

THESIS

TO THE LIGHT

Submitted by

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Colorado State University

Fort Collins, Colorado

Spring 2015

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ABSTRACT

TO THE LIGHT

Wood is a warm, natural material that has a long history as a structural support in the construction of buildings and this role is deeply embedded in our minds. Left bare with minimal sealants, its grains reveal the course of the growth it took while still in an organic state. These qualities remind us of the living presence contained within certain inanimate objects.

The scale of construction is miniature, revealing the numerous conscious decisions that went into building the passageways, levels, and thresholds that respond to each other as they define the spaces of the sculpture. The sculpture is intentionally taller than the human body so that we are physically overwhelmed and humbled by it. The constructed form also expresses the humbling qualities of gravity and time.

The sculpture's appearance, as tenuous and struggling for uprightness, expresses the vulnerability all forms experience under the pressures of gravity and time. We relate to how our bodies feel physical vulnerability to these and other forces at work in the material world.

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The physicality of the making process determines the visual aesthetic of my work. I want the manual and labored qualities of making to remain as layers in the finished product. If I could, I would sleep and live in my sculptures as I make them and they might remain as shelters for beings as interested in transience as I am. I will explain my sculpture through three categories: architectural structure as an allegory for mind, plant growth cycles as a construction model, and human desire for the security of shelter.

Allegory can be likened to a visual metaphor. Architectural structures have become part of the vernacular of our minds. The mental images of these structures are embedded deeply in our psyches. These images can be seen to manifest in how readily children attempt to adopt the behaviors of adults. At the time my nephew was two years old he was playing in a cardboard box that had a window and a door his size. I doubt he consciously understood the ramifications of what a house is, but he perceived the image of one, knowing how to use its features; he repeatedly went in and out of the door and gazed upon the living room through his miniature window.

The psychologist Carl Jung called these images of structures, or personages, archetypes. They are the deeply embedded mental images and structures that somehow are passed down through the generations. Some of the more obvious archetypes are mother-and-father images, that a child contains these images is evidenced by the child's ability to relate physically and mentally with its parents before speech. Jung postulated that there are infinite archetypes.¹

My experience of my own inner world is indeterminable, layered, and faceted. I cannot say from experience if my mind is centrally organized. Reflecting the questionability of mental organization, the overall structure of my sculpture is an accumulation of smaller structures that lacks a cohesive plan. My experience of my mind is that

mental features, such as memories or emotions, accumulate and influence me and then pass away. Like my sculpture, there are intentions for design that manifest in the world, but they never have the duration I believe they will possess. Much of the process of making is experiencing inspiration, acting upon it, getting bored with it, and then discovering new ways of making. This process of making is cyclical since the discovering leads to inspiration. In my sculpture I have gone through this process of finding a way, losing it, and discovering a new way of constructing; the result has been a layering of construction styles into a single sculpture.

Psychology arose out of the older tradition of philosophy however many parallels still exist. One branch of philosophy that I am strongly influenced by is phenomenology. Phenomenology is the subjective exploration of existence; it therefore correlates with sense experience and personal interpretation, making it a resource for artists. According to the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl, time is an experience that arises in the mind, just like thoughts and emotions.ⁱⁱ However, our fascination with time is so strong that we externalize its power. Time has three parts: past, present, and future. *Memory* as the label for thoughts of the past and *daydream* for those of the future, are powerful somatic experiences. In my sculpture I am seeking to induce memory and daydream, they are the entryways into a vivid experience of the present. Memory and daydream are one way to contact the archetypes.

When “structure” becomes shelter, it formulates a dividing line between outside and inside, the civilized and the wild, between the habitable and the uninhabitable, exemplified clearly in the layouts of tribal villages. We make that distinction in how we define what exists as an external environment. I explore the divide between structure and shelter, by leaving shapes and materials in a raw form. Those raw forms express the impermanence of the process and the object, serving to further question what is “interior” and what is “exterior”. I believe that we are

learning that even the more deeply embedded structures of mind, such as identity and personality are not permanent, even within one lifetime. Due to this fluidity of identity and mental structure, there are no central identifying components in the sculpture that would give it a discrete existence. It is built with a provisional quality so that it appears to be in a state of transition with forms piling on top of each other, merging, and collapsing.

The miniaturization of scale that is present in my work also relates to an allegory of mind. It is much easier to read miniature spaces as inner or cerebral since we simultaneously mentally identify and physically misidentify with them. They are not for our actual bodies even though we interpret their visual cues to be such. The sculpture then becomes totemic of spaces we inhabit. The form takes on a spiritual function like a religious shrine with its small components for making offerings.

My preferred term for this sculpture is fetish object. *Fetish object* typically refers to items involved with ritual prior to modern organized religion. Most are small and portable, but some are large totemic structures that exist within a site of pilgrimage. Mine is of the latter tradition, with hope that it will eventually reside in an outdoor location.

Fetish objects are objects of devotion. They exist in society because they unite human aspirations for well being with the material elements of the world discussed further later. Fetish and totemic objects also serve to localize the energies of the individual and to legitimate the existence of our psyches, both important qualities for mental well-being. By creating a fetish object, I am working with secular aesthetic qualities to create a spiritually expressive object. The spiritual experience of living is an important aspect of life, giving it vitality and joy. The imagination is another quality of mind. The imagination is an important link between creativity and spirituality. Fetish objects are spiritual because they come from the imagination of the

creator and invoke the imagination of the viewer. Imagination is important because it points us in the direction of wonder and the mystery of living. Predictably, objects larger than our bodies humble humans. Imagination and spirituality do not occur without humility, that is why I have made the sculpture of a larger scale than the human body so that it will overwhelm the viewer. The sculpture invokes the imagination of the viewer because it is indecipherable as an object from everyday existence.

The second main topic of the paper is plant growth cycles as a construction model. In particular, my observations of plant life have strongly impacted the aesthetics of my sculpture. Plant growth is always responsive to the details of their environments; plants are the ultimate site-specific objects. Plants interact with their environment as they exchange matter through the processes of photosynthesis and absorption. In my thesis sculpture, I have attempted to make a structure that both interacts with the elements of nature, and provides shelter from them. Plants grow in unique ways. I have observed repetitive aesthetic patterns that are significant to my style of building. These repeated visual cues appeal to me because they are both beautiful and unpretentious. I would describe these visuals as: accumulated, non-linear, fluid, obsessive, segmented, and impermanent, topics I will go into detail below.

In plant life, accumulation appears when the location is right. Plants will multiply in large densely packed clusters to make the most of their resources. Or a single plant will multiply a certain part of itself; even those parts contained on a single plant can be closely grouped together. Some examples of this clustering are the way flowers and fruit clusters are produced, and the ways that numerous thick branches shoot from the base or stem of a plant. These growths represent a surging and collecting of intention for the plant. That surging and collecting appears in the way I have delineated the spaces contained within the overall structure of my sculpture.

Plants do not envision their final appearance as they grow, nor did I have a clear vision of what the sculpture was going to look like when it was completed. Spaces became defined and shapes collected near each other to become stable enough to support the weight of an even taller organic structure. I nurture the overall form of the sculpture as I manage structural integrity to make it taller. I am not concerned with the even distribution of material through space. Rather, I am interested in how structure can aesthetically accumulate forms in a non-linear way in order to suggest a growth pattern that is innate to the structure.

Non-linear growth expresses the time that plants use for their development. They have their own timeframe based on a natural harmony with their environment. For plants, it is impossible that growth occurs at a stable rate and is constantly occurring; when winter comes plants diminish or die. Their reproductive periods take great energy, slowing growth or putting plants at risk to other elements in the environment. As material forms, plants grow and wither in relationship to the world around them.

In my own sculpture I tend to work intimately on one section while giving up concern for the whole. I then will work on another portion without regard for what I have just made. However, in time those portions must be joined together, either structurally or visually, to ensure that the sculpture appears as a single object, just as a plant appears as a whole even though it has various parts that have grown or died without much relation to each other.

Plants grow in fluid segments. Fluidity and segmentation are two qualities that may seem to be in aesthetic opposition. However, in plant growth they work together. A sprout appears and spreads its first pair of leaves. It is a complete part or segment from which another spear-like portion of the plant will emerge and grow. The original sprout and the new spear are two

different segments of the same plant. In my work, each structure is its own segment from which other segments are added.

The fluidity of creation in plants occurs because they must respond to plant parts or other objects in their environment. The stems and leaves of plants will grow around and through objects in order to orient themselves towards sunlight. Roots grow in the direction of moisture in much the same way. The structures they become along the way are fluid as they extend themselves out through earth or sky. My structure is not fluid because it has material needs to fulfill; it is fluid because it has aesthetic needs to fulfill.

Gravity and weathering are two forces in nature that create impermanence. They are the forces of decay and destruction; they imply death. What goes up must come down. The empty rooms are permeated with a subtle disquieting presence that reveals material form as impermanent and organisms as mortal. Haphazard construction suggests movement in the form that signifies its impermanence and instability. There is uncertainty as to how long it will remain upright. The wood has been treated to take away its freshly milled appearance and intentionally invites the elements to take their effect.

The final category of this paper explores the human desire for the security of shelter. How we relate to the forms of this world reveals our most primal needs and aspirations for survival and enjoyment. Culture is our attempt to gratify those impulses as well as conceal the vulnerability inherent in our efforts, we might enjoy the process of survival or we might perish in our attempt. The sculpture expresses the primal desires to wander and to seek shelter; likely some of the initial instincts of our ancestors.

In modern times, the impulse to wander has largely been subdued by industrial society. Yet, wandering expresses itself in incoherence and an unmediated experience of life. If I cannot

wander by finding a meaningful existence through continually travelling around with only a backpack, I at least want qualities or symbols of our past wild yearnings to be present in what I do now. To wander is to move without forethought or goal; mental meandering is a significant part of how I make space for ideas to arise spontaneously as I am working. This freedom is important because it opens the mind to new possibilities. Some intention is good, but too strong of an intention can cloud the mind. Confusion cuts through cloudiness. There is more vitality between the parts of my sculpture because they relate idiosyncratically to each other, this is due to maintaining a light intention through out the process.

Shelter is the counterpoint to wandering. Shelter is the fulfillment of a deep physical and psychological need. Anthropologists speculate that some of our earliest structures were granaries and houses. Houses originally were built for humans and their domesticated animals. Houses still meet our basic need for shelter. My own sculpture is composed of parts of houses; passageways, thresholds, and walls are combined incongruently in an effort to invoke the primal qualities of human use of structure. The improvisational and haphazard aesthetics of my sculpture stand for the impermanence of life as shelter relates to need.

Shelter means the most when our minds transition from its uncertainty to its certainty. I want to invoke the original moment when we appreciate that our minds are housed in a body and our bodies are protected by clothing and architecture. It is not a moment in the past. It is a primal experience that is available in every moment. Our sense of survival has been swallowed by the multitude of comforts we have created for ourselves so that we never have to feel the fear of need. Need and appreciation are intimately connected and as our instinct to experience need has eroded, so has our ability to experience beauty. What I want to recreate is that critical moment when we feel the vulnerability inherent in our needs, shelter being the primary one.

For most of human history, individuals have built their own shelter and housing. It has only been since the increasingly complex divisions of labor of the past few hundred years that home construction has become a profession. It is a primary act to build a house or shelter. My own impulse to construct houses is evident in my work methods. I have been a car mechanic, facilities maintenance person, and a construction worker. As a child I played with Lego's, built plastic models, and created dioramas. Today, with those activities still fresh in my mind, my studio practice feels like a continuation of childhood play.

There is a long tradition of structuring architectural form with wood. Wood is a warm, natural material with a universal yet varied place in the history of constructing dwellings. Its service in this role is deeply embedded in our experience. We build with wood in a way that mimics how it appears in our world as trees. Our buildings, like trees, are shaped with verticality and uprightness.

Timber framing is a construction method that has an origin in medieval England. When the settlers came to America, they brought the technique with them.ⁱⁱⁱ This method developed into "stud framing," in which two-by-four-inch pieces of milled lumber are attached systematically to create floors, walls, and ceilings. This is my favorite part of construction because it happens quickly and delineates space.

I intentionally chose an architectural style that makes do with what is readily available. I have always admired the ingenuity that goes into constructing or repairing in this way, which reflects nomadic or erratic aspects of human nature. There is an elemental appreciation for living that occurs through thriftiness. This type of problem solving comes from contemplating the relationship between the inside and the outside of a structure. In my sculpture, the inside and

outside are in a direct relationship to each other because the structure is permeable to its environment.

One way of approaching being an artist is as a way of being in the world that expresses creativity and uniqueness. We all have that potential. The other way is that making art is a reflection of a very personal skill set cultivated through professional engagement with an art practice. I find both views to be meaningful in my approach to living but my esteem as a professional comes from cultivating a unique skill set. My sculpture presents viewing and making art is a way to establish a relationship with the physical world.

This sculpture is the culmination of my personal fascinations with this world along with all of the learning and processing I have been doing in graduate school. Ideas such as “eventful object”, happenstance, the spell of the miniature, mixed media, habitual accumulation, and organism/artifact hopefully all manifest in the work. For my own part of the process, I believe there is a way of working with material that invokes the sense that the world is magical, even as that magic can be contained within the explanations for my work presented in this paper.

Through the investigation of the three main topics of this research—structure as allegory for mind, growth cycles of plants as a construction model, and human desire for the security of shelter—elucidate an experience of life that is worth living because our being is in relationship to the elements and our environment, the source for my inspiration for making art. That way of living is palpable and honest in that it does not deny our need for survival as my sculpture features its structure rather than conceals it. This sculpture is intended to inspire a reflection on our own lives as temporary and to appreciate our precarious existence. Life is mysterious and

wonderful; the more we recognize how everything changes, the more we might begin to recognize what is permanent.

ⁱ Carl Jung, *Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1959), 4.

ⁱⁱ Edmund Husserl, *The Idea of Phenomenology* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 52.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lloyd Kahn, *Shelter* (California: Shelter Publications, 1973), 27.

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