FROM SOIL TO SELF

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

by
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Throughout my time at Kent State University’s MFA program, I have come across some of the most challenging and evolving obstacles. I’m forever grateful to the faculty and graduate students who have mentored and guided me throughout this evolution of my MFA degree, as an artist as well as a person. I would like to first and most importantly thank my advisor Isabel Farnsworth, who has not only guided me through the past two years but also as a young sculptor in my undergraduate degree. Isabel’s compassion and knowledge of sculpture pushed me past limits I never saw through my work, giving me the freedom to express myself not only sculpturally but also mentally. Her talents that I could not put into words or express enough have given me more opportunities than I could imagine for myself as a future educator of the visual arts and working artist.

I would also like to recognize and thank Janice Lessman-Moss of the Textiles department. Janice has served on both of my candidacy and thesis committees, along with many hours of studio practice and conceptual guidance. Her ability to move through art and the metaphorical concepts, pushed me to not only embrace the meaning I was trying to illuminate through my work but also giving me the tools to defend that work. Her genuine personality, thoughtfulness, and knowledge are evident throughout the art students she works with each and everyday.
Professor in Foundations Mark Schatz has done so much through my development here as an artist. He is always prepared with references to artist whom I should research regarding their similarities to my sculptural work, having this guidance helped me push through a lot of the difficulties I encountered explaining my work. He was so nimble throughout this program, making as many efforts as he could to discuss my developing work without hesitation and I am so grateful for those moments.

I owe a huge praise to art historian John-Michael Warner. John-Michael has been with me through my very first semester in the graduate program that evoked many tantalizing and ambitious discussions amongst my peers. The graduate seminars hosted by John-Michael created a sense of community I did not have and an array of conceptual theory driven mindsets, which played an iconic role through my developing practice. His selflessness and intuition transformed my ability to articulate myself, professionally and personally. Through his vast knowledge I developed not only a mentor but also a friend, I am forever thankful for his influence and direction.

I could recognize so many others individually for their imprints which are forever engrained on me, this shows great admiration to the faculty that fills Kent State University’s CVA. The magnitude of talent, which fills this growing program through its current graduate students and staff, is mesmerizing and I am honored to have witnessed this unity under one roof. To my fellow graduate students who also, amongst the staff, share a strong presence in the art world, I thank you. Having the ability to critique each
other, and discuss through seminars with friendly studio visits gave me a lifeline to stay above the water. These once unfamiliar faces are now individuals whom I call friends, friends who push you and applaud you without hesitation. I am looking forward to the future of art, and how we as Kent State University alum and faculty influence and push the art world and community. Thank you all with the highest regards.
FROM SOIL TO SELF

Roots

Growing up in a small rural town of northeastern Ohio, the agriculture of the region shaped my perception of the landscape. Winding roads, farms, and a vast range of endless vegetation consume this agricultural region. My home life consisted of countless hours of physical labor shaping and cultivating the landscape. The movement and dance of my hand through the soil of every seasonal garden was intentional, and overtime second nature. The experience and physicality of working with nature has always been an influence on my art from the beginning. I was attracted to working with abstracted imagery that had an association to landscape but was never mimetic. Working with sculptural materials such as wood, is reminiscent of the physical labor of working the soil. My approach to making sculptural representations of landscape shifted last year through the experimentation I did with epoxy resin and natural elements. As a maker, notions of the self, have dominated my subconscious mind and have manifested itself in the work metaphorically. The vernacular of the garden and growth is present in my current body of work; the garden becomes a metaphor for growth of the self. Through hand picking the plant specimens from my home landscape, I feel I have imbued the work with biographical narrative reflective of my subjective experience.

The work became a vehicle to visually explore the relationship of interior space and exterior space as it relates to garden/landscape imagery; this lead me to look at folk art practices and to incorporate stylized floral imagery. Folk art expresses rural cultural
identity by conveying shared community values through a recognizable aesthetic.

Through my own apprenticeship of gardening, the craft of the work comes full circle, unifying the process of technique and the skills of making. This process facilitates the creation of new materials and contemporary expression. The diversity of natural and synthetic elements such as soil, plants, and resin are given the opportunity to interrelate and depict geographical relationships.
FROM SOIL TO SELF

Introduction

My thesis is comprised of four series of sculptures each hosting multiple elements. Each element is produced through repetition of form showcasing the language of gardening and growth. This body of work displays natural specimens coexisting with a resin and soil mixture that creates uniformity through form and metaphorical meaning. The multiple elements are manipulated through composition giving the appearance of abstracted grids and organized data. The display, which consists of wall to floor pieces is intentional and was meant to apply significance to each part of the exhibition. The soil and cedar work incorporates decorative accents that are commonly used in interior spaces to prompt the notion of home and belonging. I use the resin to captivate and preserve moments of growth of each of the plants selected from my home landscape. The idea of forging for each specimen was an important part of this project; it merges the labor of my physical body and mental subconscious.

The first in the series entitled Strategic Planting (FIGURE 1) presents methods of cultivation and my relationship with uniformity. Strategic Planting hosts six vertical cedar boxes which are spaced out in relation to the spacing of garden rows, are filled with soil and dahlia which are also intentionally spaced out to ideal dimensions for successful growth and production of the dahlia tubers. Dahlia tubers germination and multiplication is abundant and needs space to divide (FIGURE 3) inserting one tuber into a soil rich
cedar box in early spring will present you with four to six more tubers by the end of the growing season. The resin is used as a binding agent that holds and encases the natural objects in time, petrifying the process of growth and creating the ability to reflect. The element of reflection is structured through resin, gaining a clearer view of oneself through the action of making sense of past moments and their meanings. The cedar boxes are decorated with a contemporary damask motif. The selection of this iconic pattern on the exterior of the box is intended to compliment the organic shapes and foliage on the interior of the box. Damask patterns are intended to add a symbolic element to the cedar boxes, traditionally the pattern was used to show economic class, nostalgia, timelessness, atmosphere of the location created, and implications of status.

The second in the series entitled *Fields of Gold* (FIGURE 4) represents symbolic content through materials and form. The viewer is presented with a floor to ceiling composition of equally spaced out wooden circles carrying decorative motifs which hosts hand built mounds of soil. The mounds are constructed to insure proper depth in the soil structure to host germinated seedlings, the depth is common in modern day and traditional planting approaches to insure growth and production of the specimen. The shape of the mound evokes hand planting techniques, which involve building up the soil and placing a seedling down at variations of depths. The mounds were created through the epoxy resin and soil mixture, and constructed just as you would in the garden. Wheat

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is bundled and placed in the center of each mound, as it would occur in ideal planting methods, the epoxy resin filled soil is pulled up around the wheat to encase and stabilize the bundles. Wheat is a common “staple” crop and is considered a primary food in many societies; North Benton the town I am from is abundant in wheat. Wheat is a symbolic of abundance and life as well becomes a major economic factor for many blue-collar towns. The next element of this sculpture is the use of color (FIGURES 5). The use of color plays on the visual stimulus of water and sun, two crucial components of growth. 

Germination of most species is promoted by light (yellow); species kept in the dark lack productivity in growth and will not have the abundant flourish. Metaphorically yellow is meant to evoke light and creates a warming effect with productivity, evoking stability - something that is soothing for me. The painted blue wood circles correspond with the element water, blue is considered beneficial to mind, body, and soul, all stages of self-awareness. The final decorative decision employed in this sculpture was the addition of gold leaf on the soil to emphasize its importance. Gold as an embellishment can be traced back to the days of the Egyptians and ancient Greeks; it was used to signify divine characteristics and was widely used in the decoration of statues, books, paintings, and any symbolic objects.

The third series entitled Predicted Germination (FIGURE 6) displays an ambiguous chart of different soil samples. The four steel frames are filled with shutter

\[2\text{ White, 97.}\]
like casts of soil to demonstrate the use of repetition and spacing (FIGURE 7 & 8). In addition to representing a graph, the resin and soil forms reference mountain ranges along with horizon lines. The piece abstractly graphs different rates of growth for a seed to germinate and produce a sprout. The largest frame hosts twelve soil shutters opposed to the smallest which has only seven, this creates a visual representation implying productivity of the soil. Behind each steel frame is a flat decorated green swatch, sharing the same repetitive pattern as *Fields of Gold*. This geometric pattern offers the balance of visual elements that symbolize unity and harmony; just as planting strategies exhibit symmetry and order. I selected the vibrant green colors to compliment the orange rusted steel frames; green evokes nature, growth, harmony, and healing.

The final series entitled *Meditative Growth* (FIGURE 9 & 10) incorporates numerous plant species cast in epoxy resin rectangular forms. The resin is used as a binding agent that holds and encases the natural objects in time, petrifying the process of growth and the creating the ability to reflect on stages of life. Once the elements cure they are arranged in chronological order, even though each plant is different in genetic make-up. For me, the plants in this piece represent the course of one's personal growth, which is then isolated and compartmentalized to bring symbolism to each stage. The idea of using multiple species of plants rather a singular organism is to depict the different styles of growth through diverse entities, both plant based and psychologically.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) Michael Kubovy and James R. Pomerantz. *Perceptual Organization*. (Hillsdale, NJ:
with my subjective experience, the physical world becomes a construction, based on in
variances in my own experiences”. Growth is shown physically and non-physically, but
provoked through the subconscious experience giving the viewer and self a uniquely
privileged and infallible moment. The resin casts are presented slightly tilted back in a
cedar box and share the same repetitive spacing of all the other three sculptures. The
burned and gold leaf markings on the cedar box are graph-like and meant to suggest a
record of growth.

Summary and Conclusion

From Soil to Self is an exhibition featuring a series of four distinct sculptures that speak to notions of repetition and the theme of growth. Symmetry is used as a tool that gives the impression that all objects are uniformed with intent. The goal of the work is to be structured and equally engaging through the balance of materials, presentation, and overall composition which emanates ideas of what I know, how I view, and how I react to ordinary materials which I have gathered and surround my home.⁴ “Repetition, composition and juxtaposition are integral to the artist” efforts to create a sense of order among the chaos, but there is also a consistent acknowledgement and mirroring of how the excesses of visual, physical and sensory input increasingly characterize contemporary life”. The intent of the work is to create a timeless narrative as the viewer walks through the space utilizing a sensory-based stimulus. The show freezes overlooked chapters and sheds new light and designated importance from the embellishment of pattern motifs, gold accents, and the treatment of surface. ⁵Today decorative accents to sculptural surfaces are hardly dismissed as redundant to the object; but rather it is considered fundamental. The idea that the clean presentation along with the organized display is

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⁵ Ellegood, 8-9.
complimented by the treated surfaces and embellishments dispenses the idea that decoration is superfluous to the integrity and deeper meaning of the object.

Throughout my graduate program I have worked through numerous materials and directions regarding the context of my work, and have taken shifts and strides in my life as an artist in ways I could have never foreseen. The practice and growth through ever changing materials gave me skills as an artist to create on a grander scale, to encompass meaning and content that I have shied away from. From experimentation through materials and the notion of home being my center, whether I was consciously aware of that or not, drove me throughout this program. I projected through the evolution of plants and mind coming to terms with the psychological burdens, enlightened moments, of where I was and still am mentally, environmentally, and physically. Going forward through my career as an artist I want to push the boundaries of materials from my home landscape, and glorify the emotional attachment I have to this “place” and what nourishes me. In the words of Emily Dickinson, “They say that 'home is where the heart is.' I think it is where the house is, and the adjacent buildings”, my thesis makes a case for the garden to also be part of this equation.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Figure 1
*Strategic Planting*
Cedar, soil, resin, dahlias
72” x 5” x 54”
Figure 2

Strategic Planting Detail
Cedar, soil, resin, dahlia
72” x 5” x 54”
Figure 3
Strategic Planting Detail II
Cedar, soil, resin, dahlias
72” x 5” x 54”
Figure 4
*Fields of Gold*
Wood, resin, soil, wheat, gold leaf
72” x 13” x 84”
Figure 5
*Fields of Gold Detail*
Wood, resin, soil, wheat, gold leaf
72” x 13” x 84”
Figure 6
*Predicted Germination*
Steel, soil, resin, paint
72” x 5” x 48”
Figure 7
*Predicted Germination Detail*
Steel, soil, resin, paint
72” x 5” x 48”
Figure 8
*Predicted Germination Detail II*
Steel, soil, resin, paint
72” x 5” x 48”
Figure 9
Meditative Growth
Cedar, resin, foliage, gold leaf
12” x 5” x 60”
Figure 10
*Meditative Growth Detail*
Cedar, resin, foliage, gold leaf
12” x 5” x 60”