

Look At Myself

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**Abstract**

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I have questions that need answers and I had questions yet to ask. That stumped me for a while. What would I look for as an artist and what would I do with the answers discovered? In this thesis I will address why these questions are important to my art.”Rudiementary questions like “What are the reasons for making art or does what I produce make me an artist? and their answers would be presumbaley intuitive for artists, or at least that was how I felt before this master’s program. This could be summed up best by Thomas Merton quote, “art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.” By making art I found a released or my anxiety. I get to exhist outside myself when an artwork is placed inside a gallery. I get to look and find something new about myself that is comparable to therapy. So yes, I am an artist. The cardboard constructions, unfired clay, and stacks of egg shells is my art say am an artist.

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I have questions that need answers and I had questions yet to ask. That stumped me for a while. What would I look for as an artist and what would I do with the answers discovered? In this thesis I will address why these questions are important to my art.”Rudiimentary questions like “What are the reasons for making art or does what I produce make me an artist? and their answers would be presumbaley intuitive for artists, or at least that was how I felt before this master’s program. This could be summed up best by Thomas Merton quote, “art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”<sup>1</sup>

My Bachelor’s in Fine Art was in Studio Art with a focus in Ceramics and Art history. I studied four years, three of those years in the ceramics department, at the Kansas City Art Institute in Kansas City, Missouri with intent in becoming a ceramic sculptor. Making art is fundamental to my way of life. However, why do I make art? I could pursue a gallery or museum career as a curator (like my mother), become a teacher, or any other creative career such as dancing, writing, or performing. Why is making ceramic sculptures above all else, why was this my artform?

My first MFA sculptural piece was titled *Teratoma* (image 2), the definition of which is the rare occurrence of when a twin absorbs their fellow twin fetus in utero. The absorbed twin fetus turns into a tumor of germ cells in the survived child. These tumors of cells can consist of skin, hair follicles, or sometimes noticeable teeth and bones. Often these teratomas are found inside the living twin but in some more rare cases, a teratoma can be additional limbs, an additional facial construction, or a version of physical alterations that don't fit into the children’s song, “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes.”



Image 1

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<sup>1</sup> “No Man is an Island”, by Thomas Merton, published by, Shambala Library, 1955

*Teratoma* was a chance to prove something to myself. I took what I knew about clay and sculpted the largest ceramic piece I have made to date. I challenged myself by making a work that is both large, figurative, and abstract. *Teratoma* pushed me to sculpt clay on a human scale. Once *Teratoma* was made I felt accomplished in the fact I made a roughly life size figure that survived two firings. The soda fired process translated the firing into a uniquely emotional surface. The sculpture wasn't what I was looking for but sent me on a journey of more exploration. Consequently, *Teratoma* is an expression of my insecurities. By sculpting clay, it captures my fears and anxiety from relocating, starting school again, all the while expecting a newborn.

From the critique of *Teratoma*, there were varying interpretations of what clay could express with the position of this abstracted body. I believe clay is much like the body in that it is made of minerals with water, forged by its environment and tempered by energy. However, I still questioned why I make art.

I entered the winter 2022 quarter with a hunger to do something different. Therefore, I planned to make ceramic sculptures again but I wanted to utilize more materials. With that in mind I created *Symposium* (image 2). Ceramic humanoid figures, spray painted, on steel pikes, with a ceramic kylix holding an infant made of dyed silicon. I was experimenting with the concepts of how to create a context that invites the viewer into the space of the artwork. This offers the feeling of one joining the artwork in conversation, hence the name of *Symposium*. Similar to ancient Greek symposiums, parties, events, the two male figures hover next to an infant lying in a vessel used to serve wine. The male figures represent men in my father's family, whom I perceive as very macho and redneck with conservative energy. Like most men in Texas my uncles and cousins stand around a cooler full of beer until the cooler runs empty. As they drink the conversation gets darker, meaner, and truly hateful, with terrible thoughts and shared propaganda. All the while young children, like my brothers and I, stand next to them with our Dr. Pepper's, absorbing what they say quietly. I compared this setting to that of the ancient Greeks symposiums where men debated and drank. The drunk men of my family thought they were having truly deep and profound conversations, emblematic of the mythological intellect of ancient philosophers.

This scene has two grotesque figures in bright toxic colors associated with caution and poison, hover next to an infant who resides in a drinking vessel to be consumed. The viewer stands with these figures, relating how these moments of hate and anger pass on the legacy of found in many families like mine. There was a fixation on the vulnerability of the infant with its soft squishy silicon. Questions and references to the title and the references to Greek pottery in the work were a focus. Again, the most important question asked, believing that my craft and history with clay spoke for itself, was why am I using clay.

*Teratoma* and *Symposium* were attempts at sculpting ceramic figures to express emotions for people to feel and empathize. Would the pieces have been more or less successful if they were not made of clay? Could the audience relate to the expression of these dark, intimate feelings? Now I had more questions and I really began to think about myself.

I recycled and reused the clay to sculpt heads, and a slip to dip the egg shells. The shells came from the previous month's breakfasts, nearly three eggs a day. Incorporating materials from my sustainable daily routine.

This was the first piece I made of clay that I had no intentions of firing. *Compression* was an installation that existed in the CMA and would always return to the CMA after its lifetime. Fired clay is a method of preserving sculpture, ending the clay's plastic state of motion and potential for change. Once clay is fired, it is a new element, solid and lasting well beyond my lifetime. This gives sculpture permanence, independent from the artist. A self-portrait becomes a window to the past with its future uncertain. Unfired clay, however, returns to its fluid state and changing time and time again, much like how we change and how I wish to change.

With *Compression* the act of making was more important than the finished product. Making multiple heads through a sequence of repetitive actions was therapeutic: the act of eating the eggs and preserving the shells for reuse, smashing the heads together, and filling in openings with shells. Part of the process was personal. No one was there to watch me crack open, cook, and eat the eggs, or making the heads for reclaimed clay, and compressing the heads together.



Image 2.



Image 3.



Image 4.

These actions were private and not meant to be consumed by anyone else but me. It was the short life of the work that was on display for the audience. Then once it lived its life, the clay was reclaimed, returned the cinderblocks, and the shells were composted to continue a regenerative cycle.

Because of *Compression* my work had new energy and the thesis began. I wanted to look at myself, make art where the process and material are just as important, if not more so, than the finished artwork. Previous artworks of mine solely utilized clay no matter what the artwork was about simply because it was what I knew best. It was time for me to change. I felt confident to grow and change by sharing my processes and intentions in ways people could interact and sympathize with the materials as much as the finished artwork. I wanted my thesis work to make spaces that the viewer can enter and interact with and those materials and imagery elicit memories to help others sympathize with my work.

The first work of my thesis was *Enter Sandman* (image 5), which was an installation at the Henry Art Gallery on the University of Washington campus. Using what I had learned from materials other than clay in both *Symposium* and *Compression*, I consciously made the choice to not use clay and instead use materials that hold meaning to me and be familiar to the audience so they may form a connection with the artwork and material. In this case, I used cardboard to construct and decorate.

*Enter Sandman* originally started off as a side project to construct some privacy doors for my personal studio space. I recently had come into a large stash of nice cardboard boxes and wanted to use the material to make my doors. The reason I wanted to work with the cardboard was because it holds nostalgia for me and many others. It is an easily recognizable material that most people see or interact with daily and when I was a child my brothers and I would use cardboard boxes my mother brought home to construct cat towers. We would spend hours and days cutting, taping, and gluing the cardboard until we had a maze-like structure that reached for the sky, but in reality were three or four feet tall. My brothers and I would also utilize the cardboard to make structures for ourselves to have spaces for us to play in or find seclusion, such as forts.



Image 5.

Once I made the original two doors for my studio space, I wanted to work more with cardboard. I wanted to continue with my play with the material so I kept working on the doors, adding

decoration, a function handle, and an archway to go over the doors. I was having fun and found myself exclusively working on these doors to make a gate way into my studio. This was I was looking for, working and playing with a material that was not clay. I didn't have the pressures from the history of clay sculptures that I would compare myself to, or the pressures of expectations from others and myself to work in clay. I felt free and open with my artwork for the first time in a long time. I had found my reason to make art, to free myself and play.

I will go into what I mean by play. Once I realized I was having fun and I felt like I was in a state of acceptance with my artwork I wanted to focus on the idea of play and what that means as an artist and as an individual. An American poet I was introduced to around the same time, thanks to National Public Radio (NPR), was Ross Gay. Gay is a contemporary author and poet whose work discusses the idea of finding joy and learning to play again as adults. I read his 2022, *Inciting Joy*, a collection of essays from Gay about why we as individuals and as a society should focus on what brings us joy and how to use that to bring all of us together.<sup>2</sup> As Gay puts it, "Joy is a condition that emanates from our being aware at a moment that we are connected to something bigger than ourselves..." Joy through play and the act of playing in my studio was the turning point I needed to find a purpose to my art work and define who I was as a person. A particular essay stood out to me, the "Grief Suite: Falling aboutis" especially the particular passage, "Grief is not gotten over, it is gotten into... in understanding what the grievers bring back to us... everything will change, and for good."

The line, "everything will change, and for good" made me think of my artwork and back to the question I have been asking myself since I entered my MFA program, is what I'm doing make me an artist? For a long time, I have been making artwork, such as *Teratoma* and *Symposium*, to express my grief, shame, and insecurity I was not treating my practice as an artist as a means to make any sort of change and always thought of my work as something passive, to be seen but not heard; to express but not feel. My artwork was not for change anything but to satiate my own need to be seen as an artist: to be seen as a maker. I never imagined I could elicit a change for good, to add joy and play into my work, and I never thought I could share my joy in making with the viewer.

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<sup>2</sup> *Inciting Joy*; essays, by Ross Gay, 2022



Image 6.

Another source of study in my quest to form and answer my questions was *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi. “Flow activity...provide a sense of discovery, a creative feeling of transporting the person into a new reality. It pushed the person to higher levels of performance, and led to previously undreamed-of states of consciousness.”<sup>3</sup>The joy I speak of while making *Enter Sandman* can easily fall under what Mihaly described as a flow activity. The act of planning, drawing, cutting and gluing the cardboard was not only fun for me but transported myself to days playing with my brothers as children, me playing with my first cat, Cupcake, and the times I would hide inside my forts to escape from my young anxiety.

Back to *Enter Sandman*, having described the process and why it was so important for me to play with cardboard, I want to further discuss what *Enter Sandman* means now as a finished artwork and on display in the Henry Art Gallery. The art work itself is made of two objects, a gate, and a wall piece. The gate (image 6) was originally the doors I made for my studio while the wall piece was a response to the making of the gate and my studio space. I had made the gate to close in my personal space, to shield and protect my studio from eyes and unwanted guests when I wanted to be alone with my work. My studio was a safe place, a fortress of solitude that now had its gates, where I could let my intentions and desires take shape.

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<sup>3</sup> *Flow: the psychology of optimal experience*, by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1990.



Image 7.

The wall piece for *Enter Sandman* (image 7), was designed to mimic diptychs that would be found in private altars rich families would commission. The diptychs would show imagery of saints, portraits of family members, and other symbols and locations that related to the family. Consequently, my diptych is full of imagery that relates to my life and why I now seek joy as an artist, with metaphors for my childhood anxiety and depression. Images of animals and locations that symbolize how my upbringing in Texas shaped me and imagery showing my salvation in art and family.

The location in the Henry Art Gallery was also very important for the work. Having started in my studio as a form of isolation, transferring *Enter Sandman* to a gallery gave me the opportunity to open my personal world to the public. In *Entering Sandman* is transformed into a space for people to enjoy and relate to the work and hopefully develop some sort of connection with the cardboard. I also originally intended the gateway to be interactive, for people to open and close as they walked through, but keeping the gates open at all time has given the artwork a sense of transparency that suits me well as I often share much about myself in my work.

Now that I had discovered the answers to my questions of why I make art and wanting to continue my joy in making I embarked on the second work of my thesis, *Fort* (image 8). *Fort* was an amalgamation of previous studies, such as *Compression* and *Symposium*, and focused my play with materials to build another space like *Enter Sandman*. Using found cinder blocks and bricks, I built a structure around a centralized sculpture made of cardboard. Once the structure was built, the audience and I used clay to fill in the gaps amongst the bricks with little sculptures. I asked everyone to make something fun and relaxing, with no expectations in order to have the audience interact with the fort, to have their imaginations to explore the space and create the nostalgic feeling of play.

The creation of the fort was also a form of play for myself. Stacking the blocks and bricks in an intuitive way to make walls and nooks to hide in. As a child, my brothers and I would make a fort of anything. From our massive collection of stuffed animals, pillow, blankets, boxes, and furniture, to the scrap construction equipment that my father hoarded in the backyard. We never started a fort with a general plan, all we knew was we wanted to build one that allowed us to play however we wanted to play.

So finally, down to the second and last question I started my thesis with. Someone making something and calling it art doesn't make you an artist, but does making forts and cardboard gates make me an artist? Going back to the Thomas Merton quote, "art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time."<sup>4</sup> By making these artworks I found a release for my anxiety. The process of smashing clay together, cutting and gluing together cardboard is therapeutic. I get to exist outside myself when an artwork is placed inside a gallery. I get to look and find something new about myself that is comparable to therapy. So yes, I am an artist. The cardboard constructions, unfired clay, and stacks of egg shells is my art say am an artist.

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4 "No Man is an Island", by Thomas Merton, published by, Shambala Library, 1955