AN EXPLORATION OF ABSENCE

A Thesis

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By

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ABSTRACT

I have always been interested in abandoned places, however I was always content not to explore them. Knowing that they are there, an unexplored part of my life, was enough. My image of these places has therefore remained flexible. This thesis is an acknowledgement of this malleability. It is an examination of the unexplored, a celebration of the unknown, and a remembrance of what is lost, and gained.

The attraction to the unknown is described through the exploration of animals, as they hold a magical quality. Stories are contained within them never to be fully told. Communication happens on a base level.

The exploration of materials, particularly discarded ones, has proven vital to my work. A raw material is a small part of the physical world. Exploring them is exploring the world. This allows me to manifest my mental and emotional view of the world in the physical.
Dedicated to my parents Gary and Judy Hoffman
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vita</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Images</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: An Exploration of Absence</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Material Exploration of the Imagined World</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. Byberry Manor</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Echoes of a Place</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Elephants</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Variability: Drawing With the Left Hand</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Bodies and Vulnerability</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Absence</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix: Images</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image</td>
<td>Image Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Still from Rob Schrab’s <em>Crooked Teeth</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Untitled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Beginning of the <em>Vivian Hall</em> installation process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>Echoes of a Place</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>Eyes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Still from <em>Self Portrait</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Detail from <em>Burghers of Calais</em> - <em>Auguste Rodin</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>Vivian Hall</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>Vivian Hall</em> (detail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>Echoes of a Place</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>Echoes of a Place</em> (detail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><em>Elephant-1</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><em>Elephant-2</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>Elephant-2</em> (detail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>Elephant Group</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><em>Terra Cotta Elephant</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td><em>Eyes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td><em>Eyes</em> (detail)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td><em>Self Portrait</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td><em>Tusks</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION: AN EXPLORATION OF ABSENCE

Vacant lots where rowhomes once stood, vacant bodies which people once inhabited, vacant eyes which emphasize this absence. How does skin relate to form? How does the use of material speak to the absence of it? How can distance create clarity?

When I came to graduate school, I had images of vacant row houses in my head, images of demolished lots where they once stood and the remnants left on adjacent walls. Philadelphia, the city that I have lived in for twenty-five of my twenty-seven years, has been going through an “urban renewal.” Homes all across the city are being demolished. As I explored these ideas of urban renewal my ideas began to shift. I began to think about family, memory, and imagination in relation to architecture and urban renewal. Are these things malleable? Where does the truth lie, and is it important? How are we defined in the malleable context of our families? Our homes? Our cities? Are our buildings an extension of ourselves? Are they a skin? Are they a form of body?

My process of making is a material one. I think through my hands and through the materials they touch. This physically tangible research allows me to explore these questions and introduces new ones. How can materiality relate to
concept? How does the element of time in my building process relate to the element of time in the questions I am asking?

I. Material Exploration of the Imagined World

Exploring materials is my way of discovering, learning about, and understanding the physical world. Having a ceramics background has allowed material exploration to become deeply embedded in my studio practice. Real world materials inform imaginary spaces. I delve into many materials and processes. Clay and paper have been primary substances in my studio. Their physical attributes not only allow me to create work, but they feed the content as well.

Upon moving to Columbus Ohio for graduate school, one of the first obstacles that I ran into was not knowing where the good dumpsters were. I quickly realized how much of a bricoleur I am. Discarded materials and remnants of my environment are an integral part of my work. Ideas are generated through seeing materials. My studio practice is not normally one where I seek out the things needed for a given project, but rather one where ideas are generated through the materials around me.

Figure 1: Still from Rob Schrab's "Crooked Teeth"
The video works of Michel Gondry, Rob Schrab, Laurie Faggioni, Jan Svankmeyer, and others have long been an inspiration to me. I am moved by the ingenious way they utilize their resources. Their work allows a material to transcend its normal use and artfully speak about an idea or become a metaphor for something that was seemingly unrelated. In Rob Schrab’s music video “Crooked Teeth” for the band Death Cab for Cutie, he uses cardboard puppets to create an entire world.¹ Simply by using cardboard in a way that questions its nature, it encourages the viewer to suspend his/her belief in reality for the time that he/she is spending with the piece.

Inspired by this use of everyday materials, I began collecting the campus periodical “The Lantern,” ripping it into strips, soaking it in water, and grinding it up into a pulp with a drill and paint-mixing bit. The newspaper became a malleable sculpting medium. Once dried, it would become hard. I could also use paper in strip form, soak it in water and glue, and apply it to create a layer with an edge so organic that I could never intentionally duplicate it.

I began making bricks with this paper through a simple wooden mould that I created. Blending the paper into a pulp, I would mash it into the mould and pop it out with the collapsible bottom. In questioning the ephemeral nature of cities, homes, and ourselves, paper seemed an appropriate material. Periodicals like the ones I was using are full of acid that would make the paper break down over

¹ http://3.bp.blogspot.com/_LtiDfVKvC-E/R6qh1neQSaI/AAAAAAAAB50/Gadlo8tEDYI/s320/crooked-teeth.png
time. How do structures relate to the stories told about them? How do both break down and change over time? Will either last?

Through studying materials, they come alive. This is where my interest in puppetry, animation, and discarded things come from. In an interview with Richard Schechner artist Julie Taymor describes this by saying “…that’s the magic of puppetry. You know it’s dead and therefore you’re giving it a soul, a life.” Playing with this process and giving myself the simple task of making bricks with this material, allowed me to learn how the fibers grabbed hold of wood when wet and grew incredibly strong when dry. It allowed me to learn how the paper could give a velvety surface when sanded and how the newspaper would look marbled on the sanded plane. I learned about how long they could hold their heat and how intensely hot they burned when lit on fire.

Figure 2 Untitled, paper, dirt- 2007

These bricks found themselves in an untitled piece in the fall of 2007. In this piece, I imagined a fictional place, and then depicted it in ruins. Dirt was then used to delineate a simple rectangular shape. The area “inside” of the structure was clean, while the dirt was scattered away in what would be the “outside.” In playing with the idea of inside and outside being defined simply by a corner made of crumbling paper bricks and lines of dirt, a structure was formed, or rather implied. I attempted to evoke a structure that once stood. Paper is such a processed material, and it becomes even more so once I work with it. This processing, for me, seems to relate to the nature of a human structure.

The dirt stands in for the “other” in relation to our homes. It is the outside, the dirty, not the home. The acclaimed anthropologist Mary Douglas once described dirt as “matter out of place." What happens when the “place” is only delineated? Does an imaginary or ghost structure then get created? Is a “place” or structure needed or can it simply be defined by its “other”: dirt?

Figure 3 Beginning of the Vivian Hall installation process

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3 Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger- An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo, (Routledge, NY, 2002) p.44
In the winter of 2008 I had the opportunity to work in Vivian Hall, a building that The Ohio State University had planned to demolish. It was half abandoned when my class went in. Immediately striking was the evident history of the place. Room 211 had discoloration on the floor. There was a line about eight inches wide that went right down the middle of the floor, up one wall, across the ceiling and down the next wall. This was clearly where a wall had been, and faded parts of the concrete illustrated where furniture had and had not been on the floor. On either side of the strip that spanned the middle of the room, the discoloration in the concrete made a mirror image of itself. This led me to believe that room 211 used to be two rooms.

My first act was to simply delineate this discoloration. There was a pile of discarded aluminum blinds on the floor and I laid them out in the space of the faded concrete. I then hung the empty blind holders on the wall adjacent to the windows. The result was a sort of shifting in the room. Elements that were once together on the far wall had split and found their homes on two different planes of the room.

In response to the history of the place, I wanted to create a history of my being there. I smeared clay slop thickly all over the blinds and allowed to dry and crack. The dried clay was then flipped piece by piece onto the other side of the room where the concrete pattern was faded in a mirror image. The blinds were then all tied together and raised up to the ceiling in the middle of the room. This made an impression of the space and my hand in it. The room became an action
and the clay became the fossil. It embodied the process of relocating an element, impressing it, and flipping it to reveal multiple layers of that impression. This is my material exploration. This is how I chose to understand an abandoned place.

II. Byberry Manor

In Philadelphia, there was a mental institution called Byberry Manor. It was a massive complex with beautiful old dilapidated buildings that represented turn of the century American architecture. The main building spread out wide to reach out to other buildings on the compound. Though it looked as if it had been abandoned for fifty years, it had really only been since 1990. I heard tell of tunnels running beneath the structures connecting the entire complex. I heard of old equipment still there. I heard of hauntings.

Recently this compound was demolished to make way for a development. I never did explore it and felt sad for the loss. Even though I was perfectly content not to explore Byberry Manor, my intention to was always there. Simply having it there offered a possibility for adventure, escape, and mystery.

I imagine the tunnels are dark with work lights periodically lit. It’s damp down there. Where the stone walls meet the concrete floor there is a bit of accumulated water. Rats are down there too. I imagine the smell of the musty air when I close my eyes. It’s not really clear how far the tunnel goes, and I don’t find out. In my mind I still go there sometimes. I stand in the tunnel, wondering
how far it goes and which building it comes out in. I play with the image in my head.

My image of Byberry is malleable, though the compound was an anchor point for the image in my mind. Though my conception of this place may well have been far from the reality, it was my image and I had a relationship with the buildings. This relationship is possibly more personal than it would have been had I broke the distance and entered the abandoned complex.

Unlike Byberry Manor, I entered Vivian Hall and tried made work in the place. However, there was a similarity in the experience. By playing and working off of the impressions and objects existing in the space, bringing in new materials, and creating my own impressions of the room, I was able to imagine a history of the place. The idea of materiality became important. How did the physical nature of the building change when the inhabitants left? How does the idea of this structure change when the physical building is destroyed? How does this relate to time?

III. Echoes of a Place

In thinking about these questions of physicality and time, I made Echoes of a Place. The piece was an 8.5’ tall by 12’ long staircase with the layout of an upper floor. It was hand-made cotton paper with an embossed lace pattern. The intention when going about this piece was to reference a fictitious, demolished piece of architecture, similar to the first untitled installation. The lace pattern was
meant to mimic the pattern of a rug. In that way, the staircase was intended to be a stair runner, something that an inhabitant would add to their environment that directly mimics the structure of a building. I was playing with the idea of removing the structure, but leaving the human mark upon it.

While I think the final product did not read like a stair runner, and the lace pattern introduced some elements into the conversation that were not intended, the creation of this piece effectively addressed my intentions in unexpected ways. The stair runner became a staircase. The idea of the stair runner, or something placed on top of the architecture seemed to merge with the idea of the architecture itself. In this way, the staircase became a delicate, personalized structure, similar to the way fabric tends to merge to furniture in much of Doris Salcedo’s work. The windows in the space were open and the stairway would sway. The fleeting physical nature of structures seemed expressed in a way I hadn’t planned. It left me with questions of how we as humans relate. How are our physical structures fleeting? What impressions do we leave behind? Where is the line between the inhabitant and the structure of our own bodies?

Figure 4  *Echoes of a Place, 2008*
IV. Elephants

In thinking about humans and our physical bodies, I came to the image of an elephant. Elephants became a mechanism for me to explore their potential as a kind of stand in for human beings. Like in the piece Untitled with the paper bricks, using some “other” can speak strongly to a subject. In this case the Elephant is acting as the “other,” or the thing that is not human. I am trying to let it speak to very human emotions and subjects.

The image is a loaded one. I associate elephants with memory, age, strength, and vulnerability. They seem to be animals encumbered by their own mass. Their bodies are both their burdens and their identities. Their wrinkles tell stories. These animals to me seem like they have lived a thousand lifetimes.

I have never touched an elephant, I have not looked at many pictures of elephants, and I have only rarely seen one in person. There is a story that is told in a number of different religions about blind men and an elephant. It says that a number of blind men are presented with an elephant and asked to describe it. Each man was feeling a different part of the elephant and described it in his own way. One man thought an elephant was like a pillar as he was touching the leg. One man described it as a winnowing basket as he was touching the ears. Each man was correct, but could never understand the entirety of the form of the elephant. In this story the elephant is religion or God.

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4 G.M. Strong, translated by Dawsonne Melanchthon Strong, The Udana, the Solemn Utterances of the Buddha (Forgotten Books, 2007) p. 97
Imagining is important to me. I prefer to remain in the role of the blind men in the story. What does that skin feel like? What do the eyes express? How much information can I strip away and still have the feeling, the essence, of the creature? Can something be emblematic and individual at the same time? The less I know about the reality of the elephant, the more malleable the image is for me. It becomes a place of refuge, like Byberry Manor. My mental image becomes as plastic as clay.

V. Variability: Drawing with the Left Hand

Once in a while an experience will change the way I make and think about art. While studying in Rome I had a drawing class that did just that. The class was given the simple task of drawing with our less dominant hand (my left). Being well practiced with the right hand means that there are elements in my mark making that are somewhat unconscious. Having less control requires more focus, more engagement, and in a way results in more honesty, as I cannot fall back on the skills of my right hand.

With the experience of drawing with my left hand in mind, I went about creating elephants with level of variability, and a certain lack of control. Not knowing the end result became important to my building process. The first elephant I built was out of chicken wire with the ground up paper pulp on top. I could model the pulp as if it were clay. This process took a couple months to
complete. As I finished that piece I began to feel like I had more and more control over the process. This prompted me to alter my process.

I decided to build another elephant head out of poster board. Having never worked with the material and not being able to fully control the angles and curves that would result allowed a certain individuality to emerge in the final piece. I would cut the poster board and staple it together to try to evoke the form I wanted. The eyes were made with ripped paper. The rip provided an edge that I could never intentionally recreate.

Layering these edges allowed a surface and form that felt organic while my hand, though very much a part of the building process was a little less evident.

This was the same in the project in Vivian Hall. The space offered it’s own variables. The discarded blinds, the discoloration on the floor, the light coming in from the west facing windows, the grid of the drop ceiling, etc. all were things that the space offered that I could never plan. Through the raw clay on the floor, I introduced my own variables. The cracking of the clay, the residue on the floor between the blinds, the motion of the blinds once they were hanging, etc. were my way of engaging the space and exploring with a certain level of uncontrollability.
As I worked with the image of the elephant, the form became further abstracted to just the tusks, or just the eyes. As this progressed, I continued to incorporate variability into my building process. The tusk piece manifested itself through the use of raw clay as I had used with the Vivian Hall project. The cracking and drying that took place could never be reproduced. In developing the eyes, I explored new building techniques. Working with wet slabs of clay, I would quickly bend, fold, and push the clay. These became evolved into quick gesture drawings.

The piece Eyes was the product of working in the moment like this as each eye was quickly bent and folded to make the creases. Elephant was made with a similar spirit, though out of paper. Due to the nature of the process being very much in the moment, each piece could never be duplicated. The individuality and variability of the work became important to me as I felt it didn’t tie my image of an eye, or an elephant to one form. The eyes could all be different manifestations of one eye or all individual eyes. The forms and images are malleable.

Recently I began to work with clay in slab form, folding it, bending it, and pushing it from beneath. As the slab moved it retained the previous action in the texture that was created. In this way I was able to do what I did with the paper. I could create organic surfaces that emerged out of the process of working with the material. I could coax the work into the form I want while paying attention to the limitations of the material as well.
For me, creating these surfaces mimics the aging process of skin. Through repetitive motion over the course of a lifetime, a person’s eyes evolve into forms that speak to the expressions they’ve made. In a much more condensed fashion I work the clay in a similar manner to create individual forms. As the work represents an element of humanity to me I wanted each piece to have some individualizing elements. Allowing the lack of time to force me to improvise lets each piece achieve this individuality.

The condensing of time in a way is the exact opposite of what I want the work to feel like in the end. I wanted the work to feel aged. If I took my time in making the work I very well might have been able to control every contour of the piece. I could have sculpted in a way that afforded me much more control. However, the speed introduced a level of variance that forced me to improvise, much in the way we do in everyday life. It is interesting that in trying to make a piece feel honestly old, I needed to work quickly, whereas if I allowed a lot of time, the piece wouldn’t work the same. Taking more time would have resulted in a more polished piece, but the speed with which these pieces were made allowed the folds, crack, and wrinkles to happen naturally without being worked away by process.

VI. Bodies and Vulnerability

Watching my Great Uncle Hymie dying was surreal.
He went into the hospital for a hernia and they discovered a tumor. After it was removed complications arose and he declined rapidly. I remember watching him breathe, or try to. As his chest rose in what should have been one smooth breath, his belly seemed to quiver in a series of short intermediate breaths. The quivering of his belly was of such a sharp contrast from the strength of his hand as it grabbed mine.

“They’re killing me” he managed to write out on a piece of paper. He died not long thereafter.

How vulnerable we are. Our bodies. Our bellies.

My Aunt Sheila lay dying a year before my great uncle. She had a gastric bypass and neglected to care for herself since. When I saw her she was weak and gaunt. I barely recognized her. The energetic, loud, spirited Aunt who would somehow know whenever I was at the door and engulf me in a hug before I could step foot in the room was not the person I saw before me. She was in there, behind the frailty. Hiding in that shallow body was a large woman full of energy.

In the same short stretch of time I also lost Barbara, though I never did see her when she got sick. I only know her as she always had been.

It was quite a different experience with my Bubbie (grandmother) as she was sick for years. No one ever knew what was wrong. All we knew was that she was always in pain. Her pain was who she was. It began to identify her. Who will I be? Where was she? In some ways our bodies are our identities.
They are the physical representations of who we are. Through repeated smiles, frowns, furrows of the brow, our faces begin to mold into the expressions we make. Our eyes embody a lifetime or expression. The faces of old people are sculptures, which take a lifetime. In some instances though they can be at odds with our true spirit. My Aunt Sheila and our friend Barbara surely had spirits at odds with the bodies they were in.

What will I be like when I am old? I have always felt old in a way. I sometimes feel like the third person feeling the goings on of my body. Sometimes I feel the pain of a gas moving around. Sometimes there is a sharp, or dull, or pulsing unknown pain. Nothing bad at all, just something being alive; just one of the countless systems groaning as it is meant to work for the common good of my body. What will happen as these systems begin to break down? Will I be myself as my body fails me? Were my Aunt, my great Uncle, and Barbara still themselves in their last moments? How little does it take to define us? How much can be stripped away?

These questions prompted a video self-portrait. The intention was to try to sculpt myself as an old man. As I did, I obscured my skin with a second layer of skin in the form of clay. As with the eyes, what is not there becomes more
evident in its absence. In this video what is absent was myself. My physical self slowly receded as the aged clay proceeded. In a way I was stripping away my present identity as material was added to my face.

As the video was shot I made it a point never to make eye contact with the camera. In theater there is the idea of the “fourth wall.” This is where the audience usually is, but the actors imagine it as another wall in an attempt to allow their acting to be as natural as possible. In this way, they are not acting for a visible audience, but acting out their emotions in a natural space. The plane of the monitor became the “fourth wall.” This allowed the viewer to witness an act rather than being a part of it.

This is reinforced by the use of a box to display the video. As the video is an exploration of a human, the technology of the monitor and computer would not serve to benefit the theme. I created a box out of MDF to house the monitor and computer. The box came about 8” off from the wall; about enough for a human head. In addition, the video was edited so that the head moved slightly off frame at times and so that the aspect ratio of the frame was standard as opposed to widescreen. These adjustments allowed the technology of the piece to recede and let the humanity come to the forefront.

The piece was hung slightly below human height, it was slightly smaller than human size, and the subject never made eye contact. This gave a sort of odd distance to the piece. Had all of these measurements been much more realistic to human scale, and had the subject been staring directly at the viewer, it would
have had the effect of including the ball of the eye in a sculpture. Where I feel that the distance allows the viewer to see and empathize with the subject even better.

VII. Absence

Whenever I see sculptures with fully modeled eyes that you can make contact with, I don’t feel a connection. Rendering the whole eye in an attempt to be as naturalistic as possible can sometimes have the opposite effect. I often feel more connected to those sculptures that take away the ball of the eye and leave a void. Viewers know what the sculptor is implying, and allowing them to make that mental leap and understand that what they’re looking at is an eye allows them to be more engaged in the viewing process. That subtle element can allow the viewer to empathize because they are more engaged. An amazing example of this is Rodin’s *The Burghers of Calais*. In it he depicts a scene of men experiencing intense emotion, yet he leaves the eyes void. He sculpts the lids, the brow, the cheekbone, and everything else that would define the eye, but it is a void upon close inspection. This inspection that allows us to be more a part of the work.

![Image of Rodin's The Burghers of Calais](image)

*Figure 7 Detail from Burghers of Calais - Auguste Rodin*
The things that bothered me about the first elephant I built were the eyes. While I tried to leave out the pupils in an attempt to access a feeling of distance, it wasn’t enough. I began working on a new one with the eyes first, created the lids just out of paper. The eyes resolved themselves as just lids with an empty space inside. The head formed around the eyes.

I made a series of just eyes to focus on this. They were slab built clay pieces. Folding, bending, and rolling them, I was able to quickly create a surface like that of kneaded dough. I would then find the spot I liked to rip through and create the form of the eyelids. This quick way of working allowed me to improvise and work with the material, rather than dictating what I wanted.

There is information in the absence. These naturalistic surfaces would only work by removing the detail of the ball of the eye. We become more aware of the thing by removing it. In addition, it is possible to see a subject more honestly when at a comfortable distance. The Eyes do this by being hung at heights that rarely make contact with the viewer, and by not having the ball of the eye included. They became fragments of skin-like surface. Lit from above the textured surface cast strong shadows exaggerating the wrinkled, aged surface. They referenced a structure underneath, but the eyes were vacant. They felt old. They felt absent.

As with buildings, our bodies are places destined to be abandoned.
Conclusion

As I continue to make, I realize that the variables that I need in my process are an attempt to relate to life in a certain way. Making work with too much control, for me, does not relate to life and humanity. Further, my material exploration is a way of connecting to the physical world. It is a way of trying to understand our physicality; our fragility, our strength, our breaking points, our resilience through other physical materials. I experience materials in relationship to my hands, my eyes, myself. I understand myself through my process.

When I begin making, I don't have a finished piece in mind. I have a feeling, a material experiment I want to try, a need to fix an element from an older piece through a new piece, an action that I want to explore, etc. This, however, leaves me with the task of finishing and presenting the piece once I've made it. Making the mental leap from building my work and being in that process, to finishing it and allowing it to come to some point where it can reside, was difficult at times. However, I came to understand that deeper meanings within the work came through the finishing/presenting process as much as they did through the making process.
Exhibiting in the Urban Arts Space offered unique circumstances that became possibilities. One of the spaces in the gallery that was assigned to me for my work was the column. The video *Self Portrait* was to go there. While the curators of the exhibition (Chris and Jenifer Bedford) and I were discussing where to put *Elephant*, another column was suggested. I then asked to have it placed on the same column as the video. With the elephant on the opposite side from the video, hung at similar heights, a relationship is drawn. Viewers could stand back far enough to see a bit of both. They are both in a similar color scheme, both a study of materiality, and both representing a head in some form. The elephant becomes a representation of humanity and a little less animal, while I become less myself and a little more like the elephant.

Simply the act of hanging and lighting the work offered new possibilities of furthering the ideas with which I approached the piece in the first place. For the piece *Eyes*, I hung three rows of the ceramic eyes. Each row was at a height that is slightly inaccessible for the average person’s height. With sharp downward light, the cavity where the eye would be gets a dark rich shadow, obscuring the eye. As my intention when approaching this piece was to study absence through the venue of an eye, the height and lighting were able to further this idea.

After having gone through this process, I have had many themes that were present in my work make themselves apparent to me. I have been able to explore these themes through making, finishing, and exhibiting that work. I feel
that I am just beginning to explore some of these ideas of absence and body. The realm of video also seems to offer a lot of possibilities. I am attracted to the idea of treating video as a physical material like paper or clay. I am left with new routes to follow and many possibilities for my work in the future.
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APPENDIX

Images
Figure 8  Vivian Hall
Figure 9 Vivian Hall detail
Figure 10  Echoes of a Place
Figure 11  *Echoes of a Place* (detail)
Figure 12  Elephant-1
Figure 13  Elephant-2
Figure 14 Elephant-2 (detail)
Figure 15  Elephant Group
Figure 16 Terra Cotta Elephant
Figure 17  Eyes
Figure 18  

Eyes (detail)
Figure 19  Self Portrait
Figure 20  Tusks