Complexity Yields to Simplicity

A Thesis

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by
Juan D. Granados, B.A.

The Ohio State University
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Master's Examination Committee: Approved by
Michael Chipperfield
Malcolm Cochran
Georg Heimdal
Robert Shay

Advisor
Department of Art
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Dedicated to

Marsha Grace,
who has given me
support and encouragement
throughout all our times spent together.
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VITA

March 18, 1962 . . . . . . . Born - Floydada, Texas

1984 . . . . . . . . . . . . A.A., Clarendon Junior College, Clarendon, Texas

1987 . . . . . . . . . . . . B.A., University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma Chickasha, Oklahoma

1989 . . . . . . . . . . . . The Ohio State University Columbus, Ohio, Graduate Teaching Associate

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Complexity Yields to Simplicity

Introduction

In order to better offer an explanation of my work, I believe it would be best to offer a few of my life experiences that seem to have shaped the way I see and perceive things. These life experiences revolved around a struggle for survival and have stimulated my thinking processes in different directions than most. I see my background as having potential to impact my work in a positive way, and I've been trying during the last few years to use my experiences that way.

My story begins in a small town in Texas called Floydada. I was born in my parents' home at 6:15 a.m. or so on March 18, 1962. A Black mid-wife was there to assist my Mom and me. I was the second of seven children to arrive in a family of migrant farm workers. Our life style consisted of traveling from county to county and state to state in search of farm work. Sometimes my parents would hear by word of mouth that in the next couple of weeks the tomatoes would be ready to be harvested in southern Florida or in a few months the citrus fruits would be ready in the north part of Florida. At times I didn't know if we were coming or going. A lot of uncertainty and financial insecurity filled our lives and kept us from establishing a solid, functional family life.
During the most migratory part of our lives, we traveled from Florida to California working the crops. On to Wyoming and back to Texas would complete the summer growing season. We mainly picked citrus, onions, potatoes, and strawberries. My worst memory of picking involves onions, where every pore of my body smelled like onions for days afterward (an experience still imprinted on my memory).

Planting was just as hard. The young plants had to be inserted into the ground by hand. While traditionally the workers used their index fingers to make holes in the hard Texas dirt, I eventually resorted to the use of a stick since my hand eventually felt as if it would fall off. We were paid by the row, and my older brother and I were lucky to complete one row by mid-day. At best we completed a row-and-a-half. Each row was about a mile long. While the adult workers stooped over, we were small enough to work on our knees. I was seven and Carlos was eight. These experiences were boring, tedious, repetitive, and mundane.

Going Places; But not a Vacation

What is a migrant? One who migrates. One who travels from place to place in search of work. This sort of life style is one through which my family lived until my last couple of years of high school. This unstable home life and related circumstances create the back-drop and energy for my work. My parents unfortunately still continue this tradition of moving around, but now it's a little more orchestrated.
As I grew older I realized that the word or term "migrant" followed us from place to place. I didn't understand what it meant or why we were called this. We were called other things; my grandfather called us Gypsies, white folks called us Mexicans, and some called us wetbacks or other such remarks. All of these names confused me since in school I was taught about what it meant to be American. I didn't understand why there was such a derogatory attitude toward Hispanics and other people of color. It seemed that if you weren't white, you just didn't fit.

Around the age of eight I started to feel that things weren't right. I found myself in and out of school too often and knew that this wasn't what everyone else did. I seldom ever saw anyone withdraw from classes where I went to school, unless it was me or one other kid or family that we might have been traveling with on our way to another seasonal job.

On many occasions before my oldest brother and I were old enough to work, we would stay in migrant housing with an older relative who was either sick or unable to work because there was a cut off in the number of workers allowed in the fields. We hated this because we weren't treated very nicely, and what made it worse was that it was in our own living space where we felt like prisoners. We weren't allowed to go outside because they didn't want the responsibility of looking after us. The heat was incredible. I would spend most of my time near the window or near the door where it was the coolest, and I would pretend that I
was outside running around. I don't remember seeing that many kids outside; I suppose they too had to stay indoors. I think back now that this was done probably for safety sake since there were a lot of strangers wandering around without work also. To frighten us so we wouldn't wander around, my parents would tell us all sort of things about people who would catch kids to sell, drown, chase, eat, and otherwise harass. Even though this seemed scary to me, I never saw a person that caused me harm. I did however see some unfortunate people whose condition and outward appearance I thought represented the people my parents had warned us about. I remember asking my parents if they were the ones; they would say, "No that's not them." I was actually hoping to discover who to look out for, but I never did. It remained a mystery to me until I knew better.

As a young boy, I looked forward to the time when I would be able to work with my parents, and in the early years it was fun for the most part. At least we were outside which was where I wanted to be, and we could play and have our lunches with my parents. Although I didn't know the word picnic then, to me it seemed like one since we got to eat outside. In fact, most of the time I spent growing up was spent in confusion and not knowing what was right or normal. I still at times feel this same sense of uncertainty or mystery as my pieces take on their sometimes enigmatic final forms.
The experiences of these years which remain most vivid to me are of times when I experienced being physically drained of the will to continue. Being at one end of a mile-long field without water was one of those times. If the owner of the fields was nearby, we couldn't take a water break but had to keep on working back to the other end. Eventually, I began to carry my own supply of water in a canteen I bought with my share of the weekly allowance. I remember the dry air cracking the inside of my nose, the dust that permeated everything, and the occasional relief when a cool breeze would come by and cool us. Our favorite saying was, "Barbas de oro--throw us a little bit of cool air." These experiences with the dry air and the parched, cracked earth are found in the surface treatment of my current clay expressions. The textures of my pieces feel rough and are colored in shades of blues and greens suggesting growth and life. These pieces represent times when we were in the fields feeling parched and dry but surrounded by the colors of life.

As the years went by, frequent moves were made around the U.S. looking for work. Despite these moves, I was able to spend most of junior high and high-school in Wellington, Texas after talking my parents into settling down and buying a very modest house for $500. Although the house might actually be called a shack, it stayed in one place and gave me a sense of stability. During the summer hoeing seasons, all members of my family would hoe in the fields 10 to 14 hours a day for six days a week.
For this effort, my family of nine would receive nearly $900 per week. This amount would pay off debts from the winter months and would keep us going through the rest of the growing season.

During these years of travelling and working, I didn’t do well in school. Some teachers tried to be sympathetic and helpful, but for the most part they could do very little since there was so much catching up to do. Although I did get in some trouble, I was still an interested student and found geography and science very interesting. At home, I developed hobbies to keep myself busy and to add order to a somewhat chaotic life pattern. One of my favorite hobbies was a fabric and string collection that I started by collecting bits of fabric from old clothes, blankets, sofas, and rag rugs. Among other hobbies were collecting rocks, bottle caps, sea shells, small chunks of rusted metals, and tropical fish. I remember spending time examining and arranging them in different order; sometimes by texture, sometimes by color, and sometimes by where they came from. Uncertainty, confusion, repetitious work, fruits and crops, rocks, fabrics and strings, and monotony were part of my life then and are today part of my art.

Examining the Work

My early work conveyed a couple of things at one time. I was satisfied with this at that point and felt that if I used more information, it would begin to be just simply “more information” not necessarily allowing the viewer to understand the piece any more fully. During that time, I believed that less was more but presently
I feel satisfied with the belief that if less is more, then more is more, too.

At first glance, my most recent work assumes a very simple shape that I have referred to as a loaf. This seemingly simple shape provides a great deal of surface for information to be placed on its outer layer. I think of the pieces as loaves because bread has always been one of my favorite food items.

Among the qualities I like in my work is one that is not literal but rather the essence of an idea. The piece "Double Loaf" has an icing-like layer on it which visually represents a sweet tasting frosting that I used to love. A contradiction exists however, as the "icing" appears to have gone bad and is starting to mold and turn green. No one got a chance to enjoy it. It's sort of a love-hate idea. I use a simple form and a lot of small bits of hints in my work to whisper to the viewer rather than to yell or to talk out loud. I enjoy the way my work talks to the viewer when the viewer gets close, because only up close can one see the rich surface I've built up. It is minimal; and it is very textural and quiet and at rest.

In the piece called "Dipped Loaf," I talk about things that are food items but which may not be appealing to eat or which the viewer would think twice about before eating (Plate I). This piece looks as though it's been dipped in frosting while it was still hot making the frosting run a bit. As a child, I was a big lover of sweets in general. In the second grade, someone put a tube of toothpaste in my back pocket and when I sat on it, the white paste
squeezed out and smeared over much of my rear. The worst part was that I only noticed it when I was in the cafeteria line and was embarrassed. But you know I had to taste the stuff to make sure it wasn't something tasty! The idea of an amorphous form that can have associations to more than one reference becomes evident in this piece. The other end of the "Dipped Loaf" takes on the form of a squid possessing a crusty surface. I chose to use a form that resembles a squid, although I am not sure I would eat a squid even if it was frosted. This interest in aquatic life stems from experiences I had during my teenage years while caring for freshwater fish in two large aquariums. This interest was a benefit of establishing a more stable and less mobile, home life; and as my life became less chaotic, the size of my aquariums grew.

Some have commented that the use of texture, surface, and color and their combinations in my work have resulted in pieces that possess various qualities of beauty including balance, form, shape, line, movement, and qualities of color intensity and vibrancy. I have been asked if I make my work for the sake of beauty or with the consideration of beauty. To be quite frank, it's not a consideration. I do however, make my work alluring and seductive and work in a more intuitive manner which allows me to use what I like, what the work reminds me of, and what I want to say and hope to communicate. The end result of my work yields "art" objects that seem devoid of human touch; while at the same time, the surface of my work is very active, particularly on pieces
where I have scratched the moist clay surface.

Earlier, I had concerns about small fragments of the surface texture falling off, and I tried to avoid knocking off the built-up layer because it was difficult to know how much of the surface would eventually adhere to the main body of the piece. But most recently, I've decided that this is a part of the work and not a defect. As I now see it, I feel that the work exists in a living environment; and if some of the textural bumps fall off, the piece is simply experiencing the effects of wear and weathering.

Ceramics to me is a very simple and humble material; after all it's only dirt! This humble material is pretty incredible stuff; everything that we eat grows from it, and in basic terms, the food chain has its first link with dirt. This material is also a very versatile medium and can be molded into any shape imaginable. While clay is soft and squishy at the bottom a creek bed, it is hard when dug out of a quarry. While I change the clay from a soft powder to a hard substance, my final work suggests softness. To further this contrast between soft and hard, I am currently using melted and hardened wax as a metaphor for preservation, freshness, and protection. Even though the wax is a soft substance, the hardened wax resembles slabs of marble.

Despite these contrasts and transformational qualities, the most versatile aspects of clay occur when you add personal life experiences, individual attitudes, and the uniquely human need to communicate.
Early Influences

My early art experiences were relatively few because the schools I attended didn’t provide art classes. However, I do recall two teachers, one in third grade and one in fifth grade, who provided us with manilla paper to draw on after completion of our regular class assignments. This was an incentive for me to do my work because I really enjoyed drawing. I also recall watching my older brother draw at home. He was very good, and I envied his abilities to shade and make things look as though they had depth. He told me the way he learned was to trace over old pictures in magazines with pencils and to observe carefully which things were dark and which things were light. It took a lot of time and practice before I could feel as though I was getting something accomplished. Nevertheless, I continued until eventually I took my first clay class in Colorado where I was in school for six weeks. I really enjoyed the qualities of clay, but I had to return to Wellington to try and finish highschool with my friends.

My first full art experience began as an art elective at Clarendon Junior College not far from Wellington. I took several other art classes also as electives and found myself falling in love with art. The instructor talked me into majoring in art suggesting that I had real talent. He was very demanding and helpful in guiding me through many art experiences. Eventually, I decided that if I was going to make a career out of art I would teach. My instructor suggested that I would be an excellent teacher because
of the way I was able to get along with people and help them with their art. During this time, most of my 2-D art work was very academic and of course my clay pieces were ordinary pots. I still enjoy the qualities of pots and creating pottery, but I found while studying at the University of Science and Arts of Oklahoma that my interests in clay began to employ more sculptural aspects. After three years at USAO, I felt that I had extended my use of the wheel in creating sculptural vessels as much as possible at that time. I didn’t find hand building an adequate means of forming my work because it was cumbersome and lacked of the immediate gratification which comes from doing work on a wheel. It wasn’t until after my undergraduate degree that I began to experiment with hand building beyond the usual class assignments.

Many approaches and attitudes that I now use with clay presented themselves to me during those undergraduate studies. I didn’t use them at the time because I wasn’t sure why or how they would be appropriate. Specifically, these approaches include airbrushing layers of clay and glazes, using low-temperature colors, relying on simplicity in form and design, and focusing on surface textures and colors. While these are simple approaches, I feel these are all the basic tools I need to create a language that I can use in my work.

The Influence of The Cup

One of the greatest influences on my career was walking into a gallery space at Corpus Christi State University and seeing
an exhibition of works by Ron Nagle. His work (cups with strange little handles) seemed incredibly small; but when I got up close to them, they appeared full of information. To me, his cups looked like a small crab claw or mountain. I was able to look at his work and see references to things other than those particular objects. The forms reminded me of mountains while the colors reminded me of the artificial color in my aquariums. The textures reminded me of dirt, my love for sweets, and all the things that were little nuances of who I am. I was able to relate to their intense color as well as their presence. I quickly started re-evaluating why I was working in clay and whether I was doing the right things with clay. At the time, my work was sculptural pots. I sat down and wrote all the things that I liked about clay and all the things I liked to create with clay that reminded me of my past in a bittersweet yet nostalgic kind of way.

I began to consider a body of work that represented the idea of a mountain and what mountains represent to me. They represent a land mass at a distance, and they have an interesting silhouette. But as you get closer and closer, the simple land mass becomes very complicated with life, trees, colors, animals, and rocks. Mountains represent a life that is compressed and upwards rather than flat and laid out. I had a romanticized idea of what living in the mountains was like. I considered scale when the idea of making them came to mind, and I thought if I was going to make mountains, it would be absurd to try and make them big; so I made
them small. This decision was a direct influence of Nagel's small works. As I thought about the concept, I began by breaking wet clay into smaller pieces, examining the qualities and texture of the clay, and thinking about a rational approach to creating the idea of a mountain. I realized an irrational one would suffice and began to construct small mountains from the irregular and broken, moist clay. I used a wire to carefully cut off the top textured layer of the broken clay and began a collection of textured pieces storing them aside until I gathered enough to construct a small mountain (Plate II). Even as carefully as the mountain was constructed, fingerprints were apparent. To remove the prints, a needle tool was used to pick away at the impressed joints until the joints were blended in to match the rest of the textured surface. This experience was the beginning of my work incorporating a refined balance of texture, color, form, intricacy, complexity, and simplicity.

Future Directions

At this point, I believe that my entire life experiences have led me to express the effects of environment and situations involving sustenance, change, growth, and contradictions. My work continues to explore simple, yet essential, needs and ideas in a tone that is serious. In the future, I plan to continue working with ideas that are directly fed by my past experiences as well as my present situations to create works that further expand and explore themes of a related nature. Finally, I'm excited and
intrigued about the future directions of my work feeling I have gained more momentum as I continue to discover myself.
Plate I: Dipped Loaf
Plate II: Rugged Mountain Form