

Human(e) Nature

By

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of Radford University in partial fulfillments of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Studio Art

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May 2025


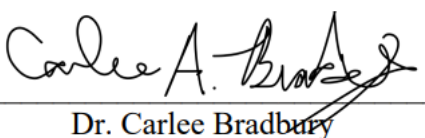

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Introduction

I am a working artist who specializes in various mediums of sculpture with a focus on nature, memory, and the human form. While I have experience in working with a variety of sculpting materials, I've chosen to spend the last three years primarily working with ceramic clay and mid-fired glazes to express my thesis research.

Throughout my body of work, I hope to share my experiences that once began in shame but then paved the way to approach my human nature in a more humane way. This self-acceptance has been significant. I want to use it as my topic of research to bridge together a more meaningful community of others like me who once felt that they were alone.

I was born and raised in Southwest Virginia, the town of Chilhowie specifically. I spent some time in private Christian schools during my primary years, but for the majority was homeschooled and raised under the mindset of Christian Baptist Fundamentalism, a subset with a history of Calvinism, which is an interpretation of the Bible as a literal way to live life. Some areas of conviction are up for selective interpretation depending on the congregation you belong to, so it isn't always consistent in what they enforce. Followers of the sect I grew up in believe that the Bible, specifically the book of Revelation, prophesizes specific events that will orchestrate the return of Christ for his church. It is believed that the "rapture" will take place, which comes about through the sounding of seven trumpets. All Christians ascend to heaven while non-Christians are supposedly left behind to bear witness and participate in literal Hell for a period of seven years. During this time, a battle is supposed to take place between God and his army of angels and Satan and his followers. Humans left behind are subject to whatever happens in the fallout. We are taught that those referred to as unbelievers (non-Christians) have been

given every opportunity to hear God's word, because He is just and merciful, but they reject his offering. This is why they "deserve" what comes next. God is supposed to cast them all into a lake of fire to burn for eternity, where they will never die but will feel pain and torment forever. Once these events have come to pass, God returns to Heaven where he and all of his appropriate Christian followers live forever in peace.

As I was growing up, my true nature as being gay scared me because I believed that these desires, being attracted to men, were "sinful" and could keep me from being able to go to Heaven. During the late 1990s and early 2000s, I didn't have any positive examples to look to for guidance or acceptance, and being called queer, fag, or faggot was something I had experienced off and on, mostly at church youth-related events as those were my main means of social interaction. I can remember early on feeling the need to repress aspects of myself in order to safely blend in with those around me and my environment. As I got older, I devoted myself to the church in hopes that God would "heal" me and make me worthy of love. I was convinced that if I walked the walk and lived my life embedded within the beliefs of Christian Fundamentalism, that what I perceived as my "pure" nature could be achieved.

For years I fought against my natural instincts, but I finally came to a place where I couldn't go on living in the closet. I decided to come out publicly, and this triggered a series of events that initially took me to a dark place, as I lost relationships with people who had been in my life for nearly a decade or more. I didn't know how to live life outside of the church or without my church family. Initially, it felt like I had cut a limb from my body, and I didn't know how to walk anymore. Like a sculpture that had fallen off of a pedestal, breaking into pieces, I tried to figure out how to patch old beliefs into my new identity. I looked for salvageable parts, tried gluing them together, but pieces didn't fit the way they had before. It slowly dawned on me

how easy it was for the people I had known and loved to completely turn away from me in the name of God, and I eventually abstained from anything related to organized religion or spirituality. It took some time, but I found the path that allowed me to begin the process of rebuilding my spirit and identity, which was art.

Even when I was young, being creative was my natural instinct, but there wasn't a lot of cultural exposure or opportunities to explore artistic expression in my rural area. For years, I created little humanoid figures out of whatever materials I could find around my house. The material ranged from pipe cleaners, socks, yarn, and leftover floral wire – I kept any scrap materials in an old Danish cookie tin and would make these creations anytime I was alone. It represented a safe space to me, camouflaged in plain sight. Getting lost in the process is one of my favorite parts of making art and knowing I can work freely. I find that the best way to practice this way is for me to work in isolation, almost like a holy ritual. When I was around seven years old, my “Mamaw Trula” (paternal grandmother) taught me how to sew with a needle and thread, which allowed me to make clothes for these figures. My “Pappy” (maternal grandfather) bought me a plier set which I could use to snip and bend varied gauges or sizes of wires that I began using to create wire frames for body forms, like a skeleton. As I began incorporating these new techniques to the figures, they became dolls that I would play with.

When family members discovered these dolls, I faced ridicule over the fact that I was making something “girly,” so my creations were hidden from that point on in a shoebox under my bed, further camouflaging what my natural instincts had created. This process became a ritualistic act, working in solitude with my hands, designing a figure that I would add careful detail to in making clothes, hair, and an accompanying story for. When it was done, it was placed in the shoebox. All done in secrecy. It was like I was creating a little universe that only I knew

existed, similar to the figures and toys in the work that Alexander Calder created. I also relate to how he viewed and interacted in the art process. He wrote,” From the beginnings of my abstract work, even when it might not have seemed so, I felt there was no better model for me to choose than the universe... different sizes, densities, colors and volumes, floating in space... of the greatest variety and disparity.”¹ This resonates deeply, as I feel that even to this day my inspiration comes from what is around me. I’m playfully gleaning from nature, animals, people, the “universe”, and recreating them in a way that makes sense to me. There was no one around to judge the subject matter, it was only me and my impulse to “make.” The parallel of being gay and feeling the need to hide is similar to how I approached artmaking, both closeted in secrecy during their formative years.

Since stepping away from my initial roots, it seems that I’ve been trying to figure out who I am outside of that belief system I was so devoted to. There have been obstacles, but also achievements. Coming to terms with my sexual identity and finding love with another man. Trying to find peace in my perspective as a gay man living in Appalachia. Pursuing my dream of being a professional artist. Allowing myself to be more open spiritually outside of traditional values. I’ve achieved academic goals I never thought I would have a chance to.

Through my thesis research, I haven’t found all the answers I was looking for; more questions seemingly to have come up along the way. However, the opportunity to understand who I am on a deeper level and finding the ability to create art representative of that process has allowed room for significant growth in my art practice as well as how I view myself and others in the human experience.

¹ Quote from book *Calder's Universe* on page 18: Calder, Alexander, Jean Lipman, and Whitney Museum of American Art. *Calder's Universe*. New York: Viking Press in cooperation with the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1976.

I was raised to believe that that I needed to be ready and accountable for my actions, big or small, and the idea of Jesus coming “like a thief in the night” to take his people home used to scare me when I was young. As I got older, it became this fantasy I looked forward to, especially when things seemed chaotic in the world or in my personal life. No matter how bad things seemed, knowing I was “saved” with a larger group from damnation so long as I followed God, the Bible, and went to church regularly made everything alright at the end of the day. This unfortunately left a lot of room for oversimplifications, gullibility, and figurative holes in my framework for life. When this framework was no longer there, I spent a lot of time not wanting to acknowledge the void it left behind or how it created gaps in my interpretation of the world.

As an adult, I had the opportunity to attend New River Community College where I for the first time was exposed to a learning experience in a standard classroom. While it was overwhelming to learn in a higher education environment and what it took to be a successful student, I craved the knowledge I was receiving. It felt like I had finally connected to an entity that spoke to me again, and a history of others who also connected to this entity. I suppose learning in general is a passion of mine. The exposure to the world of art – from painting to sculpture, art pre-history to contemporary working artists, concept to execution – learning about the canon that is “art” and the practice of artmaking became my religion. I hadn’t allowed myself to feel excited about much of anything in a long time, and I’d found passion for being alive again. The polarizing nature that can arise out of the creative process excites me, either bringing feelings of happiness or pushing the viewer away and challenging them in their comfortability, both unifying and dividing. I’ve been fortunate to experiment with several forms of media in terms of sculpture, both in class settings and in personal practice, and I believe it’s helped me to

focus on my technical sculpting abilities which can then be applied to a wide variety of materials.

Through the process of making this body of work, I've been able to reclaim painful parts of my past and carve out spaces to honor my experiences. Where words fail me, I hope my sculptures speak and offer a sense of understanding to others who know the same overwhelming silence that I have experienced. I believe that like nature, art endures the test of time, and through it, I find myself.

Concept and Work as a Whole

The work relating to my thesis research explores a timeline stretching from adolescence to adulthood, a narrative from my perspective as a gay man growing up within Appalachia and Christian fundamentalist culture. My research into these subjects revealed a lack of visibility for others like me, who grow up in environments that don't always foster growth if you don't fit into a societal mold. Being in this type of situation affects people in different ways, but there tends to come a time when a decision is made. Repression takes over the mindset, and realizations of being different stifle us into a closet. Blending in at all costs becomes your way of life. This isn't an option for everyone, so some escape to bigger, urban areas where safe spaces already exist, and there's freedom to discover one's authenticity. There are also those who love where they are from, who want to create safe spaces within these areas without sacrificing certain aspects of environments and culture. My question: Is there a way to successfully combine heritage, spirituality, and sexual identity within my Appalachian culture? Through sculpture, I believe I've been trying to find an answer.

I chose to use ceramic clay as the main medium to express my thesis due to the process that must take place in order to get a finished result. Its physical ties to the earth in the reclaiming process and the permanence it can offer with the right chemicals is symbolic of going through challenging circumstances and coming through the process more refined.

I tend to work in combined sculptural media, smaller works which include floral wire, Apoxie Sculpt (two-part sculpting medium), oven-bake clay, masking tape, aluminum foil, et cetera. These materials have the capability of becoming more fragile over time while ceramics have allowed more opportunities for details that remain permanent. Outside of ceramics, I

typically have to think about how I'm going to join different materials together, relying on bonding agents such as JB Weld, Apoxie Sculpt, and Modge Podge. Sculpting with ceramic clay has simplified the process for me and has kept me from having to think too much about how I will join different parts together. Now, I only have to use water and more clay to achieve the results I need, which allows more opportunities for me to get lost in the process.

There's an interesting parallel to my past beliefs and the chosen medium of clay, directly pulling from the creation story from the first book of the Bible, Genesis. In chapter two verse seven, God creates Adam, the "first" man from the dust of the earth, "clay." While I do not view myself as "God the Creator" in any sense, I am in effect creating my own world in which the things I make can exist in, "breathing new life" and giving meaning to previously unworked clay or materials. That feels like an analogy of my own life, reclaiming what was buried, refining by fire, and showing up for the process in order for it to unfold.

I feel like my concept has stayed pretty close to the realm of other work I create, as it all connects back to similar subject matter relating to the human form and the forms that nature presents itself in; however, I've been able to take my focus to a more observed and distinctly personal level. Rather than focusing on how realistically I can depict subject matter, I've been trying to put more thought into the references I'm using as inspiration for my concepts. Instead of only considering the surface level aesthetic, I've come to want added layers that can be discovered after more than one viewer's interaction, in terms of visual aspects and deeper concepts.

Through my art, I feel that I'm trying to recreate a feeling of comfort that came from being in the woods as a young boy and also hoping to connect to a bigger conversation of shared LGBTQIA+ Appalachian experiences.

Method and Materials

My practice has been building throughout the program, beginning with my interest in nature, my focus on the human form, and the process of how to narrate formative life experiences in sculpture via ceramic clay.

Ceramic clay body is typically made of a mixture involving refined clay that has been reclaimed from the ground, and sometimes processed to remove impurities like plant matter and rocks, and then combined with water and other earthen minerals such as silica dust (ground-down glass), feldspar, and kaolin to give it working plasticity. It's malleable with water when refining details, allows good manipulation during the sculpting process, and has direct ties to the earth and nature.

The first project I wanted to focus on involved making a body part that communicated vis-à-vis body language, so I chose to study the human hand, as it was common for me growing up to notice nonverbal cues in the hands of others while trying to gauge their mood as well as my own at certain points.

I can remember the first time I held a significant other's hand and the impact it had on me. Even though it was innocuous, it seemed like such an intimate process that was intentional and required vulnerability, communicating care and desire.. I've witnessed hands used to emphasize spoken words, waving around, and pointing. I've witnessed and experienced inclusion through hands, such as the extra hold in hugging someone tight, the comfort communicated through a friend grabbing and holding my hands in theirs. I've also witnessed hands communicating anger and violence, be it through pointed gestures or a closed fist around an object that gets thrown across the room. My own hands have a language that they convey when

I'm experiencing strong emotions, such as anxiety. I can tell that my anxiety is rising through two physical responses in my hands - when I connect my pointer fingers and thumbs, then begin rubbing them in clockwise motions, or when both my hands will automatically come to rest against my chest and stomach, feeling my breathwork in order to regulate my breathing. Using these experiences were helpful in making an emotional connection to the project of recreating and understanding the hands.

I began the process realizing that I needed to know the bone structure, movements, and how I could manipulate the form. To ensure I could fully understand their structure, I looked at my own hands, the way that my fingers looked when they bent, stretched, gripped, and the way that the skin reacted to these motions as it stretched and curved in wrinkles. I then researched photos from my art books like *Anatomy for the Artist*² as well as online sites like Line of Action³ that allowed me to focus on different types of hands. Once I was in the process, I began searching online resources for photos of hands in different positions, older/younger hands, hands with severe arthritis, missing fingers, et cetera. I came across David Wojnarowicz b. 1954, an American artist who was gay and died as a result of AIDS in 1992. One of his works, *Untitled (Sometimes I Come to Hate People)*, 1992, features a pair of bandaged hands with text overlaying the black and white image.⁴ This was his last work before passing away, and the words are haunting. Feelings of becoming empty, a shell of former self, having your defining qualities stripped away by disease and an apathetic society. He was a photographer, a film maker, a painter, an activist, a writer, and a performance artist. His work focused on the AIDS crisis and the lack of response from American government during the 1980s and 90s and is an

² *Anatomy for the Artist* by Sara Simblet provides an array of references to the different facets of anatomy, from bones to muscle to skin, as well as different positions to showcase functions of the human body from both male and female perspectives.

³ An online program providing live models in different poses and body close-ups: line-of-action.com is a site that provides timed intervals of reference photos that offer artists the chance to create a quick sketch based on a specific action or part of the body.

⁴ Image and information source: https://wojfound.org/timeline_event/1992-sometimes-i-come-to-hate-people/

inspirational figure to me for his bravery in wanting to bring difficult issues into a bigger conversation.

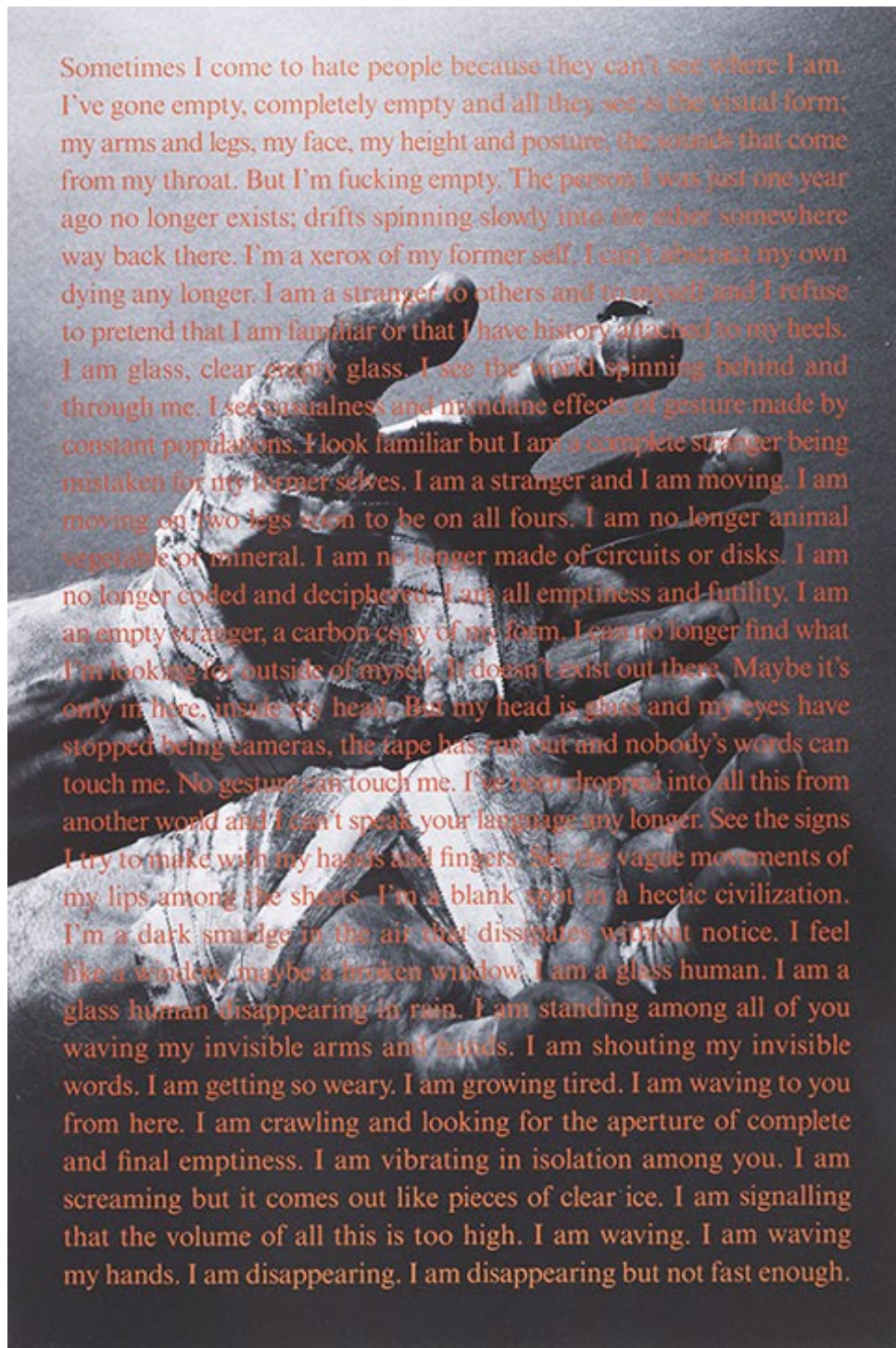


Figure 1. Untitled (Sometimes I Come to Hate People), screen print on gelatin silver print, 47 ½" x 35", 1992.

After attempting to sculpt from the reference of photos and my own hand, I decided to purchase a mannequin hand to help visualize it more and to understand the basic shape. This helped with practicing gestures and different positions and helped me understand the general form of the hand. Initially, I wasn't achieving a realistic look and that the hands were looking "floppy", lacking the appearance of having bone structure.

French sculptor Francois Auguste Rene Rodin was renowned in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century art world.⁵ He respected the tradition of sculpture but worked in a way that challenged traditional concepts. Known for pieces such as *The Thinker*, earlier known as *The Poet*, which was created as a figure in his larger work *The Gates of Hell*, he used human anatomy as his muse. One of the works, *The Age of Bronze (L'Age d'airain)* (1876), caused a scandal.⁶ The figure is fully nude, life-sized, appearing with ambiguously gesturing hands and a drowsy expression. This piece caused scandal, as it was believed that Rodin had actually created the sculpture from casting the human form rather than his own skillset. He maintained that he used a live model to reference, and that the sculpture was made up of four figures that weren't able to be recognized.

⁵ Bio and other work of Auguste Rodin: <https://rodinmuseum.org/collection/about-auguste-rodin>

⁶ Photo source: <https://rodinmuseum.org/collection/about-auguste-rodin>

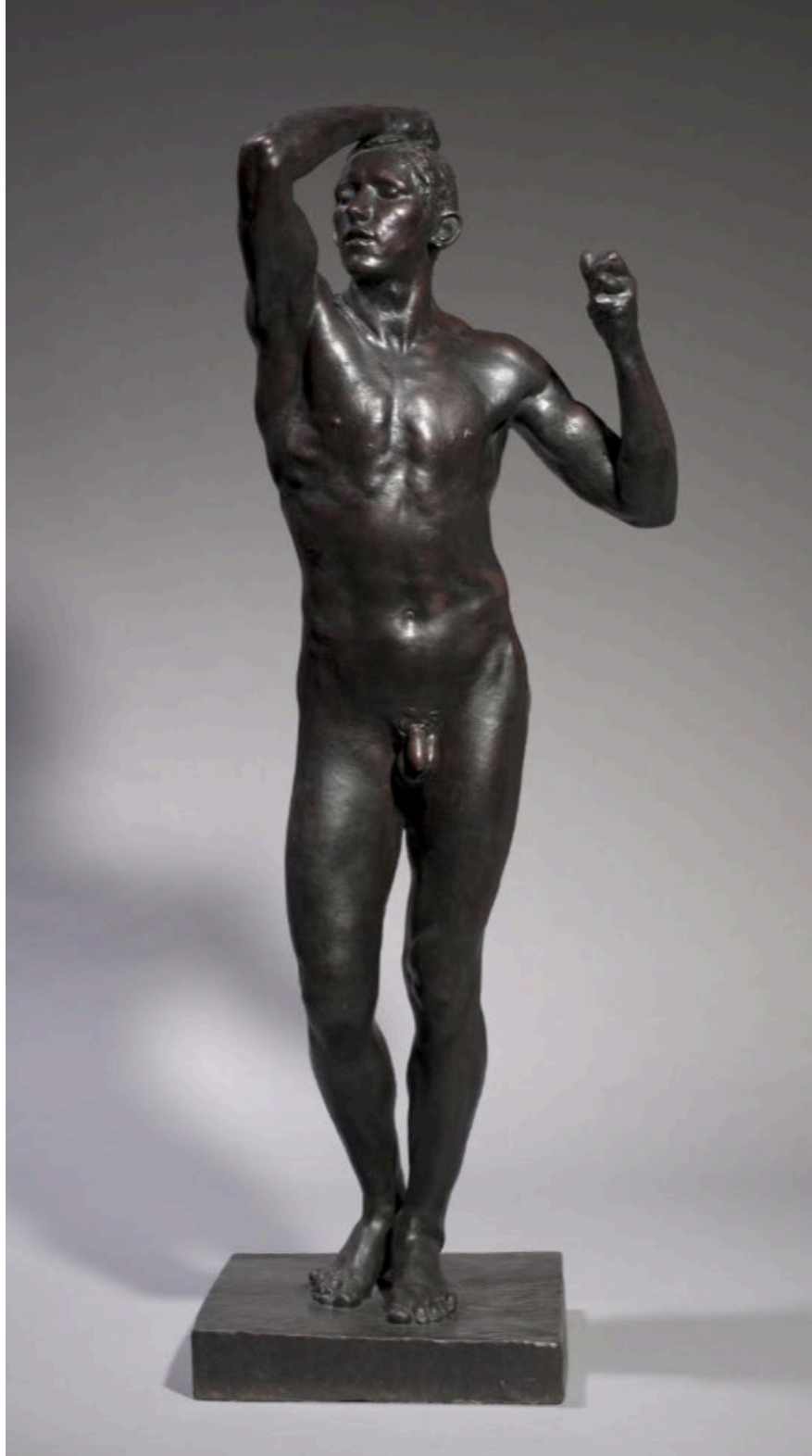


Figure 2. *The Age of Bronze (L'Age d'Airain)*, 71 ¾" x 26 1/8" x 18 ½", bronze, 1875-76.⁷

⁷ Source for *The Age of Bronze* photo: <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1918.328>

I eventually purchased a life-sized replica of a skeleton hand, and this allowed me to understand what gives our hands their shape and mobility. Our hands are full of bones⁸ carpals, metacarpals, phalanges, trapezoids, lunates – doing more research greatly helped me understand where certain bones needed to go in order to make the hand look more structured and natural. It took a bit of practicing and a few mistakes, but the forms began looking more realistic the more work I put in. I took the process in making hands very seriously, so as I finished sculpting a study of one I immediately started on a new one. I would make sure I had made both a left and right within one sitting session. This allowed me to get to the fun part of the process.

My technique involves forming approximately a pound of clay into a wrist and hand palm, then using a wire tool to cut it in half where I would hollow out the inside, then slip and score the two halves back together. Once a solid piece again, I then roll out clay coils for fingers, cutting them in appropriate lengths, and adding small line details on the knuckles, finger bends, and fingernails with a micro silicone brush tool.

I learned that I needed to hollow out the excess clay in the palm otherwise the hand would explode in the kiln firing from too many air pockets. Making a finger using the coil technique is much more effective than piecing it together knuckle by knuckle. After I understood the form of the hand, I began to incorporate other elements. I added swollen knuckles. I sculpted fingers to look as if they were being bent backwards to the point of being broken. I started to add nature textures. Through the process, I was given the name of Kate MacDowell whose medium is porcelain sculpture. She uses this material to symbolize the fragile nature that exists between humans, nature, and our changing environment.⁹

⁸ Information on bones of the human hand: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/bones-of-the-wrist-and-hand/img-20006951>

⁹ Kate MacDowell Artist Statement: <https://www.katemacdowell.com/statement.html>

Her work focuses on the relationship humans have with nature and the environment, using the forms of animals, human anatomy, and plant textures, sometimes meshing them all into one concept. A couple of her pieces, *Soliphilia* (2010) *Memoriam* and (2020) are reminiscent of my work, meshing ideas of what we consider natural¹⁰

¹⁰ Artist websit <https://www.katemacdowell.com/soliphilia.html>



Figure 3. *Soliphilia*, 10"x5 ½"x4", hand-built porcelain, 2010.¹¹

¹¹ *Soliphilia* photo source: <https://www.katemacdowell.com/soliphilia.html>



Figure 4. *Memoriam*, 12"x9 1/2"x3", hand-built porcelain, 2020.¹²

¹² Photo source: <https://www.katemacdowell.com/memoriam.html>

Sculpting hands was extremely challenging, but I feel like the process prepared me for more than just making the physical form of a hand. I took the same mindset into making my other work, which first involved understanding what it was I wanted to make. Once I had the intention, I could begin doing research. The research informed the intention more, and then the making process could begin.

I moved my focus to the mouth, which to me is a multifunctioning means of communication. I wanted to put a lot of care and attention on the teeth and lips, making sure they looked somewhat realistic in how I mimicked the right look of teeth; the little ridges, lines, discoloration, and the sharp, uneven crevices that line our back molars. I wanted to hone this skillset not so much for the purpose of hyperrealism, but because I enjoy the combination of the hard, sharpness of the teeth against the soft, fleshy skin of the lips; it almost feels dangerous that the two textures reside so closely to each other, and that theory proves true when I accidentally bite my lip or the inside flesh of my mouth.

In my work, the mouth is a strong base concept. It holds the power to build, destroy, repair, pleasure, and torture. In my experience, I associate the mouth as a weapon. Hearing insults from others, I would spit them back. I learned it wasn't always necessary to use a tool in order to tear someone down. Words have lasting effects that can make us break down over time, and I think that makes the mouth an interesting concept to focus on. The mouth vessels that I create don't have vocal cords or the ability to speak, so it's necessary to design them in a way that utilizes visual cues to insinuate the action of speaking. My process in creating these pieces varies, as I can build them using a pinch pot technique, where you take a small handful of clay, forming a hole in the center without poking through the bottom, then using your pointer finger and thumb in a pinching motion to create walls around hole until it resembles a dish. I also

utilize throwing pottery on the wheel, which refers to a machine that has a spinning circular bat, similar to the aesthetic of a large record player, that allows the user to form clay into bowls, cups, and other dishes through consistently applied pressure on the clay body. This process allows for more consistent results, meaning the surface is smoother, and the walls of the piece should be more stable in thickness from the base to the rim. Either process creates a rim around the top, which is all that is needed to provide a row of sculpted teeth. I begin by scratching faint lines where I want the teeth to go, then I let the clay dry until it becomes leather-hard – this refers to the state in which a bit of moisture has left the clay body of the of the piece – this allows it to have more structure, which allows me to handle the piece without having to worry about it warping or falling apart. I then carve out the teeth with my previously mentioned tool until I'm satisfied that I have teeth in all the places I want, then I let it become bone dry. This term refers to clay when almost all of the moisture has dissipated from the clay body, giving it a chalky white appearance, and making it prone to forming cracks or pieces falling off. This stage is where I go in and add any final touches or smooth out the rough areas on a piece, because the next step of the process is a bisque firing in a kiln either electric or gas-powered. Bisque firings in a kiln will heat to 1,945 degrees Fahrenheit, which is common for the first firing. An initial firing removes any remaining water from the clay, and partially fuses the clay into a semipermanent state. It is still porous after an initial firing, which makes it ideal to decorate with different oxides and glazes as it will draw the moisture out, causing them to dry easily and be ready for the next step of the process. Depending on what temperature the glazes on a piece are exposed to, the effects can change. A lower heat will produce brighter, sometimes more vibrant colors, whereas a high fire, around 2,340 degrees Fahrenheit, will result in dark and rich tones. I prefer a mid-range firing, between 2,230 and 2,270 degrees Fahrenheit, because I like brighter

colors in my work and that temperature zone has proven to be really consistent for the results I've come to expect. I enjoy using bright colors in my work in order to grab attention and to add a more playful component to the interaction, and while there are some darker toned pieces in this body of work, I mainly wanted to focus on bright colors to indicate pride and the vibrancy of my spirit that kept me working through challenging periods in my life.

Judy Pfaff is an artist I came across early in my program who I felt gave me permission to explore a wider variety of color, patterns, and materials. This helped me deconstruct what I thought I understood about building concepts and added more abstraction to my ideas¹³. One of my favorite works by her is titled *Enter the Dragon* (2012)¹⁴ because through the combined media, I see founds objects take the form of an organic being, something brought to life and made whole through assemblage. In my process of building concepts, I've tried to allow myself more freedom in what I expect something to look like or what it needs to be considered "finished" and coming across the variety of work that Judy Pfaff produces has been an evolutionary part my process.

¹³ Judy Pfaff Bio: <https://www.judypfaffstudio.com/about>

¹⁴ <https://accolagriefen.com/artists/judy-pfaff>



Figure 5. *Enter the Dragon*, Steel wires, plastics and papers, shellacked Chinese paper lanterns, parasol & fan, and organic matter, 83" x 110" x 24", 2012.¹⁵

When it came to finding the right technique for carving the teeth, an interesting object that I discovered was a descaling tool known as a Montana Jack. Dentists actually use this when cleaning teeth, as I discovered it during a visit to the dentist and asked what type of equipment he had used to scrape the plaque from my teeth. I enjoy using it because it allows me to achieve smooth, round edges that create a “gumline”, while the sharp end is nice for carving out characteristic grooves and lines that separate the teeth. This study went further than just learning about teeth and allowed me to work on my micro-detailing sculpting abilities.

¹⁵ Image information source: <https://accolagriefen.com/artists/judy-pfaff>



Figure 6. *Mouth Vessel* in progress, unfired ceramic clay, 2024.



Figure 7. *Mouth Vessel*, 5"x4 1/2"x3", Ceramic clay, mid-fire glazes, resin, 2024.

I did a few smaller studies that focused on “nature textures,” such as spongy mosses, leaves, mushrooms, and tree bark, attributes that can be seen in my *Hideaway Vessels*. I knew that I wanted to use a lot of traditional aspects of nature, so I referenced – Smithsonian natural history and flora books – and also had many opportunities to visit Radford University’s Selu Conservancy, where I was able to take many photos for reference and study the different natural textures and patterns that occur in our region.

In terms of using nature as a stylistic choice, I wanted to explore and challenge what I understood and recognized as “nature.” For years, I only associated that term with plant life, or the woods, not really encompassing animal life, insects, or human beings, so I started thinking about how to bridge the gap in a creative way.



Figure 8. Selu Conservancy, photo by Zach Blevins-Goad, 2024.



Figure 9. Selu Conservancy, photo by Zach Blevins-Goad, 2024.



Figure 10. Selu Conservancy, photo by Zach Blevins-Goad, 2024.

I believe growth in the nature theme began with smaller concepts, little attempts to make something I didn't quite recognize but could relate to in some way. I knew roughly how to replicate the human form, and so I started there and began adding little hints of nature slower hats, leaf hands, or having these figures standing in a pot of soil. Eventually, the skin became bark-like, and branches grew out of heads, leaves sprouting or flowers. They looked as if they could have been plucked from the forest floor, and I decided to start calling them "Nature Sprites" for marketing purposes, as well as drawing a connection to Celtic nature spirit folklore, a cultural heritage in my background.

While these concepts are more supplemental at this point, the early influences can still be found in my current body of work. What I found to be successful in public interactions with some of the Nature Sprite creations was how the audience connected with them. "The faces, I feel like they're looking back at me!" is what I will hear, or "look at the gesture of the hands!," and I find it interesting because what people connect with are attributes that they can find within themselves, something small and strange staring back, also a part of the interaction process. Playing with this concept allowed room for the projects and my process to grow, learning that I don't always have to be so direct in what I want to convey. While I want my technical skills to be finely tuned, hyperrealism is not my personal goal to achieve, so I'm not overly concerned with making something that looks strikingly realistic. I am, however, comfortable in creating an illusion that hints at the uncanny valley effect – a phenomenon in which other humans interpret human-like qualities about an object, but sense that something is amiss or unnatural, sometimes producing unsettling feelings. Examples of this can be found in my dishes with rows of teeth lining the rims, or portions of "floating" limbs, fingers, or faces where they might not be expected.

Another figure who produced similarly effective work was Swiss artist Meret Oppenheim. Her work *Object*, 1936, or also known as *Le Déjeuner en fourrure* (*Luncheon in Fur*) is widely known.¹⁶ The image isn't striking at first, the shapes of a cup, saucer, and a utensil. The uncomfortable feelings arise when the surface material is discovered to be fur, the pelt of a gazelle to be specific. The idea came about at a café meeting between Pablo Picasso, his new love interest and Meret Oppenheim. While tossing conversation around, Picasso pointed out a bracelet that Oppenheim was wearing, having fur detailing on the cuff. He commented that one could add fur to multiple objects, and she agreed, mentioning that even the cup and plate before her could be. Later at a department store, she purchased a cup, saucer, and spoon and carefully wrapped each item in the soft pelts. The work gave rise to many reactions, ranging from disgust to intrigue. The vessel insinuates female anatomy while the spoon is phallic and resembles a furry tongue, and the added hair sexualizes the energy of the piece.

¹⁶ Image and information source: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thesalt/2016/02/09/466061492/luncheon-in-fur-the-surrealist-tea-cup-that-stirred-the-art-world>



Figure 11. *Object*, fur-covered cup, saucer, and spoon. Cup 4 3/8" (10.9 cm) in diameter; saucer 9 3/8" (23.7 cm) in diameter; spoon 8" (20.2 cm) long, overall height 2 7/8" (7.3 cm). 1936.¹⁷

¹⁷ *Object* details: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/80997>

While some of the work in my thesis research pushes the boundary in a more uncomfortable direction, the capacity to bring out a surrealist effect in a playful way is achievable as well in my work relating to the Nature Sprites.

In order to broaden my skillset so that I could take my concepts further, I started experimenting with the texture of skin, how it rolls up when gathered or how it creases between our fingers and toes. I watched a film by Brian Yuzna called *Society*¹⁸ as a recommendation from a professor due to the visual effects, which utilized imagery of skin being stretched, congealed, and morphed into different beings and shapes. This directly influenced me with my concepts behind *Jack Rabbit* and *Womb Room* as the details of skin being rolled back or bunched together can be found in both pieces. To achieve the texture, I use a combination of making lines with my scoring tool and a porous sponge, and a little bit of water on a soft paint brush to soften the effect.

With the component of visible textures in my work, I enjoy the freedom that ceramic clay has allowed in being able to transition from one texture to another, which allows depth in the way it contrasts against the smoother surface areas and creates a new narrative. Different textures provide information that the viewer attributes to the context of a piece, or even the environment that it is meant to inhabit. I've found that within nature there are patterns that can appear neat and orderly, such as the eastern Redbud tree which produces alternate-forming, heart-shaped leaves on its branches; mimicking the leaves in clay, it isn't very difficult due to the standardized shape(s) and size(s) that allow for some predictability in design. Trying to mimic the design of something broken or shattered with asymmetrical edges or insinuating marks of decay can be more challenging. Even if there's a predictable pattern to the distressed area, it still involves

¹⁸ Film description: <https://philosophyinfilm.com/2020/04/09/review-society-1989/>

choosing the area that is affected, using reductive techniques to chip away or bore holes into the surface, and giving an organic impression that something is gradually being eaten or rotted away. It's important for me to physically go into nature and study the different effects that can occur, as well as to take samples of fallen debris to aid in the mimicking process. I believe that this offers a layer of authenticity to my work, as I rely on observable nature to inform my understanding of how different life cycles occur, what that physical process looks like, and how I can replicate it in my style.

While I do have some detailing tools that allow me to replicate various "nature" textures, I've also found that I don't have to overthink the process when it comes to achieving results. I'll take portions of bark, pinecones, leaves, lichen, and other found objects that I find, and I will press them into the clay body while it's still wet. When it has dried out some, I'll pull off the debris and then the impression of the object is left behind, giving me a detailed natural texture that has authenticity behind it. Capturing the tiny details of these impressions can be achieved through glazing, but I also like to use different metal oxides to decorate and enhance the aesthetic of my work. In powder form, different oxides can be mixed with water to create a type of stain or pigment that can be applied via a brush, sponge, or spray. I enjoy adding an initial layer to fill all the little detailed crevices and designs, then wiping the excess away for the stain to reveal only the carved-out areas. Different oxides that I've been to work with are red iron oxide which ranges from browns to reds to yellows, cobalt oxide that appears as blue, and copper oxide which can produce green and red colors. I use these a lot on areas of my pieces to add color, as glaze can't be applied to the bottom of a piece or else it would vitrify and fuse to the kiln plate during the firing process, but oxide stains don't have that issue.

Each of the areas I've been able to focus on have provided me with a surplus of subject matter that I've been able to infuse into my concepts and have given me confidence to venture outside of my comfort zone, which has allowed me to explore what I can produce through my newer technical abilities.

Jack Rabbit and Maquette

Sex was not openly talked about in my home and my educational structure was aligned with ideals within our faith. Anything sexual that was outside of heterosexual marriage was considered a sin. When I became a teenager and my hormones were developing, it was clear that I was not attracted to the female form in the way I was to the male body. This was not socially acceptable in my community or family, so this became a source of deep shame. I accepted that I could only experience those desires in my imagination and would most likely never act on them. While I did allow myself to feel pleasure through masturbating, I did so knowing that afterward I would inwardly berate myself for “giving in” to my sinful thoughts. I couldn’t help sometimes allowing myself to imagine what it would be like to let go, kiss another guy, and feel his strong arms around me. Then I would catch myself, address the thought as being perverted, from the devil, and ask God to forgive me for having the impure thought. I knew I would have to repent yet again that Sunday at church, another week falling “prey to temptation.”

I wanted *Jack Rabbit* to symbolize this time by capturing the feeling of being mid-ecstasy, fully caught in the moment of an act that I believed to be perverse, and yet it didn’t keep me from giving in to my human nature, craving connection and acceptance, and believing that I couldn’t have it nor did I deserve it. Throughout the piece, I’ve cut out organically shaped holes to focus on a couple of points. First, to capture a general shape of a seed, symbolizing semen dripping down the shaft of a penis after ejaculation. Second, I wanted to symbolize the holes in my information regarding sexual education and my own biology, which greatly influenced my sense of self.

I started by creating a maquette of the sculpture, or a miniature. This was a response to not being as comfortable with sketching out a 2D model of my design, which did develop, but I found that creating a smaller model (with intention to improvise the design as I needed to) was more helpful in my process. This also helped me move forward with more confidence in making a larger scale piece if I generally knew the shape I was working towards.

Standing over 4 feet tall and phallic in shape, *Jack Rabbit* resembles a pillar topped with a chimera-like face of a human man with rabbit ears, a forked tongue sticking out as he smiles. The forked tongue references the idea of a snake, which in the Bible is almost synonymous with Satan, or the Devil. He tempted Eve as a snake in the Garden of Eden, Jesus in the wilderness for forty days, and is thought to tempt unbelievers and believers alike to sin. This felt like an important attribute to include in the narrative, as it adds to the feeling of being perverse, or “of the Devil”. An arm is emerging from its left side, where a multiple fingered hand touches the edge of a cut-out hole, and veins loop around from the base to the top. If taken in from a distance, it almost takes on the shape of an erect penis. The piece is glazed in a color called coral gloss, a deep pink, with blue and purple hues showing through from dark flux glaze, which darkens the color of other applied glazes and shifts the hues around during the firing process. I applied this to the inside and specific areas to make certain details stand out on the piece as well as to differentiate the color slightly, such as the creases between the skin rolls, face lines, and raised vascular areas. I then wiped away excess glaze where I didn’t want the darkened effect, then applied the coral gloss glaze over the entire outside surface. While this piece was made to narrate a difficult time in my life, I feel that the design and color is playful and invites the observer to walk around it, almost taking the role of a voyeuristic participant, looking around and within the piece.



Figure 12. *Jack Rabbit*, 10" x 15" x 41", Ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.



Figure 13. detail of *Jack Rabbit*, 10" x 15" x 41", Ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.



Figure 14. Detail of *Jack Rabbit*, 10" x 15" x 41", Ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.



Figure 15. *Jack Rabbit Maquette*, 3" x 3" x 6", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2023.

Repression

The piece *Repression* reflects how I felt the first several years of my life. A face is growing from a misshapen opening that resembles a stretched neck leading to an open mouth, moving down the “neck” there are spikey tentacles and flowers decorating the surface. The mid-section is open, revealing thorned vines around the neck and lower stomach are that eventually form into a large pink knot in the center of the cavity. Beneath, the final piece of the installment resembles a tree log in texture, with two half-formed legs squeezing together to hide an aroused penis and testicles between them, and an anus at the very bottom.

The whole concept visually feels alien, aligning with how I viewed myself. I didn’t understand why I was sexually attracted to men, and any time I felt arousal or excitement, it was immediately followed by an inward reminder to stop the thought, repent, and bury the feeling. The most prominent point of focus for me is in the twisted knots of the “belly,” because I think back to being young with constant belly aches or feelings of being sick when it came to my anxiety. Any time I had to take a test or was dealing with anxiety I would inevitably vomit, and the feeling would always start with my stomach feeling like it was in knots. I wanted this piece to capture the emotions I felt as a young teen coming to terms with my body and sexuality, which most of the time felt like a constricted process. I learned to mask my emotions early on that I felt could expose my true nature, and this led to a negative perspective on how my body functioned. I hated what I was attracted to and how my hormones reacted if another guy I was attracted to was physically close to me or if our skin brushed accidentally, as it would more often than not start to give me an erection. I felt like if others were to find out or know the truth, they would disown me or even cause me physical harm. I can remember in the years following the

Matthew Shepherd case, where a twenty-one-year-old Wyoming man was beaten, tortured, then tied to a fence in a field by a couple of men for being gay. He later died from his injuries. I would see updates on the news, read about it in the checkout lines at the store, and I just remember feeling so scared of what could happen if sensitive secrets were uncovered. I was young, but I recognized that if I tried my best to blend in with others around me, I would be less likely to bring unwanted attention to myself and avoid the wrath of others.

So, in wanting to convey this narrative I chose a mixture of colors for this piece that to me symbolize feelings of anxiety, nausea, vulnerability, with some bright spots in between. Coral pinks line the inside cavities, showing vulnerability and softness. The mask is green and rotting black holes open to warm pink, lifted up by dark vines snaking in and out of the orifice behind the mask, referencing the idea of the serpent and the role of temptation it plays in the Bible. An artist I came across in my research was South Korean artist Lee Bul, born in 1964 during an authoritarian regime.¹⁹ She has worked in mixed media ranging from performance art, 2D works, and sculpture. Her work comments on societal expectations relating to gender, culture, and futuristic cyborg beings. She's said, "If I didn't make art, it would be difficult to endure life," and that statement resonates with me. Aside from nature, art was a solace for me and continues to be when I'm frustrated or working through a challenge as the process is soothing and grounding. A work of hers that stands out to me visually is from her show titled *Crashing* (2018), and the piece *Monster* (1998-2011) that relates back to my work features bright pink tentacles cascading up and down, writhing in different angles and directions. It feels organic but alien and presents form in a way that gender is not discernable or necessary.

¹⁹ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/videos/2015-12-29/artist-lee-bul-on-brilliant-ideas->



Figure 16. *Monster: Pink*, 82.68" x 82.68" x 70.87", Fabric, cotton filling, acrylic paint, and stainless-steel frame, 1998-2011. Collection of the Daegu Art Museum, Photo by Jeon Byung-cheol.²⁰

²⁰Image source - <https://www.lehmannmaupin.com/museums-and-global-exhibitions/lee-bul-beginning>

The overall theme of the concept of *Repression* might not insinuate bright “happy” colors, but there were times that I did convince myself that if I ignored the truth, believed that God would “heal” me, that I would be happy. I just had to play the part.



Figure 17. *Repression*, 8" x 11" x 22", Ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, wire, apoxie sculpt, 2024-25.



Figure 18. Detail of *Repression*, 8" x 11" x 22", Ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, wire, apoxie sculpt, 2024-25.



Figure 19. Detail of *Repression*, 8" x 11" x 22", Ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, wire, apoxie sculpt, 2024-25.

Womb Room and Maquette

*“Now, now, here's all you never thought to see--and it's not black... no sealed cell, but a witch-cathedral of rose quartz, peony petals, arched, vaulted, glimmering... Made to hold a life it couldn't hold...”. – Excerpt from Catherine Carter's poem *Womb-room*.²¹*

I remember first hearing mention of the term *garbhagriha*²² in an Art 100 course that referenced Hindu temple architecture. A *garbhagriha*, also known as a “womb chamber,” is traditionally the inner sanctum of a temple, or the *cella*.²³ This was considered a sacred space that held a consecrated image depicting God and was used to bring about spiritual transformation, or rebirth through devotional meditation. The concept of using a “womb room” has been approached by other contemporary artists, such as the company Meow Wolf²⁴ that launched a permanent site in Santa Fe, New Mexico – and more locations since – in 2008 with public and financial support from *Game of Thrones* author, George R.R. Martin.²⁵ It's comprised of artists from varying skillsets that create immersive, artistic experiences meant for the audience to participate and interact in the simulation. When their Denver location began the process of opening, artist Jess Webb was a designer who created installations also known as “Womb Room” and the Rainbow Room.²⁶ Her concept began with the intent of creating an environment that promoted the idea of being within an incubator, balancing the “elements of real life that felt

²¹ Carter, Catherine. “Womb-Room.” *North Carolina Literary Review*, Annual 2019, 173. *Gale Literature Resource Center* (accessed March 29, 2025). https://link-gale-com.radford.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/A589126235/LitRC?u=viva_radford&sid=oclc&xid=634da98f.

²² <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hinduism/The-arts#ref303933>

²³ A *cella* refers to the body of the temple that houses the deity or image of worship -<https://www.britannica.com/technology/cella>

²⁴ Link to find out more about Meow Wolf: <https://meowwolf.com/about>.

²⁵ <https://meowwolf.com/blob/game-of-thrones-george-martin-meow-wolf>

²⁶ Jess Webb's role in more detail: <https://meowwolf.com/blob/meow-wolf-denver-womb-room>

familiar yet impossible, playful in their materiality, appearance, and relationship.”²⁷



Figure 20. Image of detail in “Rainbow Room” Meow Wolf Denver’s Convergence Station, photo by Jess Bernstein, 2022.

²⁷ Photo and information source: <https://meowwolf.com/blob/meow-wolf-denver-womb-room>



Figure 21. Image detail of “Womb Room”, Meow Wolf Denver’s Convergence Station, photo by Jess Bernstein, 2022.

Niki de Saint Phalle is another artist I came across in my research who used the human form as her concept for artmaking and creating immersive experiences for the viewer. Famous for her *Nanas*²⁸, she created a large-scale sculpture/installation of a female form lying on her

²⁸Saint Phalle used the forms of large, imposing women to create dialogue of social injustices happening during the civil rights movements of the 1960s - <https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en/learn/schools/teachers-guides/nanas-and-social-activism>

back with her knees apart, revealing the entrance through an open vulva. It's titled *SHE – a cathedral*, June 4–September 4, 1966.

“Its impact was about the corporeality of the sculpture, and of *Hon*'s (*She*'s) relation to the actual room, dominating it, almost touching and breaking its roof.”²⁹



Figure 22. From the exhibition *She – A Cathedral*, Moderna Museet, 1966 Photo: Hans Hammarskiöld / Moderna Museet © Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, Per Olof Ultvedt / [Bildupphovsrätt 2018](#).³⁰

My interpretation of *Womb Room* focuses specifically on my experiences of trying to pass as a “straight” man in my environment, and the feeling of safety that came from living in

²⁹ *Hon en katedral byggd av: Niki de Saint Phalle, Jean Tinguely, Per Olof Ultvedt*, Moderna Museets utställningskatalog no. 54, exh. cat. (Stockholm: Moderna Museet, 1966).

³⁰ Image source: <https://www.modernamuseet.se/stockholm/en/exhibitions/remembering-she-a-cathedral/>

that lie. While I felt trapped in only being able to express interest in the opposite sex, there was a relief in being able to blend in with my peers and follow the “one man and one woman” example of the Bible. I dated a few girls in my teens, hoping that I would either meet the right one to ignite my sexual attraction to the opposite sex or at the very least keep people from questioning whether or not I was gay, as I’d already been picked on for acting a bit more on the feminine side. While I dated girls that I did care about, even going so far as to plan a life together and marriage with one, I never felt the spark that seemed necessary for me to be able to move forward without dread, knowing it wouldn’t be fair to either one of us in the end.

This piece represents an old set of values that at the time brought me comfort, peace that I was trying to be my best for the sake of Christianity, in the end repressing my true nature to fit in and be deserving of love.

Womb Room’s base begins as a square, the outside mimicking a stone prison with bars cut out in the shape of abstract penises. Moving upward, a second piece is stacked as the shape becomes cone-like with a large opening in the front mimicking a vulva, framed by rolls of skin, with bars stretching across the opening. Moving upward, the vulva centers above the opening while folds of skin surround it and morph into the sides of the opening and around the back, and on the very top of the piece is an anus. Like a garbhagriha, there is only one entrance to get in and out of *Womb Room* where the bars are slightly more open.

I began approaching this design by sculpting a maquette, playing with shape and trying to determine what the best texture use could be in order to make the piece more affective. I used the coil technique to build both the maquette and larger piece, which is where you take a bit clay and roll it into a coil shape either between your hands or on a flat surface, creating long “ropes” or coils of clay. If you had the opportunity to make “snakes” out of clay or Playdough as a child,

this might be a helpful frame of reference. I coiled the whole piece, and then created the anus by throwing a bowl shape on the wheel, and then after flipping it upside down and slipping and scoring it to the top, I creased in lines using a reductive slicing tool made by Diamond Core; this tool was also used to insinuate the lines and rolls of skin around the side and back. The vulva that was initially sculpted on the front blew off during the first bisque firing, most likely due to an unseen air pocket that exploded. While it was initially distressing, I decided to work the accident to my advantage. Once I glazed the rest of the piece and put it through a final firing, I created a new vulva design using Apoxie Sculpt, a two-part sculpting medium that once dried is waterproof and adheres to most materials. I then color-matched the new design using acrylic paints and covered them with a layer of resin to make sure they would get rubbed off.

I wanted to choose colors that would give the impression that a lot of time had passed, so the teal/green color symbolizes that the structure is returning to nature and oxidizing and turning green from the elements, while the inside is glazed a coral color to insinuate warm softness, much like the feeling one might consider in the safety of a mother's womb, because even though I felt trapped in a prison most of the time there were still positive moments that provided comfort.



Figure 23. *Womb Room*, 13" x 13" x 40", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.



Figure 24. Detail of *Womb Room*, 13" x 13" x 40", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.



Figure 25. Detail of *Womb Room*, 13" x 13" x 40", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.



Figure 26. *Womb Room Maquette*, 4" x 4" x 7", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2023.

Shed Skin

This piece has had a symbolic journey. Initially, I built this as a large form, similar to Jack Rabbit and Womb Room, using the coil technique, slipping and scoring, and reductive carving. The surface has the texture of scales, which I achieved by pressing meshed metal sheets into the clay while it was still wet, then lifting it off, leaving diamond-shaped impressions behind. This detail was to insinuate the idea of having the ability to shapeshift, like a chameleon, to match my environments. Also like a reptile, I like the idea of being able to shed an old skin that no longer is protecting me, bringing about something of a rebirth in leaving the old ways behind. There are sporadic holes, fish fins, fingers, vaginal skin folds, and a penis on the larger skin form, and the head piece features a wide-open mouth of teeth while fingers surround the opening, pointing, and stretching.

Unfortunately, it fell apart as it was being loaded into the kiln for its initial firing, which was a discouraging moment. However, the way in which it did fall apart left a salvageable portion that resembled a discarded skin, as if someone had taken off a mask and stepped out of a shell. I decided that instead of trashing the whole piece and starting over, I felt like I could improvise and work with the accident to make it an intentional aspect.

I glazed the majority of this piece in a glaze called Olive Float, which has effects that produces a spotty, green hide color, which gives the piece a reptilian, monster-like appearance. Shed Skin represents the change I had in my mindset, when I realized that in order for me to live authentically that I needed to let go of the person I thought I needed to be, who other people expected me to be, and since shedding that first skin I've learned that it's a process that happens many times throughout our lives. When I had to let go of certain expectations or directions that I

thought my life would go, I realized that I could either hold on to old beliefs that kept me complacent, or I could change and adapt, learning to thrive in new environments.

I also learned that not all accidents are bad. I won't quote Bob Ross, but through my process of having something fall apart, the end result created a totally new piece that is successful in its own way.



Figure 27. *Shed Skin*, 16" x 18" x 20", Ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2023.

Atonement

This piece holds a lot of meaning for me, and it was challenging to try and conceive a design of what the church means to me at this point in my life, being so removed from it. For years my life revolved around the church, and it effected almost every decision I made. I loved being a part of a church family and being able to participate in the activities that it offered, such as singing in the choir, going to social functions, and church summer camps.

Before I came out as gay, I had attended the same church from the age of 11 until I was almost 20 years old, so the people there had watched me grow up, sung beside me, supported on mission trips, and I believed we were like family. After a time of moving to South America for eight months when I was 19 years old, I came back to Chilhowie, Virginia, knowing that I was about to come to a fork in the road. I had spent a lot of years outwardly working for the church while inwardly, I was doing it all in the name of atonement for my “sinful” nature. For so long I had been in this place of begging God to take my same-sex feelings away, asking for forgiveness when I didn’t overcome tempting thoughts about other guys, and I had achieved no results. After putting a little bit of distance between myself and my home church, I was very much feeling like I had no options, so I decided to test the waters by telling a friend that I thought that I was gay, and that I was going to try and accept that part of myself. I did this over the phone, not realizing that my assistant pastor’s son was also in the car, which unfortunately led to most of the church finding out quickly. No one reached out in support, only a couple of messages assuring me that they were praying for “God’s healing hand” in my situation. In the years since leaving the church, my mindset has had to change significantly in order to work through loss and learning how to depend on myself rather than live in avoidance.

Due to my negative experiences relating to the church, specifically Christian Fundamentalism, I don't see myself being able to belong to any type of organized religion, though I don't judge those who are able to express their spirituality under those conditions. I've learned to seek out ways to be spiritual that are separate from religion, and I've found ways to bring meaning to my life outside of the church. The relationships I now build with people aren't dictated by a surface level belief system, who accept me for who I am. I might have scars, but I've healed from the experience of the church and am in a new era of my life that allows me to live authentically. *Atonement* is an acknowledgement to my younger self, every time I would pray and ask God to make me "straight," and also symbolizing the hurt felt by the hands of the church.

When approaching the concept of *Atonement*, I felt like I needed to refresh my understanding of what the roots of Christian fundamentalism beliefs were after removing myself for so long. A book that became helpful during my research was by David S. New titled *Christian Fundamentalism in America: A Cultural History*.³¹ It delves into the history and lives of some of the founding fathers responsible for the movement, such as Jonathan Edward,³² an eighteenth-century British American Puritanism philosopher and theologian.

In New's book, he writes, "The term 'Puritan' was originally a derisive name for those who wished to 'purify' the Church of England. Unlike the Pilgrims, who separated themselves from the English Church because they thought it beyond reform, the Puritans wanted to reform it from within... Puritanism in England was expression of a distinctive religious movement found

³¹ New, David S. 2012. *Christian Fundamentalism in America: A Cultural History*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland

³² <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jonathan-Edwards>

on the European continental mainland known as the Reformed tradition, a major strand of thinking coming out of the Protestant Reformation and closely associated with Calvinism.”³³

The front of the piece reaches forward with several writhing fingers, yellowed and patchy, trying to mimic a church rhyme with hand gestures from my childhood. The beginning started as “here is the church, here is the steeple”; you would then lock all of your fingers together except your index fingers and thumbs, all four of which would come together pointing up; then finish the rhyme by saying “open the doors, and see all the people,” to which you separate your thumbs and palms, revealing wiggling fingers that are meant to symbolize the people in the church. The fingers on *Atonement* surround a rose colored “window,” an open mouth. Slightly open with yellowed, uneven teeth, ropes of skin behind the teeth act as prison bars, allowing things to filter in but unable to get back out. Columns are represented by two reptilian “arms” with scales and claws, on either side of the front. The steeple is cracked and appears to sway to one side, with the edges appearing fin-like, and on top a golden rooster stands erect. Along the sides and back, veins bulge out and line open church windows, while the roof has a scaly complexion, leathery and pale. The bruised and battered design on the top of the roof symbolizes the hurt received from the church and as well as my inward degradation. Here is where I would fixate on all of my shortcomings and there were times in my frustration that I would call myself stupid and sinful, sometimes even hitting myself in the head. Around the back of the piece, the inside is glazed in corals and reds, but in black underglaze are tally marks, four strikes and a fifth diagonally crossing through, lining the entirety of the inside. The walls and the ceiling are covered in these marks, each symbolizing a time I asked God to make me straight, and every time it didn’t happen. Every time I felt that I needed to confess for not withstanding

³³ New, David S. *Christian Fundamentalism in America: A Cultural History*, p.15. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 2012.

temptation of impure thoughts. The feeling that I was constantly falling short weighed on me and I didn't understand what I was missing. The bottom edges of the church are stained in nickel oxide, a poisonous chemical that if exposed to long term can cause nasal and lung cancers. This felt like an interesting opportunity to draw comparisons with the toxic nature of the church along with how negatively it impacted my life.

Separate denominations or sects of Christianity use different iconography to appeal to followers, though a cross is most commonly found adorning the tops of churches where I grew up in Southwest Virginia. When I had the opportunity to visit a few European Baltic countries in 2024, there were several churches that usually had one of two symbols on top of the steeple. Catholic churches had the cross, while Lutheran churches used a rooster to distinguish themselves³⁴. Whereas the cross is a symbol relating to death and sacrifice Christ made, the rooster is used to symbolize the weakness of man. It references Peter, a disciple of Christ's in the New Testament of the Bible, when he denies that he is a follower of his.

Including the rooster as the top for my steeple allows an opportunity to reference the word "cock" in a playful way in connection to the church, as ultimately in their eyes, I chose "cock" over the church.

This piece was interactive during its exhibition, having a kneeling bench and red carpet that invited viewers to participate in the ritual. Those who did interact with *Atonement* were able to share my experiences in walking down the church aisle to kneel to repent for my "unnatural" desires.

³⁴ More information on rooster iconography in eastern Europe: <https://manhattanpres.com/why-the-rooster-symbol-for-a-church>



Figure 28. *Atonement*, 15" x 17" x 24", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2025.



Figure 29. Side detail of *Atonement*, 15" x 17" x 24", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2025.



Figure 30. Back detail of *Atonement*, 15" x 17" x 24", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2025.

Bloom and Maquette

Bloom was made to represent the time in my life when I finally allowed myself to become sexually active, giving in to feelings that I had repressed for so long and never believed would grow to fruition. While I finally felt that what I was doing was natural and I was experiencing thoughts and feelings that I'd been waiting for, there was significant insecurity and hesitation on my end due to my background. It was a transformational time for me because I was basically going against everything I had been taught growing up, choosing to explore "sin" rather than shut down with self-beratement, and I almost didn't know how to handle that much freedom at first. My instincts told me that I needed to blend in, yet again, but for different reasons. I was dealing with men who I believed had more experience than me, which led me to place a lot of expectations on myself on what I should already know about sex. This was an important time in my life for sexual liberation and discovery, however a lot of my experiences, while fun, were overshadowed by shame. It took a lot of time and shifting of my perspective to get to a place where I didn't feel the need to blend into the background or pretend that I was someone that I wasn't in order to deserve love. In my experiences, I've found that connecting in a more intimate, meaningful way requires authenticity and vulnerability.

This piece is successful to me from a technical standpoint in how I combined the textures of nature with the human form, somewhat of a dichotomy in that I chose an area of the body that tends to be fleshy and soft and gave it the rough surface texture of tree bark.

I began this project with a maquette miniature, trying to think of a design that would get this concept across successfully. The prototype for *Bloom* initially had the penis out of view and erect on the inside, which one could view through one, large, roughly made orifice.

At first glance, the viewer can make out the shape of a stump or log lying on the ground. Upon closer inspection, details of mushrooms, moss, orifices, and open cavities reveal themselves in different textures and earth tones. Moving around the piece, the shape of spread legs, a penis, testicles, and a blooming flower in place of an anus come into view. The glaze colors are naturalistic with browns, greens, and a soft, fleshy pink coating the interior of the piece. I didn't choose the brightest of colors for *Bloom*, as it's not so much a piece of joy and vibrancy. The colors are darker browns and greens, and the inside pink is duller, unlike some of the other pieces in this body of work.

While it was initially exciting to be in that phase of my life, being able to experiment with other men and act on my feelings, I quickly became intimidated, and I wanted to disappear in some situations. I had very little sexual education, and it seemed like everyone else was again a step ahead of me in terms of what they knew, how long they had been sexually active, and how many partners they'd had. I began comparing myself to the guys I would meet and would get to a place where I would tell them what I thought they wanted to hear. In times that I should have been celebrating my sexual freedom, I was again telling myself I wasn't good enough and that I needed to blend in to be considered worthy.



Figure 31. *Bloom*, 7" x 19" x 23", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.



Figure 32. *Bloom Maquette*, 3" x 7" x 9", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.

Elemental Branches and Trio of Elemental Masks

These pieces were designed with the intention of practicing my technical skills and combining my concepts of meshing nature and human anatomy. My first attempt at this concept resulted in *Elemental Branch #1*.

This piece is no more than 15” in length with “finger” twigs on one end and an exposed joint socket on the other. In between are textures of wood, lichen, shelf mushrooms, and barnacles. I chose very naturalistic tones of brown with hints of green, so it’s a bit dark compared to other pieces in the body of work. To me, there wasn’t a lot of variety of color or texture and I lose interest quickly. While that is relevant to my story in how I tried to camouflage myself and not bring attention, I wanted to bring out a different reaction and get out of my comfort zone.



Figure 33. *Elemental Branch #1*, 5" x 6" x 12, ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2023.

I started the next project, which became *Elemental Branch #2*.

This piece I wanted to experiment more with different textures. At the time I had been leafing through *Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Life* and wanted to practice some sort of scale texture with fish-like fins meshed with details of flowers and moss.³⁵

³⁵ This book documents various dinosaur species and visual qualities that I find helpful in trying to mimic the texture of hide, horns, scales, dorsal fins, et cetera: 2019. *Dinosaurs and Prehistoric Life*. New York: Dk Publishing.

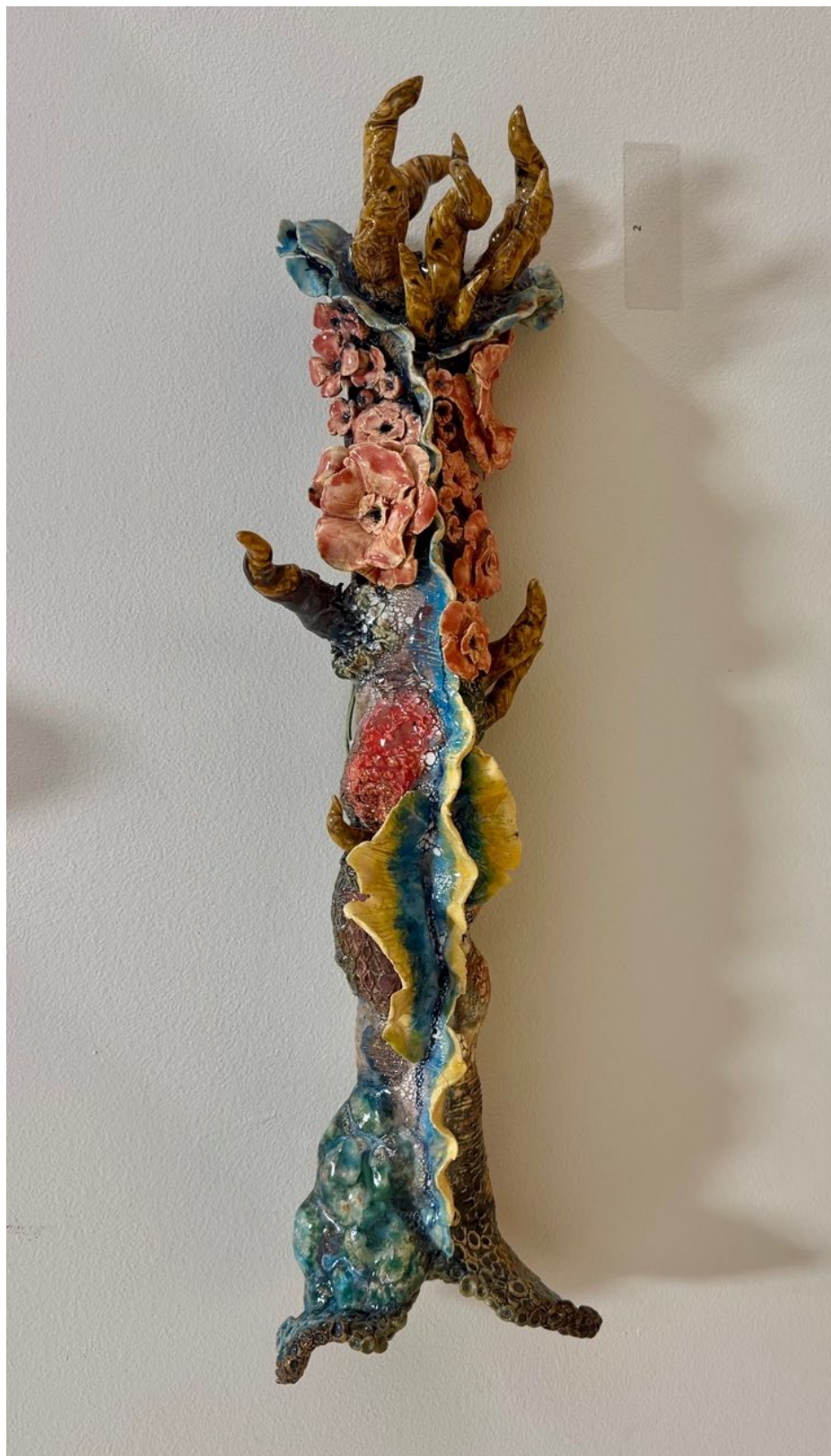


Figure 34. *Elemental Branch #2*, 4" x 6" x 20", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.

The first mask I started was *(T)horned Elemental Mask*, initially by studying the thorns of plants like roses and the needle-sharp ends on the Agave cactus leaf, both of which are sharp enough to draw blood. I then began studying the horns of animals, specifically goats, as they are used in Satanic iconography which serves as the opposing force to the belief system I grew up within. This will come up again in my piece *Growth Room*. Enjoying the way they curl and curve around as they grew in length, I incorporated those qualities into the technique of making thorns. In order to get the right shape, I used a version of the coil-rolling technique on a small bit of clay and made one end sharper than the other, then lightly twisting the short coil to give it a curling effect. I then took a needle tool to make light line marks and indentions, giving it a less polished and a more organic surface. This was the process I used in order to get the effects displayed in the *(T)horned Elemental Mask*.



Figure 35. *(T)horned Elemental Mask*, 4" x 10" x 12", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.

I then wanted to focus on sculpting mushrooms, as I feel like they can be used as an analogy when thinking about how in life, sometimes we need to let go of certain beliefs, decomposing different portions of ourselves in order for growth to be made possible. The wild shelf mushroom has been my aesthetic inspiration in a few of my pieces, such as *Breath of Life* and *Bloom*, and I like using them in the concept because they grow off of the sides of their hosts rather than the ground which I found gave me more freedom in where I could place them. My studies on mushrooms are what produced *Mushroom Elemental Mask*.



Figure 36. *Mushroom Elemental Mask*, 4" x 12" x 12", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2023.

In my last mask study, *Thorned Flower Elemental Mask*, I added a couple of studies together, combining horns and then figuring out a technique to make flowers. This concept was still about exploring nature effects, but I added the intention to convey an emotional narrative. The horns represent an unwanted quality, something that calls attention for the wrong reasons, while the flowers represent all of the ways in which effort is made to compensate for the unwanted quality.

I figured out my technique for making flowers by using a similar technique that I'd used to make horns, by making short clay coils, slightly thicker on one side and coming to a point on the other. I imprint an "X" shape on the thicker end, pinching each of the four sections out into a small flare until they resemble flower petals. I then take the blunt end of a small tool and press into the center, or sometimes I'll use my small-tipped silicone brush to create little indentions to mimic the carpels of the flower, or the female portion in the center, then the small stem is slip and scored onto the piece. In the end I like the way the design turned out. Two medium horns grow out of the forehead while small, four-petaled flowers grow in patches around the horns and different parts of the mask. The colors and textures on the face morph into each other, ready to shift, to be more diluted, more relatable to the viewer.



Figure 37. *Horned Flower Elemental Mask*, 5" x 8" x 10", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.

Through the process of making these elemental masks, I think I was able to start incorporating more emotional depth into my concepts along with better skills with how I express visual effects. The choice in using masks to represent these studies was made with the intention of incorporating the mask concept in future designs, using it to hide behind other identities or to blend into certain environments. The masks also resemble trophies of sorts, the death of certain beliefs and habits that I used to have but no longer practice.

Designing them to hang on the wall calls back to my childhood and growing up with taxidermized deer and elk heads hanging on the walls of our cabin. I can understand to some who didn't grow up with hunting, this might seem morbid or startling, but in my area of Appalachia and in my family, keeping the "trophy" after a kill was customary. The body didn't go to waste, as we had a carport to field dress (remove internal organs and viable meat) the carcass and a deep freezer to store the meat for food throughout the year. I went hunting a couple of times but lost my taste after a bad aim only wounded the animal, and the idea of it suffering was too much for me.

Another way in which I was able to practice my texture-making and elemental effects was through making my *Hideaway Vessels*, modeled after tree trunks. The encompassing Virginia woods around the house I grew up in were a point of refuge for me. For many years, tumultuous times in my home drove me out into the solitude of nature, which made me feel safe. I didn't have to pretend to act a certain way or please anyone - I could just exist as I was without judgement. It was as if mother nature was my mother, and she accepted me for who I was in those difficult times.

Walking up the holler, a stream trailed deep into the woods, and since one of my favorite activities was playing in the water, I would trek back until I felt that I was truly alone, then I

would allow myself to play. I would catch tiny frogs, tadpoles, and salamanders, run from snakes, soak in deeper sections, and sometimes submerge or chase toys. Sometimes, I placed them in the current of the water and I would run alongside them until they'd exited the woods, floated by the house, and found their way into the creek by our barnyard. The holler was and is situated in a portion of the high embankments around Carlock Creek Road, a country road that allows its travelers to access passage to surrounding Smyth County communities like Marion, Chilhowie, and Saltville. In a further back section where two steep hills create a small valley, there are downed trees that stretch across and connect the hills, like footbridges, and were covered in thick mosses and lichen, producing so many hues of the color green that I loved. The fall season brought out the deep reds, pinks, and yellows in the leaves, sheltering the holler for a little while before littering the ground in a burnt orange collage. I loved climbing trees, big and small, more than once getting the breath knocked out of me for placing a hand or foot on a weak branch and hitting the ground. I loved the challenge of seeing how high I could go, and I also felt that the trees were somehow protecting me while I was climbing them. In my mind, they were anthropomorphizing into sentient beings, holding me up with their branched arms, shielding me from the anxiety stemming from the outside world; I could peek out through breaks in the leaves and branches, unseen by others.

These pieces represent that feeling of safety I felt within the woods, while also showcasing the many textures, colors, and shapes I was able to observe. In creating the *Hideaway Vessels*, I used samples of fallen tree bark, lichens, and mosses to inspire their textures. I began their construction by throwing four ceramic cylinders on the wheel, and then misshaped them and pressed holes into the sides. Using my scoring tool, I was able to make woodgrain lines in sections to convey exposed wood. To create the illusion of moss, I used an

asymmetrical sponge with large pores that when pressed into the clay, leave a spongy texture.

The mushrooms and lichen were made by pinching clay into disk-like shapes and cutting them in half, then shaping them until they have a rough, organic appearance.

I used red and cobalt oxides to stain the finer details in the pieces, and then used a variety of browns, greens, and yellows on the exterior of the vessels to add a natural aspect that would be expected, but the insides are all glazed a pink coral color. This was done to symbolize the safety of being in the woods, in the presence of mother nature, basking in her comfort.

All of these studies combined have helped me build my skillset and combine past experiences into my current concept.



Figure 38. *Hideaway Vessels*, approx. 3" x 6" x 7", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.



Figure 39. detail of *Hideaway Vessels*, approx. 3" x 6" x 7", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.

Growth Room

This piece began as a study for texture and figuring out how to combine different aspects of anatomy and nature, hence the vines and hands. As I was progressing further into the piece I was doing research on different hand gestures and meanings within different faith systems, and I began working toward the concept of expressing balance and growth.

The base of the piece replicates stone and earth, symbolizing a stronger foundation to build onto. The piece grows into a mound with vines moving upward from the base, framing different areas that are lush with moss textures and green glazes. Small, coral-colored openings that flare out mimic the shapes of flowers as well as mushrooms, which symbolize beauty and decay and how in order to reach “beauty” or an ideal reality, there are certain traits and belief systems that have to die or be let go in order for new growth. Hands adorn the top, modeled after hand sigils commonly found in the iconography of Jesus Christ, the Christian Symbol, and Baphomet, representing the Satanic Temple. Hands relating to the Christian faith are represented with the thumb and ring finger making contact, and the hands of Baphomet³⁶ point the index and middle finger upward while the thumb holds down the other two.

I’ve glazed both styles in the color yellow, as this color symbolizes strong life force to me, and I wanted to communicate the interpretation that they are both equal sigils of good will to their respective believers.

I like using the dichotomy of what might be perceived as good versus evil, or black and white thinking, because in my experience I’ve learned that living in extreme mindsets don’t work for me. Pouring myself into a religion and believing that I had to be devoted to a strict belief

³⁶ Information relating to Baphomet sigils: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Baphomet>

system in order to be “whole” and happy did not bring me contentment, no matter how much I prayed or how many Christian services I participated in. Likewise, when I was living under the belief that I didn’t need to be spiritual or that nothing could be trusted relating to a higher power, I lost my joy and meaning for existence. I’ve had to learn that finding balance in my outlook is what allows me to grow, and that finding duality in old ideas that still work while being open to new perspectives is how I can move forward.

This piece has come to symbolize a cocoon where formative growth has occurred during my time as an adult. I’ve grown in terms of finding love and getting married, being able to have access to higher education and finding the desire to learn, and discovering who I am as a human and artist.



Figure 40. *Growth Room*, 12" x 13" x 20", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2024.

Assorted Practice

Assorted Practice is a combination of bisque ware, pieces of clay that have only been fired once but not glazed, some intentionally broken, and others organically broken during the firing process. I've been collecting some pieces over the last couple of years, enjoying the symbolism of effort and time spent in practice. Like in life, this has allowed me to incorporate previous practices into my current concepts, giving my work a new sort of identity.

There are hands being forced into unnatural, perhaps painful positions, with portions of hands, fingers, a nude, broken torso, and a face with a mouth that is forced open into a smile, all arranged on the ground to give the impression of vulnerability as well as to give the viewer the position of power in the interaction.

During the summer of 2024, I had the opportunity to visit the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek³⁷ in Copenhagen, Denmark. This art museum holds artifacts spanning about six thousand years, many of them being sculptural. This provided me insight to different time periods and the types of sculpture being created, as well as the tools they used.

³⁷ <https://www.glyptoteket.com/about-the-museum/>



Figure 41. Partial Sculpture from Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek collection in Copenhagen, Denmark, photo by Zach Blevins-Goad, 2024.



Figure 42. Photo of Ancient tools via Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek collection in Copenhagen, Denmark, photo by Zach Blevins-Goad, 2024.

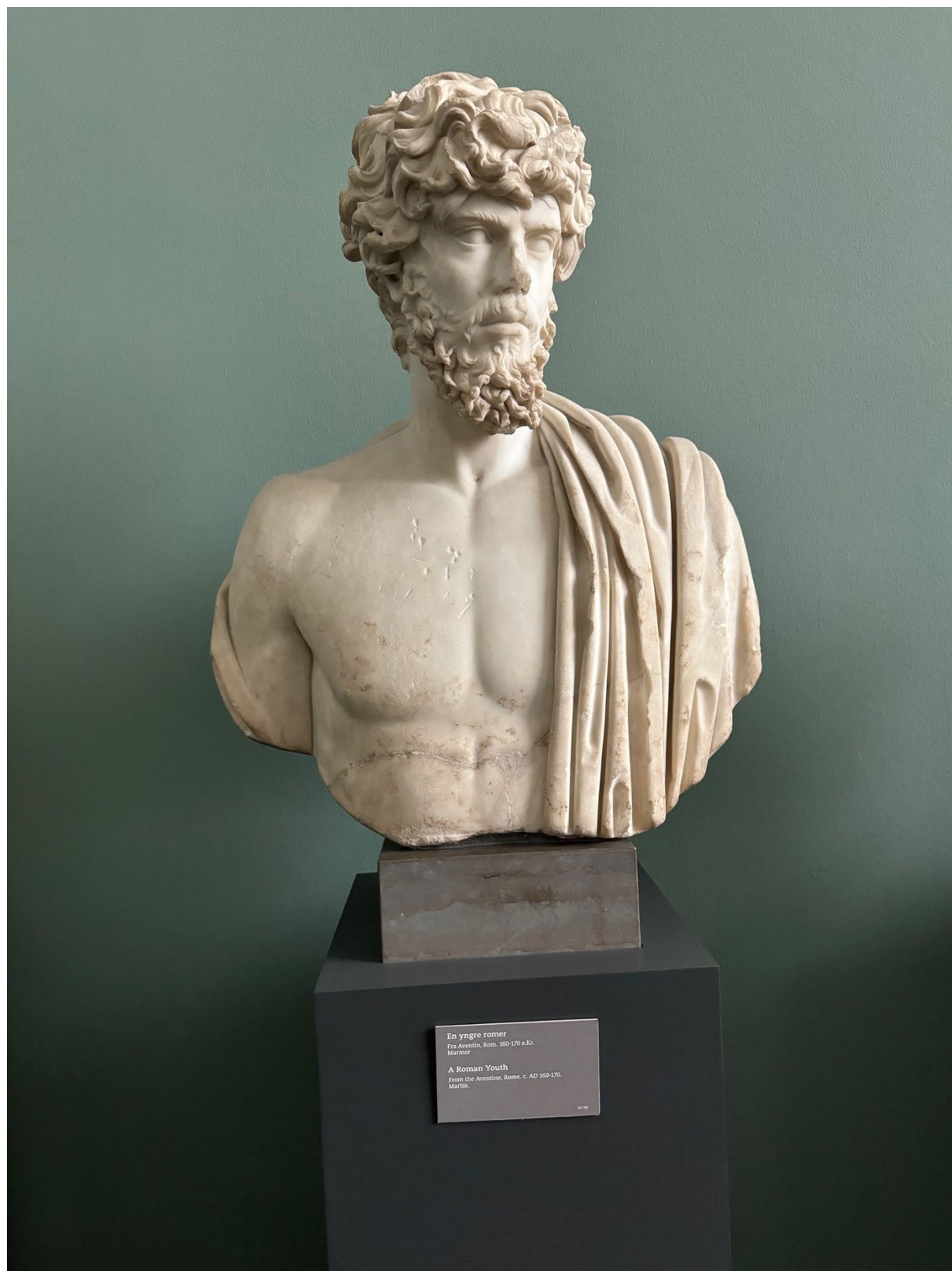


Figure 43. Sculpture from Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek collection in Copenhagen, Denmark, photo by Zach Blevins-Goad, 2024.

While this piece isn't a self-portrait, for me it symbolizes all of my hard work and the effort that goes into trying to remain positive in my process when things haven't gone the way I imagined. There have been times when something I've been proud of and put extra effort into has been destroyed during a firing process, and I've had to accept the outcome and start over again. I've put on a smile after presenting work to professors and colleagues with an expectation that what I've made is good, only to find that I've missed the mark. It's a cycle of being ready to revisit the drawing board, learning from mistakes, and being willing to become vulnerable in order to be better. Realizing that sometimes I have to take the good, the bad, and the ugly is an important part of the journey in learning and making. Finding beauty in the empty spaces allows me to feel appreciation when spaces aren't empty, and everything comes out wholly as intended. As long as I keep showing up for the process, the rest will unfold.



Figure 44. *Assorted Practice*, 10" x 24" x 35", bisqueware clay, 2022-25.

Breath of Life and Maquette

“And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” – Genesis 2:7, KJV³⁸

Looking back over my thirty plus years of life, I’ve had opportunities to live under many conditions that have required flexibility and improvisation, and I think it’s prepared me to approach life with an open mind. I’ve learned to utilize coping mechanisms that don’t immediately require prickly defense, and I try to approach my problems rather than repress. I sought love and happiness from outside situations when I needed to be looking within. To quote the great Rupaul Charles, “*How the hell you gonna love someone else if you can’t love yourself? Can I get an amen? Amen.*”³⁹

In this process, I’ve relearned how to approach others, even myself, with love rather than suspicion and distrust. I was taught for so many years not to trust my instincts or what my human nature was trying to express, so *relying* on my intuition in itself has been a challenge, especially when it comes to believing in my designs and abilities.

My human nature isn’t unnatural or perverse, nor is it undeserving of love. I’m actively growing into who I’m supposed to be. Perfection is unattainable, broken edges show I can learn from my mistakes. I have a multitude of textures and experiences that allow me to connect and adapt, ready to approach what life puts on my path. These qualities were what came to mind in creating the final piece for my thesis.

³⁸ Rouben Mamoulian Collection (Library of Congress). 1952. *The Holy Bible : Revised Standard Version Containing the Old and New Testaments*. New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons.

³⁹ Quote source: <https://www.thepinknews.com/2024/09/11/rupauls-drag-race-if-you-cant-love-yourself/>

Breath of Life is made of three stacked ceramic pieces, a base, midsection, and a head. The base resembles a tree stump with indented textures, lichen, flared openings that resemble fish fins, and upper section has outlines of pressed leaves enhanced by iron oxide stain. As the top of the base transitions to the next section, irregular points jut out mimicking broken tree bark that just barely concealing the phloem layer beneath. The mid-section introduces a more human form, almost armor-like in the encased textures of nature. A feathery fiber texture covers the right front and side, while vines grow upward and frame portions of moss and fin-lined openings. Thorns stick off of the left back shoulder, and large leaves drape off of the right shoulder. Two hands are visible on the front, one counting each breath and the other slowly revealing an opening in the stomach area that is framed by fins. The “collar” resembles the texture of spread-out wild shelf mushrooms that transform into fish fins, where the head piece sits atop. The face is serene, eyes closed, focused on the act of breathing. Fish fins cover the top of the head and create the outline of ears and a beard.

Breath of Life is the largest piece in this collection, and I wanted it to exhibit a lot of the technical skills I’ve been learning while in the program, such as texture studies, assemblage, color theory, etc. These are the techniques that I’ve been able to learn during my other projects and studies, from subject matter to form to concept. As I did for most of the other works, I began with a maquette for *Beath of Life* as well as a sketch to make sure I fully understood what I needed to consider before going larger. I had to make some changes along the way for different reasons, one being to forego making arms on the larger work and also having to break the design into three sections, both of which had to be done for technical firing purposes. With a few attempts at adding arms, the effect was taking away from the piece rather than making it stronger. I also realized before I got too far into the process that if I chose to add arms, the design

wouldn't allow me to use the kiln that I wanted, they would make it too large to fit inside. In the end, I decided that by adding the hands, it was enough of an insinuation that there were limbs to get my effect across of holding the stomach to count breath work. The colors range from hues of yellow, pink, red, blue, green, and creamy whites. The patterns of colors are arranged in a way that mimics camouflage, patches of color moving into each other. While the glazes of other works in this collection are of a more limited pallet, I think *Breath of Life* reveals my desire to be more open and experimental with how I express joy through color.

An artist that I researched when designing the concept for this piece was Nick Cave, (American b. 1959).⁴⁰ His work ranges in media from sculpture, performance art, video, fashion design, and he's both nationally and internationally known. What gave me the inspiration I needed to work with was in Cave's *Sound Suits*, wearable art that varies in textures, colors, patterns, functionalities, and sounds, made in response to the beating of Rodney King.⁴¹

I like the concept of being consumed by all of these trappings of environment and having to dig through them to find meaning. I think with my final form, I wanted it to have an aesthetic similar to body armor, but instead of using aspects of the environment for camouflage purposes, I wanted to use pattern and color to show vibrancy and pride. His piece that speaks to me most is *Sound Suit 2021*.⁴²

⁴⁰ Nick Cave Bio: <https://art21.org/artist/nick-cave/>

⁴¹ <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/lapd/race/king.html>

⁴² <https://philbrook.org/philbrook-acquires-major-work-by-renowned-artist-nick-cave/>



Figure 45. *Sound Suit 2021*, vintage ceramic birds, wire, beads, fabric, metal, and mannequin, 98 ½" x 46 x 42". Philbrook Museum of Art, Tulsa, Oklahoma. 2022.

This piece represents where I feel like I am now, living in a place of acceptance and feeling pride for the life that I've built. I've learned not only to trust my human nature, but approach myself in a more humane way, offering compassion and understanding when I make mistakes rather than anger and beratement, and I think it's allowed me to apply that lens to other situations in my life as well. Looking back over my experiences and the sculptures that narrate them, I thought it was important to share a concluding thought that gives hope for the here and now, moving towards the future.



Figure 46. *Breath of Life*, 15" x 18" x 62", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2025.



Figure 47. *Breath of Life Maquette*, 5" x 10" x 10", ceramic clay and mid-fire glazes, 2025.

Conclusion

This project was made possible by trying to find evidence exploring the stories of others who grew up with similar feelings of isolation or feeling that they were too different to belong to their Appalachian culture. LGBTQIA+ existence within Southwest Virginia's region of Appalachia is not invisible, though I feel more representation could create a stronger sense of belonging. Through my readings as well my own life experiences, it feels like I've uncovered a gap in terms of visibility for people who are like me, specifically gay men living in Appalachia without the umbrella of religion and attempting to carve out a life that there doesn't seem to be a prototype for. In *Queer Theory: An Introduction*,⁴³ Annamarie Jagose shares a quote by Alan Bray, author of *Homosexuality in Renaissance England*.⁴⁴ The excerpt from his book proposes that what is now recognized as a stereotype of a "homosexual" wasn't necessarily a part of culture until about the mid-seventeenth century, and even then it was discouraged and in some instances punishable by jail.

The Matthew Shepherd case.

The Aids epidemic.

While gay men have been finding ways to adapt to living openly in society, attitudes shift and sway. We learn early that if we come out, life will be different. Almost every conversation with someone new requires a coming out story. The question of "Are you married? Ah, what's

⁴³ Jagose, Annamarie. 1996. *Queer Theory: An Introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

⁴⁴ Boswell, John Eastburn, and Alan Bray. "Homosexuality in Renaissance England." *The American Historical Review* 89, no. 2 (1984): 421. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1862588>.

her name?” and the awkward “Actually, *his* name is” response and not knowing if you’ve just offended someone or if you’re in the presence of someone safe.

It takes courage to live in a world that doesn’t offer guarantees depending on who you love or what religion you practice. Going against the cultural belief system you’ve been taught can make waves, and not everyone will understand. After a meeting with my pastor at the time right before coming out, I brought up my desire to move away and go to school. Without missing a beat, he said, “That would be the biggest mistake of your life, no one out there will care about you the way they do here”. I think about that meeting a lot. It was the first time I ever realized that I could take control of my life, but that it would come with a price.

Since leaving that time in my life behind, I’ve found amazing people who have proven my former pastor wrong, helping me rebuild community and chasing away the feeling that I’m alone on an island. I had to learn be vulnerable again, allow others the opportunity to get to know the real me without worrying that they would run away after the fact.

I’ve found institutions of education that have supported me in furthering my knowledge and pushed me to become more versed in critical thinking and allowed me to glean artistic solutions I didn’t know about before.

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Additional Resources

Lee Bul professional website: <https://leebul.com/>

Nick Cave professional website: <https://nickcaveart.com/Main/Intro.html>

Meow Wolf Denver website: <https://meowwolf.com/visit/denver>