.

Bonnie Seeman's utilitarian and detailed ceramic work combines anatomical and botanical references while using the functional object as a means of narration and metaphor concerning the "fragility and resiliency of life" (Seeman Statement). The narration and metaphors for my sculptures reside not only in the forms, but also in the installation's environment. I am interested in her concept of morphology and how she references and examines the living structures of the world. Seeman uses typical forms like cups and vessels as a base then adds multiple elements from plants and human anatomy, evoking a visual parallel between the beautiful and unsightly (fig 2). Seeman states, "this dichotomy also enhances the tactile quality of the work enticing personal interaction with the viewer" (Seeman Statement). Her attention to detail and use of morphology produces an unanticipated and original piece, which is a similar objective of my own work. Seeman's successful references and use of narration guides the viewer's thoughts of what they may be looking at. Similarly, I reference familiar aspects of insects, plants, and human qualities-- although in a more ambiguous manner-- to allow the viewer space to contemplate what they see.

Another ceramic artist, Jason Briggs, creates mysterious and suggestive porcelain sculptures reminiscent of human body parts, folds, and creases (fig. 3). His use of human hair, smooth, plastic-like, and fleshy surfaces provokes an inclination to touch and explore his work. Briggs flawless execution of porcelain surface convinces the eye that the surface grows from the form and is not applied. I achieve this in my own work through developing a surface that works

with the form, leaving no trace of an application. I use multiple layers of washes, terra-sigillata, and glazes to achieve a surface that works with forms, as if it has always existed. My organism's colors vary from an opaque rutile to a semi-translucent rutile with layers of red iron and black oxide washes, as well as a brown terra-sigillata showing through (fig. 4 & 5). I also use a textural glaze in specific places to activate surfaces of specific organisms with less epic gestures and forms. The textural glazes look like small-infected polyps scaling the surface, some even showing signs of aging. Inside each of the organism's orifices lays a bright orange or yellow matte underglaze covering the entire inside, allowing the openings to draw ones eyes, ears, or mouths attention.

I admire Jason Briggs flexible work process and beginning stages. He has a loose idea of form and a grouping of words. What influences these words isn't necessarily important; it's what happens while working (Briggs Artist Statement). The focus is on the process of working with the material. I identify this parallel in my own work, where I rely heavily on my relationship with clay in generating the shapes and gestures of my organisms. Briggs porcelain forms stem from an inherent desire to touch (Briggs Statement). He plays with this human impulse, one that is very prevalent in my life, by creating a completely unique and seductive sculpture. Throughout this school year I observed classmates and friends interacting with my sculptures; everyone always wanted to feel the leather hard surfaces. The gestures of the sculptures in conjunction with the texture initiated not only conversation but also physical interaction.

While all the organisms in my family have a consistent set of traits, some go beyond mere gesture and transform into a new state of being. By referencing modes of asexual reproduction, such as budding, the organisms are seen in a state of transition and growth. In biology, budding occurs when one cell splits into two and produces a parent and child being,

where the child eventually splits off from the parent and becomes its own life form (Campbell 976). The child essentially is a clone of the parent with the exact same genetic make-up. What happens generally on a microscopic level, although many visible organisms bud, is amplified in my sculptures.

Although budding concerns reproduction, this is not necessarily the function within my organisms. Budding lends itself to powerful connotations of mutation and regrowth that function as a metaphor for human life. One of my organisms not only buds once, but splits on top of the original divide while traces of muscles and veins mysteriously protrude from inside the piece (fig. 6). My work emphasizes how all beings, humans and organisms, are connected not only metaphysically but also visually and physically. Viewers identify with the organisms through the sculptures physical and emotional characteristics. The organisms' physical regrowth and mutations parallels that of human dysfunctions or oddities. I see this diversity in my organisms as a reflection of our humanity.

The organisms I create examine physical diversity as well as emotional. Each organism embodies a specific emotion, conveyed through the figurative gesture and orifices. The gestures I use stem from investigation into the intricacies of my own emotions throughout this year. In many ways I see each of my sculptures as an external expression of my internal angst. The surfaces of the organisms also vary, due to using three different glazes, as well as the inconsistencies that the kiln produces when firing at 1,940° F. All of the organisms are unique but obviously apart of the family.

Mid- September of this year I knew that I would work in clay for this project. I desire the tangible, and clay fulfills this necessity in my life. The material challenges me physically while providing a meditative state in the repetition of the preparation of the coils. Using clay as the

primary medium for one school year yields an opportunity for extensive exploration, experimentation, and proficiency in the material. My process is heavily based off the nature of clay in relation to the coil application. I coil build all of my organisms, creating hollow structures that swell like flesh fat rolls. The elasticity of the material and slow build up of form (due to the coil building) creates a unique organic shape to each segment. I am constantly battling for control with the clay, regardless of the gesture of the form or what I intend. The sculptures are a compromise between the clay and myself.

Challenges occur while building large ceramic sculpture. Individual sections collapse under one another if drying isn't timed properly in correlation with continuous building. The small scale of the first pieces, just less than two feet, created a raw desire to build large. This urge led me to my third and fourth pieces, some of the largest of all of the organisms, reaching just less than six feet tall. From this point on I concentrated on diversifying my organisms by giving them interesting personalities/gestures and incorporating budding into the structures. I explored new muscular surface textures, increasingly expressive orifices, overall height of piece versus the diameter, and pushing the limits of the gestures and amount of budding (fig. 7 & 8). Each of these ideas results in a new member of the installation, increasing the amount of interactions within the environment.

The final installation piece displays the family of organisms in an environment of mulch and interaction (fig. 9). The location of the show, the Yellow Barn, creates an organic space with worn wooded floors and walls. The installation is in a corner space between a wooden and dark green wall. Cedar mulch covers the surface of the ground and pedestals. The pedestals covered with mulch produces mounds upon which the organisms sit, generating an illusion of increased height differentiation in the organisms. Pathways in the mulch surround the organisms adding

more visual interest and invite the viewers to walk within the installation. The mulch on the ground makes the organisms come alive, as if they grow from the ground.

The orientation of the organisms creates three separate interactions while the budding and wall piece stands alone. The situations created by the composition of the organisms reflect situations I've experience over the year. Although I have personal connections to the organisms, the ambiguity of the composition lets the viewers place their own thoughts as to what the organisms are communicating about. The lighting provides a very theatrical feel to the overall installation, highlighting each interaction and producing interesting wall shadows.

The gallery opening of "Critical Mass" reaffirms my belief in the creation of artwork that can inspire and question the context and content of our lives. Observing individuals participating with my sculptures by touching, talking into, and even posing with for pictures, makes me ecstatic. Person after person kept asking me what the organisms were and I replied by asking them the same question. Responses ranged from intestines to prehistoric venus flytraps to elephant trunks. I truly believe that I brought imagination back into people, even just for a couple of minutes.

By bringing creativity and imagination to people I am able to see the way in which my exploration in biology, interaction, and ceramic sculpture takes on a different form with each individual who encounters it. This in itself achieves a tangible physical sight that is open for interpretation yet rooted in my own self-exploration. As Lewis Thomas said, "I can imagine no terminal point of human inquiry into nature, ever". With that in mind, I have a long future ahead of investigation into the biological world.

Fig. 1
Tubeworms



Fig. 2
Bonnie Seeman



Fig. 3
Jason Briggs, *Flirt*



Fig. 4
Sculpture Surface



Fig. 5
Textured Sculpture Surface



Fig. 6
Budding



Fig. 7
Muscle



Fig. 8
Emotion



Fig. 9
Final Installation



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