INVESTIGATION INTO THE EMOTIONAL ASPECTS OF THE FIGURE

OR

HOW I'VE SPENT MY TWO YEARS IN OHIO

A Thesis

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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by

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* * * * *

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This Thesis is dedicated to Melissa. 
You have always believed in me, and 
without you, all of this wouldn't matter. 

I love you.
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Thank you Cathy Ellis for EVERYTHING!
VITA

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INVESTIGATION INTO ASPECTS OF THE FIGURE -
OR HOW I'VE SPENT MY TWO YEARS IN OHIO

In the last two years my art work has changed almost as much as my attitude about making it. I have chronicled the ideas and influences that have lead to this growth. I came to Graduate school thinking that all I needed to do was "refine" my work. I leave here knowing that there must be a sense of balance. I know now the actual "art making" is a small portion of the process.

My investigation of the figure has been accompanied by a parallel exploration of the use and properties of clay itself. This dual investigation has taken me down many different paths and where the figure and clay have crossed the journey has been the most challenging, demanding and rewarding.

AU/89

Clay is sexy, not in a perverted way. (I don't need a cigarette and a nap after I work) but to touch clay energizes and excites me.

I pick up clay and it communicates with my fingers. Pushing and pulling until something emerges that both entities agree on, kinda like an outta-body experience.

When the piece is finished, but still wet, is when it's my most favorite, still "omitting" the life I have given it. But as it dries and is fired, I lose that feeling of oneness to the work. The thrill is gone but the memory lingers.

SP/90

I love the physicalness of clay. The moving and building on sheer weight of the clay itself. I think it reminds me of being an athlete again. Working out for hours at a time in weight rooms, practicing techniques over and over until you could hardly move. The best part of the workout was the exhaustion in your muscles and the satisfaction of a hot shower. Working with clay gives me that same feeling.

Because of the nature of clay the movement and gestures of the human figure can be difficult to physically capture, especially the actions of the arms and legs. In its wet
stage clay cannot support its own lateral weight which makes it virtually impossible to use it freely in a gestural sense. Supporting the clay in the early stages, by use of armatures, can be difficult because of shrinking and warping in the clays drying and firing stages. Once the work is fired it becomes stronger, but retains some brittleness which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to move. One solution to this problem would be to cut the figure into sections. I've resisted this, however, feeling that the seams that are created break up the natural flow and movement of the figure. I've come to the conclusion that although the use of clay creates many problems the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages. When the clay is in a wet "plastic" state it has a physicality about it, a magnetic lure that calls to me, asking to be touched, shaped and molded. Its implied visual weight and feeling of mass and volume are inherent qualities in clay that fascinates me.

WJ/90

Kids can be cruel - I was a "little" chubby as a kid. The other kids would make fun of me, calling me "fatty, chubby", names like that. I didn't get much chance to be involved with a lot of other kids. I became a non-participant in many things. Looking back on this time, I think I became an observer of people and their habits.

Comprehending the figure is even more demanding than understanding the inherent qualities of clay. For me, the investigation into the figure, and the emotional content of my work go hand in hand. I find the figure to be the purest form of expression. We, as figures, relate emotionally to the forces acting on us everyday. The emotional expression of the human figure intrigues me. I'm fascinated by how expression and visual feeling can change with a slight movement in the figure; How an open hand may give a feeling of vulnerability while power or hostility may emanate from a clenched fist; How the optimism of a upturned head can contrast the possible despair of a head slightly tilted downward. My interest in the figure comes from my childhood. Growing up as a fat kid in a large family, and as one of the original members from the T.V. generation, I
learned to observe from the sidelines. Being "chubby" and very uncoordinated, I was forced to be an observer rather than an active participant. While this was painful for me I can now draw on these experiences.

WJ/90

_Memory_ - My memory haunts me. I remember almost everything.

My memory has been a great factor in my work. I am able to remember not only situations, but how I felt or how I perceived a person would feel. This ability is a blessing as well as a curse. It has been a blessing since I can call on that information when I'm attempting to capture emotion that is valuable in my work. It has proven to be a curse as I relive unpleasant memories in my mind's eye... over and over again. When portraying an idea I try to use "body language" that I have observed to create a visual representation for the viewer. I call on my memory as a reference to provide feeling for the work. By recalling those feelings from the past, coupled with the figure as a tool of expression, I have attempted to produce a visual expression of emotion.

SP/89

I was once told by a fellow graduate student that he thought that if I wasn't an artist, that I would have been a truck driver. That same person told me that my work was too easy for the average person to understand. I think he meant it as a putdown, however, I took it as a compliment.

I like who I am and where I came from and I think I would be remiss not to deal with what I know in my head and in my heart.

Six months later that same person saw my work and said he liked it... that offended me!

WJ/90

I take a blue collar work ethic into my studio everyday. I think it was the way I was raised.

I saw my father work 12 hours a day, 7 days a week to support our family. I think that type of work ethic must be hereditary. The way I look at it is, if you're in your studio working only good things can happen. I have never been able to understand artist who say, "I have to be in a certain mood to create art." To me that's like saying "I have to be in a certain mood to breath."
The emotional and visual content of my work has come from my middle class, blue collar upbringing in Detroit. Coming from what I call "a dying city" I am particularly drawn to those individuals that appear on the fringe of society. When one lives, grows up, and works in a city like Detroit, one can't help but be moved, angered, repulsed, touched, and scared by what is seen. I guess by using this type of subject matter in my work, it helps me sort through what is valid, and important in my life.

WI/89

God, I hate the Three Stooges, that kind of humor that slaps you in the face. Funny thing about that kind of humor though, you may chuckle or love the Three Stooges, but with the exception of a few of their gags, I bet you can't remember what it was that made you laugh.

In a lot of ways my work was like that, it slapped you in the face. You looked, chuckled or shrieked, but then you just walked away, never to think of it again.

The day I discovered that, is the day I accepted abstraction into my life. This was a major turning point in my work. I found out I could enhance the work by leaving things out. Things the viewer could then add, so it could become their own. It allowed the work to mean more and it opened up a new side of my work to me - the intellectual side. I discovered that art was a very cerebral process. Art was not just making work, it was thinking and feeling; but mostly, allowing the viewer to see into your soul, through your art. It is about having enough confidence in yourself and the viewer to let them discover what your work means to them.

WI/89

If I make a joke or make fun of somebody or their situation and you laugh, tell me who's worse; me for bringing it to your attention or you for laughing at it?

My range of expression was limited mostly to humor when I first started to concentrate on the figure. However, it was more of a satirical, cutting humor. The kind of humor a fat, uncoordinated kid would have to learn if he was to survive his youth. I really do not think I got over using that type of humor as a defense mechanism until I came to Ohio State and began to believe that I had something more to offer a viewer than a "one-liner". This is the most important thing I will take away from graduate school.
I relied primarily on my sense of humor in my work when arriving at Ohio State. Humor came easily to me and I used it as a defense mechanism protecting myself. The work consisted of humorous ideas I derived from my own life and topics from the headlines (plate I, Frendo’s "Legionnaires Disease"). Only later did I realize I was hiding behind the humor, still using it as a crutch in the same way I, as a young boy with low self esteem would try to be the class clown to gain acceptance. I soon realized I would need to develop the confidence in myself and my work to begin to develop other avenues of expression.

WI/89

Glaze, the ceramic tradition, purism, watta bunch of crap, or so I thought.

She was a overbearing, guilt spewing, mother type from hell, oozing guilt from every pore of her body. She made me feel that glaze was the only answer and that paint was a hideous thing that 2-D people used.

She dragged me kicking and screaming into the glaze lab. The trouble was, I knew she was right. Until I knew enough about glazes to determine that paint wasn’t the answer, by default, I should glaze. So I did. I tested lithium, lead, frits, masons stains and commercial glazes. If it wasn’t nailed down, I tested it, and for a while, I even thought glazing may be the answer to the surface of my work. But whether or not it is the answer, it is my decision. A decision I can make based on information not ignorance. Thanks Liz.

Looking back now, I think the work was very reactionary. Reactionary in the sense that the ceramic process controlled me. My technical skills were a bit suspect, and I really did not have much of a handle on what the clay’s qualities were. This forced me to react to what was physically happening in the work. I limited the content of the work to what was in the headlines, relying on my ability to hold the viewer through creating a likeness or making them chuckle rather than challenging them to think. This illustrative quality was not all bad... it taught me how to tell a story through my work, but it really was not very challenging for me, intellectually, and not very stimulating for the viewer. (plate II, Frendo’s "First Kiss") During the past two years I began to develop an appreciation and understanding of the formal qualities in the work; such as the way the figure moves in space, the line of the figure and the feeling of motion it can project.
The rediscovery of the formal qualities led me to realize that no matter how complex the work gets, these formal aspects of surface, color, mass, and negative/positive space needs to be addressed in the work.

SU/89

You know what makes me mad? No? Well I’ll tell you. When I finish a piece, I’m thinking it’s pretty damn good and some art historian type comes by and tells me that I must have been influenced by Schmitt or Bacon or Ham, I think to myself, “influenced?” I don’t even know who these people are.

Well art history and me are like water and oil, don’t mix.

A great man once said something like - Those who don’t learn from history are doomed to repeat those mistakes. The way I look at it is, hey! they’re my mistakes, damn it, I’m entitled to them.

I was reluctant (almost embarrassed) to acknowledge and learn from historical works believing that to do so would suggest a lack of originality thereby invalidating the work. Historical antecedents have come to my attention and I realize now that I have been influenced by many who have come before me. Three seem especially influential in my work; August Rodin, Alberto Giacometti, and Henry Moore. First and foremost is August Rodin. The feeling of power and strength that I get from his figures move me. Rodin’s use of mass and manipulation of the surface, particularly in the hands and heads of his figures make sense. I believe that these are the key expressive areas of the figure. (plate III, Rodin’s "Balzac" and plate IV, Frendo’s "Standing Figure").

When I saw Alberto Giacometti’s work I began to understand what abstraction was and the possibilities that it held for me. The work I saw consisted of simple elongated figures devoid of color. It made me rethink what I thought was relevant in my work. After seeing Giacometti’s bronze figures, I was inspired to develop a glaze with the same visual properties as bronze, hoping this would validate and elevate my work from craft to sculpture. Giacometti’s bronze finish was not the only aspect of the surface that attracted me. His work gave me a sense that surfaces had been handled leaving
the artist's "touch" on them. (plate V, Giacometti's "Man Pointing" detail and plate VI, Frendo's "Leon"). That idea intrigued me, and with the seduction of the clay's physical attributes I became totally enthralled in the surfaces of my work, almost uncontrollably so. Before long the surface was the dominant feature of the work and there was so much emphasis on the surface "touch" that everything else in the work seemed to get lost. (plate VII, Frendo's "Cowering Figure"). It didn't seem to matter... I was infatuated by the feel of the clay. Only later did I realize that this type of surface was too much, and that I was using this technique in excess. I had destroyed the continuity and surface information of the figure: the very thing that I thought the "touch" would enhance. The process in which I worked had to be altered. The most effective and direct solution was to limit the surface "touch" to areas that were important to me instead of building a specific form and simply leaving the marks that occurred during the initial building. I began to treat the entire surface with a rib tool which left the piece with little or no texture. This allowed me to add surface information to the specific areas that I felt would improve the work. This approach allowed me to leave my "hand" or "touch" on critical areas of the surface, which were enhanced by the contrast of the rest of the figure.

An interesting development came from this method of working, by smoothing the figure with a rib tool the figure seemed to merge and flow together. Instead of just being a figure, the work became a mass of shapes moving in and out of space. This type of abstraction seemed much like the work of Henry Moore. I do not believe that this initial process was derived from Moore's work itself, though it did lead me to investigate how Moore used positive and negative space and basic shapes to enhance his figures. (plate VIII, Moore's "Reclining Figure" and plate IX, Frendo's "Together Forever").
These three artist, Rodin, Giacometti, and Moore, have influenced me to this point. I now believe that most work has historical references if one looks hard enough. If one can learn from those who have come before, assimilating it and somehow making it your own, then there is no shame in looking back to history to see how others, dealing with somewhat similar concerns, have devised solutions to timeless dilemmas of visual expression still relevant today.

AU/88

I walked in my first day at Ohio State, right, wanna make a good impression. Right off, I meet the Ceramic Tech, Scott. Scott asked me "Is your work vessel orientated?"

"Vessel", I answer, thinking he's raggen me, "you gotta be kidd'n me?", I answer.

"Well no", he says "I do vessel work." WOOPS!!

I spend the next two weeks trying to have my foot surgically removed from my mouth, what an auspicious beginning at O.S.U.

That first quarter I stuck to my guns, doing what got me in here. After all, I didn't want to let on that I didn't think I was as good as the other grads. Looking back, if I would have spent more time looking at my work, investigating it instead of defending it, I would have grown a lot faster. They say hind sight is 20/20.

SP/89

If you can't make it good, make it big; if you can't make it big, paint it red. If is not, that should be the "first year graduate student's credo". Never let it be said that I don't live by credos.

Life-size figures, boldly painted, they were big and colorful and heavy. I had to cut 'em into sections to carry them around. They were in essence what I had done that year before graduate school, only with legs.

They were noticed. Trouble was I didn't know if they got attention because they were any good or just big.

My guess, BIG!

Rendering the figure as large and realistically as possible was my main objective when I entered Graduate school. My work was literal with everything spelled out for the viewer. I gave the viewer no room to interpret for themselves. I guess I was afraid that if the viewer was given any leeway he/she might not understand what I was trying to say. I soon realized this type of expression was limiting for the viewer as well as myself. I began to develop the work on many different levels of understanding. Realizing that we bring our own life experiences into everything we do, including viewing and
interpreting art. As the artist, I attempt to challenge every viewer regardless of their varying life experiences. By being aware of formal aspects which make the work visually stimulating and combining those with psychological and emotional aspects that are inherent in the human condition I have made the work readable on different levels. I realized that by going for that "one liner" I was selling most viewers and myself short. By challenging myself to make the work richer and have more meaning for me, the viewers benefit as well.
CONCLUSION

As an artist, I believe that balance is a very important part of the work. By this I mean taking all the components of the work and putting them together in such a way that I communicate my ideas to the viewer. The success or failure of the work will depend on my ability to balance all that I know about the physical and psychological nature of the figure with the artistic process. This includes surface, color, gesture, size, and the reason for abstraction combined with what I am trying to communicate in that particular piece. The development of this balance between the emotional content instilled in my work and my understanding of the needs of the figure itself is where growth over the past two years has occurred. I believe this is where the challenge for me now and in the future takes place. Increased understanding of the figure has given me confidence to manipulate it. That in turn allows the subtler emotional aspect that were lacking in my earlier work to come through. I've just scratched the surface ....
PLATE I, FREndo's LEGIONNAIRES DISEASE
PLATE II, FRENDÒ'S FIRST KISS
PLATE III, RODIN'S BALZAC
PLATE IV, FREndo'S STANDING FIGURE
PLATE V, GIACOMETTI'S MAN POINTING (DETAIL)
PLATE VI FRENO'S LEON
PLATE VII, FREndo'S COWERING FIGURE
PLATE VIII, MOORE'S RECLINING FIGURE
PLATE IX, FREND'S TOGETHER FOREVER