A SCHOLAR’S MUSES AND A CRAFTSMAN’S IMPLEMENTS

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts of Kent State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

by

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I would like to thank all those who showed me love and hope that I have shown the same. Cheers to you all for I would not be here without your kindness.
A SCHOLAR’S MUSES AND A CRAFTSMAN’S IMPLEMENTS

When considering the balance of the world’s natural occurring elements juxtaposed against that crafted by the human hand, a degree of familiarity exists. It is within the human mind that we assimilate parcels of visual information in which we can find a comfortable understanding of these objects existences. This notion is the basis of my thesis studies. With this in mind I have sought to develop individual studies, which lend themselves to a sense of ceremony and ritual through refined presentations of tools used within the development of my own work. This idea of setting is stressed by incorporating a marriage of these elements used as pedestals to display the tools I have chosen to investigate. The pedestals are fashioned in a surreal representation of the raw elements of wood and stone. Placed upon them are tools customary to my work as well as those seen traditionally in the history of ceramics.

The influence of the historical lineage of ceramic art has a heavy hand to play within the work I have created. More precisely my work is marriage of philosophy and craftsmanship that can be related to the Yixing scholars of China. The Yixing scholar was a student of four primary arts: poetry, painting, music, and calligraphy; yet not limited to those alone. They are considered to be the models of virtue, moral character, artistic perfection, and intellectual excellence. These models are also considered to be the purveyors’ of the cultural aesthetic of China. It is with the established ideology of the Yixing scholar I find the most common characteristics of
how and why I develop my craft. One could see this as simply the admiration and respect of the natural world yet rather it is something with a much deeper root. Within the word “study,” it is that which dictates the development of my work.

The common practice of collecting objects for personal study breaches many philosophical and religious schools of thought. However the Chinese scholar looks past the science of what is observed and digests the emotion it invokes. In relationship to natural occurring elements, such as stone and wood, it is the Chinese Scholars Rocks that have become my muse. Stones of many different material compositions and sizes where collected and refined for display purposes. These stones where housed in a scholars personal study and displayed for contemplation and reflection.

These ideas have guided my creative intuition with clay. The body of work I created for my thesis shares parallel ideals of scholarly pursuit, yet it is more of a dissection of these ideas and rearranged to my own notions of aesthetics. The approaches of creating tools speak to the practice and study of ceramic art. In this I see to be similar to the Chinese Scholar Rocks.

Throughout my career as a ceramic artist, I have collected handcrafted tools and have also built my own from wood and stone to use during my creation process. Scattered about my studio I have always had stones and cuts of wood I would find in my daily travels which hold degrees of intrigue to me personally. Many years ago I realized how significant, both personally and professionally, these objects had
become to me. I considered the care I had for their longevity and durability, and began to notice the placement of these utensils and objects in my studio. My realization of this action was the significance of these items led me to subconsciously give them a special placement or sacred area to exist for my constant observation.

With these self-reflective observations, they have brought me to develop the body of work I have created for my thesis. I treated these pieces with the idea of existing as a collection for my own personal use, both physically and observationally. I envisioned and contemplated my own personal studio and the tools encompassed throughout while pulling inspiration from that which was around.

_Sharpening Stone Study No. 1_ is a rendition of a practice seen across many ancient cultures. This idea has been witnessed throughout history and most commonly found amongst villages with pottery, blacksmithing, and farming traditions. This piece is a display of a tall stone with several worn away grooves. At the top of the stone rests a bone-like rib stone with graceful edges nestled into a slight recess. The body of the stone is a rich plum brown with tones of black marking its recesses and gnarled surface. Contrasted against this is the rib stone, which is a pure semi-translucent white. I chose this composition to push the significance of the rib stone, creating a pedestal from the larger stone allowing the
rib stone to exist as more of a reliquary implement. In its entirety the piece represents a working station for sharpening tools.

_Inkwell study No 1_ is a more exaggerated version of this thought of utilizing a natural composition for daily use. In this piece I created a form replicating the idea of an outgrowth of a tree branch from the main trunk of a tree. Where the branch ends is a small shallow pool where water would gather. There is a vertical split from this point to the top of the form suggesting its frailty from the extremes of moisture and dryness. I see the shallow pool in the same fashion as I observe a bowl, simply as a receptacle for liquids, acting as an inkwell. The body of the branch in its entirety is comprised of soft hues of orange, yellow, red, and brown. The skin of the surface is broken apart like peeled bark with boils and crevices giving it the feel of fungal growth swallowing the body of the branch.

It is within the characteristics of an old tree knot that I found the inspiration for _Mortar and Pestle Study No. 2_. The plump outgrowth of a tree knot has a vessel like form to its composition with a swirling like bowl in its center. These two traits led me to expose this bowl within the vessel as a mortar. I created a pestle as a branch with shaved blunt rounded edges. With the body of the mortar I wanted to overstress the idea of strength by building up the exterior with overlapping layers of outcropping cluster of bark thus conveying pressure and density. The mortar is grey and shinny matt much like petrified wood housing a dense white pestle with a bone like quality to its carving.
Sharpening Stone Study No. 1, Inkwell Study No. 1, and Mortar and Pestle Study No. 2 are derived out of the notion that in nature we can find tools even in the most beautiful of compositions. This thread of consciousness lends itself to the scholar’s interpretation of aesthetics in that it allows us to simultaneously consider both the idea of beauty and potential function of the objects.

Paddle Study No. 2 depicts a length of block cut wood with two hand held paddles resting in opposition to one another. The paddles are set upon a refined surface with jagged edges that give way to a panel of deteriorating blocks of wood grain. The length of wood has a rich burnt iron tone with its crevices saturated in a charcoal black to exaggerate its depth. The two paddles are an off-white marble with pock markings across their granular surfaces.

Rib Study No. 3 is a collection of several carving, shaping, and throwing ribs. The rib is one of the most common utensils used with in the tradition of ceramics for both sculptural and utilitarian work. The surfaces of these ribs are a milky white with a sanded smooth body and the graceful edges are a semi-translucent white. They are scattered about upon a slab like piece of granite that has been cut out from the rock structure below it. The tone of the rock structure is a muted copper brown with a slight iridescence floating on its surface.

Both Paddle Study No. 2 and Rib Study No. 3 are pieces that concern themselves with the ideals behind Scholar Rock compositions. The consequent
effect is that the tools take the place of the rock and the stone substitutes for the carved wooden bases traditionally seen with Scholar Rock forms.

This body of work is celebration of the tools of my craft. As an artist and more specifically as a ceramicist I have always felt that as craftsman we sometimes look past the influence of our tools. I feel there is an integrity and impact our choices have upon the objects we create and these choices guide us in the fashion or style of our work. The selection of tools and elements I decided to explore for this series of work are reflective of those I observe and use on a daily basis.

The use of the paddle and ribs for me represent my ability to control my medium with a sense of force and gesture that my bare hands cannot convey. The sharpening stone is my recognition of the care I take for these items. The upkeep and grooming of tools allow me to see that they convey their impression with consistency. The inkwell deals with my respect for literature and my own endeavors to express through words and imagery my ideas in clay. The mortar and pestle is homage to my fascination with the chemistry that is involved in my work and serves as the final piece to rounding out my assets as a maturing ceramic artist.
TECHNICAL INFORMATION

The pieces in this exhibition were completed utilizing two basic forming techniques, hand building, and throwing. The desired forms dictate the technique used to construct the forms and in some cases incorporated both. The chosen firing methods ranged from both oxidation to reduction as well as salt reduction. The specific feel for each piece that I wanted to convey determined the style of firing that would be used. All of the work was fired at high temperature range.

The following clay and glazes were utilized.

**White Stoneware, Cone 6 – Salt Reduction**

- EPK: 50
- Silica Sand: 25
- Ball Clay OM4: 25

**Iron Red Stoneware, Cone 6- Salt or Gas Reduction**

- Carbondale Red: 25
- Red Art: 25
- Fredericksburg: 25
- F4 Soda Spar: 15
- Silica: 10
- Sand: 10

**D.T. Porcelain Con 6- Oxidation**

- Grolleg: 40
- Nepheline Syenite: 25
- F4 Soda Spar: 25
- Silica: 10
- Bentonite: 2
D.T. Lichen Glaze, Cone 6- Salt or Gas Reduction

F4 Soda Spar: 30
Magnesium Carbonate: 31
Frit 25: 6
Talc: 8
Zinc Oxide: 6
E.P.K: 10

D.T. Wash

Nepheline Syenite: 75
Black Stain: 25
Figure 1

Sharpening Stone Study No. 1
Figure 2

Inkwell Study No. 1
Figure 3

Mortar and Pestle
Figure 4

Paddle Study No. 2
Figure 5
Rib Study No. 3