GROUNDBREAKING: ART-MAKING
LIFE; LIFE-MAKING ART

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the degree Master of Fine Art in the
Graduate School of The Ohio State University

by
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* * * * *

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VITA

August 3, 1961............. Youngstown, Ohio

1985...................... B.F.A., Sculpture, Youngstown
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1985-1987.................. Graduate Teaching Assistant,
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EXHIBITIONS

Solo Exhibitions

1987...................... MFA Thesis Show, The Ohio State
                     University, Columbus, Ohio

1985...................... The Gallery, Hubbard, Ohio

1984...................... Kilcawley Center Art Gallery,
                     Youngstown State University,
                     Youngstown, Ohio

1984...................... Satellite Gallery Space, Kent
                     State University, Warren, Ohio

Two-Man Exhibitions

1987...................... "Confocal Ikkyo", Geoffrey Taber
                     Gallery, Columbus, Ohio. Other
                     artist: Jerry Fulton

Juried Exhibitions

1987...................... New York International Art
                     Exhibition, Ariel Gallery, SoHo--
                     New York City, New York

1987...................... Festival 87, Three Rivers Arts
                     Festival, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
1987
Fifteenth Annual National Juried Art Exhibit, Hill Country Arts Foundation, Ingram, Texas

1986-1987
76th and 77th Annual Columbus Art League Exhibition, The Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio

1985
47th Area Artists Annual, The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

1985
Tag Annual, Warren, Ohio

1984
The May Show, The Cleveland Museum of Art, Cleveland, Ohio

1983-1985
1983, 1984, 1985, Youngstown State University Student Art Show, The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

1980
"Images 80", Fort Myers, Florida

Invitational Exhibitions

1987
Skintight, The Ohio State University Gallery, Columbus, Ohio

1986
PrepARTum Blues: A Womb Full of Grads, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1985
Youngstown State University Honors Exhibit, Youngstown, Ohio

1985
Akron Art Festival, Akron, Ohio

1984
Kilcawley Center Art Gallery, Youngstown State University, Youngstown, Ohio

Awards

1987
"3rd Prize", New York International Art Exhibition, Ariel Gallery, SoHo--New York City, New York
1987.................. The Edith Fergus Gilmore Award, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio

1984.................. "Best of Show", Youngstown State University Student Art Show, The Butler Institute of American Art, Youngstown, Ohio

FIELDS OF STUDY

Major field: Sculpture
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PREFACE

There is little that has not already been said—by visual artists and viewers, by art critics and collectors—about the complexity of the creative process. Still, as a visual artist who explores and exhibits not in a vacuum, but in a real world—furnished with acrylic gels and art galleries, with steel and studios, with paints and people—I am often asked to say something about what I do and how I do it. In retrospect, however, my past responses to such inquiries seem more sincere than inspired.

I wish, now, that I had been able to respond, at a recent show, with the eloquence of, for example, James S. Ackerman:

... inspiration may come from far as well as from near; sometimes, especially, in the formulation of a new problem, the distant past is actually closer than yesterday.

Because my work is informed not only by a belief in the reciprocity of life and art, but also by an interest in expressing life experiences and in formulating art problems, Ackerman’s view of the creative process—"complex enough to be stimulated at many points"—is very close to my own. Indeed, my own four-point analysis of my
art-making process—in terms of (1) a life experience, (2) a semi-automatic drawing, (3) a three-dimensional (sculptural) translation of a two-dimensional drawing, and (4) an analysis/formulation of problems—testifies, I think, to the truth of Ackerman's observation: for me, the "inspiration" for today's piece may be no more remote than yesterday's conjunction of actual pain and aesthetic problem.¹

Problematic rhetorical skills may result in some awkward silences; however, in my view, verbal eloquence cannot substitute for visual experience. Furthermore, I attribute the success of some of my work as a visual artist directly to the fact that my pieces do "speak for themselves." And what they speak of is the very stuff of life: because it works both to satisfy and to frustrate viewer expectations, the visual experience reflects the life experience—where the balance favors sometimes satisfaction, sometimes frustration. I also attribute the favorable reception of my pieces to their use. Enough has been said—by moderns as well as ancients—about the importance of a life that balances playfulness and seriousness, satisfaction and frustration, joy and sorrow, 

mind and body, I would like to hope that I will be able, eventually, to create a large body of art that speaks not only to viewers here and now, but to audiences in other places and at other times.
INTRODUCTION

The authority of the creative artist's analysis of his own work has been found suspect by critics, ancient and modern. After questioning the "poets" on the "meaning" of their work, Plato's Socrates observes that "... there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves."\(^1\) Similarly, before quoting the "artists" on the "method" of their work, Monroe C. Beardsley remarks that "The trouble is that, for reasons of their own, they are often inclined to the most whimsical and bizarre statements, and seem to enjoy being deliberately misleading."\(^2\) The critical inclination to mistrust the words, but to trust the works, is not, I think, unfounded: thus, as a creative artist, I hope that the following analysis of my work (intended not as a substitute for, but as a supplement to, the "visual

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experience") leads back, finally, to the pieces of art themselves.
CHAPTER I

ART-MAKING: GENERAL PATTERNS

Background

Assumptions and Influences

The general assumption that underlies and unifies my work posits the interaction between art and life: in my view, art interprets life, and life influences art. More specifically, my work involves a corollary to that assumption: as an expression of life, art reflects the times in which it was made. For me, then, art-making relates a set of aesthetic choices to a selection of life experiences.

Although it is difficult to determine with precision the life experiences and encounters that are given expression in my art, moments and memories associated with the extreme positions on the pleasure/pain continuum are sources of "inspiration" and "influence." Thus, I am concerned to express the feelings of either extreme pleasure (enjoyment/joy/vitality) or extreme pain (discomfort/sorrow/mortality) effected by periods or persons in my life. In regards to the former, the joyful
feelings generated in planning a marriage and making a friend—in my experiences of "love" and "trust"—as well as the pleasurable feelings produced in recollecting the works of my father (a small-town worker who introduced me to the joys of individualism) and the silences of my grandfather (a hard-working bricklayer who directed my attention with professional knowledge to certain cement-forming processes. This personal relationship with my grandfather enhanced my appreciation of and sensitivity to this mud-to-rock form-making process). In regards to the latter, the feelings of mental and physical pain associated with the dissolution of a planned marriage, the loss of a close friend, and the discomfort of a permanent injury have been influential.

But while my own experiences of pleasure and pain find expression in my art (which often dramatizes the differences between the two extremes), the lives and works of other artists—both early and late pioneers of, especially, Expressionism (e.g., Edvard Munch, Vincent Van Gogh, Vasily Kandinsky), Surrealism (e.g., Viola Frey, Michael T. Moseley)—are sources of inspiration and influence. Thus, for example, my utilization of semi-automatic drawings (see "Process and Problems") is not unlike Kandinsky's use of line as a directional and emotional element in a drawing. Similarly, my interest in frustrating viewer expectations (see "Interests and Aspirations") is indebted to the sense of mystery and the
quality of invention and imagination that I find in the work of Dali and Miro. Finally, I relate my own work in clay (see "Media and Motifs")--where the application of glazes and paints works to create the surface interest of the varied shapes--to the concern for color, imagery, and texture evident in the work of Frey and Moseley.

Interests and Aspirations

My interests and aspirations as a visual artist are directly related to the assumptions and influences that find expression in my work: my concern with the interaction between art and life directs my interest in the relations among artist, work of art, and viewer. Thus, for example, my effort to express the extremes of human pain and pleasure through my art work provides me with a two-directional challenge: in order, ultimately, to expand both the imaginative perception and the personal involvement of the viewer--in order to stretch his sensibilities with respect to the aesthetic qualities of a particular artwork as well as to the emotional qualities of a particular life experience--my pieces must work towards both opening and closing the distance between the work and the viewer.

The distancing effect created by my work is a function, I believe, of the manner in which I utilize irony to frustrate the viewer's expectations. By exploiting
distance (i.e., the gaps between the "terms" of the artist's visual vocabulary—e.g., the different materials and processes he uses—and their contexts) and deviation (i.e., the unexpected applications and combinations of, e.g., materials), irony accounts for the viewer's tendency to feel confronted by a particular piece of art. Thus, for example, the ironic dimension of my ceramic sculptures—in terms of actual size and weight as well as of potential for destructive breakage and for human injury—works to frustrate and confront the viewer's usual expectations.

Usually, however—and in order to enable the viewer to experience the emotions that I felt when creating and completing a piece—I ensure that while some expectations are frustrated, others are satisfied. Thus, for example, my use of color to express emotions works to satisfy the viewer's expectations: bright hues are frequently associated with pleasurable feelings such as love and joy (Plate II), and dark colors, with sinister moods related to mental and physical anguish (Plate III). Similarly, my work often reveals a close relationship between playful shapes and pleasurable states (Plate II), between threatening forms and tortured feelings (Plate III). Finally, I feel that my control of the relations among color and shape—the result of my synthesis of conceptual and formal concerns of both Painting and Sculpture (see "Media and Motifs")—accounts for the intensity and
complexity of my work. Consequently, the effect of a work like *Pop Go the Viscera* or *Resurgence* (Plates III and IV) is complex: While, in the first piece, the viewer is distanced by the combinations among shapes, colors, and textures—e.g., asymmetrical forms, bloody reds, craggy glazes—he is drawn to the wet-looking "slime" compelling him toward. Similarly, although in the second piece, the viewer is threatened by the conjunction of color and form—notably, by the "red-lined" steel tube, resembling human veins and resisting effective containment—but reassured by the symbolic interplay of white hues and suggested colors, by the sensuous interaction of steel tubes and ceramic shapes.

The shape of my aspirations as a visual artist is a function of my interest in the complex relations that develop not only among artist, work of art, and viewer, but also among color and form, media and motifs, process and problems (see "Media and Motifs" and "Process and Problems"). Thus, my commitment to the development of groundbreaking art—to art that explores different forms and contents, different methods and materials—is inseparable from my working and living experiences as an artist. But while these experiences elicit my receptivity to the potentials of varied materials (e.g., of glazes and gels—see "Media and Motifs") and genres (e.g., Sculpture and Cinema—see "Media and Motifs" or Plate III), they also
entail my exercise of a certain degree of control. By experimenting with ways of expressing degrees of pleasure and pain, periods of joy and sorrow—by creating fantasies that reflect both enjoyable and discomforting times—I am able to control both my art pieces (which seem, upon completion, to take on an organic quality, to find an independent life of their own) and my life experiences (which seem, upon incorporation, to lose their hold on me, to give a stimulative quality to my work). Thus, I am able to use my work to control my life, my life to control my work.

Graduate School

Media and Motifs

Although my work in Graduate School has exposed me to many different ways of making art, my major pieces (which work towards a synthesis of the formal and conceptual concerns of Painting and Sculpture) are made, primarily, of ceramic or cement. While my ceramic work emphasizes the motifs of vitality/pleasure and pain/mortality, my cement work suggests a rehabilitative direction influenced by the feelings of enjoyment and discomfort.

Although I am comfortable working with many different materials, clay is my most important medium: in addition to its enjoyable physicality, clay possesses the expressivity and flexibility necessary for the effects I
want to achieve in my work. While an expressive clay shape can be effected, literally, in just a few seconds, other materials often require considerably more time until the desired form is achieved. Additionally, although once it is fired, clay is archival--and strong enough to support other materials--it is still workable: areas or parts that need to be worked out of a piece can be eliminated by breaking or cutting. Finally, by working with clay, I am able to achieve the textural effects that constitute an important part of my pieces: the responsive and expressive qualities of clay enable me to create visual and tactile surface characteristics that can be realized in few other materials.

Characteristically, my work aims for the realization of several significant motifs: my art seeks--by varied means--to express, especially, the extremes of pleasure (enjoyment/joy/vitality) and pain (discomfort/sorrow/mortality) derived from my life experiences. However, thus far, my experience as a visual artist suggests the impossibility either of stipulating special rules as a means to the realization of a particular motif or of separating thematic from formal considerations as an end in the description of a particular realized effect. Thus, determining whether or not a particular piece is effectual--in its expression of a specific motif--must involve, I believe, a careful consideration and description
of that piece's unique use of, say, material or color. This is not to say that I discountenance descriptive conclusions about my work as a whole, but, rather, that I ground my generalizations on specific examples drawn from my experiences with and analyses of individual pieces. Thus, for example, *Pop Go the Viscera* (Plate III) is a piece in which I give expression to the discomfort motif largely by means of my selection of specific materials and colors: I use slime/acrylic gel (in its association with infection) to indicate mental anguish; crusty glazes (with their resemblance to sores and scabs), to suggest physical pain; and red hues, to intimate blood. In other words, in *Pop Go the Viscera*—as in my other pieces—thematic and formal concerns are intimately related: the relations among motif and material, shape and color, can be explained only in the process of a piece-by-piece analysis.

Process and Problems

Because there are so many factors that enter into the creation of an individual piece, it is difficult to provide an accurate description of my art-making process. Usually, however, my process of making art involves four broad stages: (1) a life experience, (2) a semi-automatic drawing, (3) a three-dimensional (sculptural) translation of a two-dimensional drawing, and (4) an analysis/a formulation of problems.
The usual beginning of my art-making process seems, at first glance, unproblematic: a life experience associated with pleasure or pain, joy or sorrow, is followed by a semi-automatic drawing (Plate I). After placing colored pastels on paper in an automatic application process, I unify the drawing by means of intentionally placed marks and lines. The presence of an intentional thought pattern on the page assists organization as the presence of lines in the drawing aids interpretation. I can only generally describe what determines my choice for translation from semi-automatic drawing to sculpture. It is as if I can almost look into the drawing. I begin to visualize the larger shapes in the composition, moving to the smaller, more intimate details in an attempt to determine what I can translate into clay and what I think will convey the intimate feeling that I wish to express in sculpture. When I translate the two-dimensional drawing into a three-dimensional sculpture (made of ceramic, cement, and/or other materials), I seek to create, in the new medium, the original patterns of ideation and qualities of line. The qualitative differences among my sculptures—among my three-dimensional interpretations of my two-dimensional drawings—result in specific problems demanding specific solutions (Plates I and V). For example, Bound and Wound—ceramic relief sculpture—(Plate V) is the piece that, literally and figuratively, enabled me to move from the
wall to the floor and to advance from one level of maturity to another. Containing a number of sculptural maquettes (which would eventually be enlarged to human scale and made of cement-covered steel), *Bound and Wound* takes as its starting point the aesthetic problems associated with working in a new dimension and the rehabilitative experience associated with feeling like a healed person. As a result, at the completion of one sculpture, I analyze and formulate problems (usually involving basic formal elements of design) to be resolved in the next piece: by means, then, of research and experimentation, I am able to progress to another work of sculpture or stage of work. Thus, despite the stage-by-stage movement of my art-making process, my work and life are of a piece: the aesthetic problems that I formulate when I finish a sculpture provide—in conjunction with the emotional experience that I live—the starting point for another piece. So, in a very real sense, it is difficult to point to the beginning and the end of my creative process: for me, the processes of making art and of experiencing life are continuous.
PLATES
PLATE I

Drawing, Bound and Wound, pastel and paper, 1987
PLATE II

Fly, ceramic/mixed media, 1985
PLATE III

Pop Go the Viscera, ceramic/mixed media, 1986
PLATE IV

Resurgence, ceramic/mixed media, 1987
PLATE V

Bound and Wound, ceramic/mixed media, 1987