THIS SCULPTOR'S METHOD FOR CHANNELING INSPIRATIONAL CREATIVENESS (A LETTER TO RUPERT RAVENS)

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the Graduate School of the Ohio State University
by
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*****
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The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the problems that occur when this sculptor attempts to transform his feelings and spirit into physical objects. How does the artist direct his childlike inspirational attitude and still resolve to fabricate a coherent body of work? The procedures used to discover the answers to such questions are various studio practices that enable this artist to proceed in an intuitive fashion. The results are finished sculptures which generate a sense of wholeness and truthfulness. This sculptor concludes that self-actualization can be experienced through faith and hardwork. And in this case, the art is both a reflection of those actions which are inspired by both abstract and concrete thought.
VITA

February 13, 1955 ........... Born - Plainfield, New Jersey

1979 ........................ Bachelor of Fine Arts, Columbus College of Art and Design, Columbus, Ohio

1983 - 1986 ................. Mental Health Counselor/ Creative Arts Therapy Facilitator, South Amboy Memorial Hospital, South Amboy, New Jersey

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FIELDS OF STUDY

Major Field: Sculpture

Studies in Sculpture with Don Boyd, Malcolm Cochran, Jim Hirshfield, Deborah Horrell, and Todd Slaughter

Studies in Drawing with Bill Hutson

Studies in Lighting Design for Dance with Louise Guthman

Studies in Landscape Architecture with Douglas Way

Studies in Painting with Georg Heimdal and Larry Shineman
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Columbus, Ohio

May 3, 1988

Dear Rupert,

I've been meaning to contact you since you last telephoned Cathy and me with the news of your April showing at the Tomasulo Gallery. Our invite arrived here in Columbus just one day later. But having been so self-absorbed recently, my fugitive concerns for you, dear friend, have evolved into nothing less than an embarrassment to me. So, the longer I procrastinate calling you, the more difficult it becomes for me to face the reality of my defect. Those patient nudges from Cathy though, seem to set my good intentions into action. Well, how's that for an amend?

Jesus Christ, Rupert! If we were to take all the anxiety you must be feeling from "The Bew Baby Boy" sleepless night (By the way, how are Susan and Everett Rupert?) and the upcoming exhibit at Tomasulo, then add my apprehension concerning graduation deadlines coupled with guilt for being less than an admirable friend, and stir it all up, we'd have the potential for making some "real" goddamned good art. We might create the sort of stuff that would baroquely characterize our anticipated ills.
I must tell you about Riverbed. Have you ever believed that one part of you must die in order to make way for new life? By saturating an old decaying mattress with many layers of paint, am I externalizing a need to breathe life into an otherwise forgotten person, place, or thing? Does this Riverbed 1988, a topographical collage, continue to feed something that is better off left for dead? Or is it the uneasiness within the history of this "death" bed combined with my own layer making process that sensitizes my appetite for ambiguous imagery embodying both the grotesque and the beautiful? My feeling is that Riverbed is becoming a shrine to my father who was taken out of this world by alcohol withdrawal. He convulsed and bled to death just months shy of his fiftieth Christmas birthday. And now, I realize that my work has led me back to my father's deathbed. Becoming aware of this self discovery I sobbed for an hour one afternoon in my studio for a man who had past away over twelve years ago.

Is the person also entrapped within these layers a second grade child who was beaten until he thought he'd die, for things like jumping into the swamp wearing his grade school uniform of purple and gold, leaving a "good" shoe stuck somewhere in the mud? Would it have mattered if the boy was wearing his shoddy PF flyers? Probably not; beatings were with regularity.
Oh! I almost forgot to mention that three weeks ago a horrible nightmare shook me from the soundness of sleep. I dreamt I was hemorrhaging and was trying to alert Cathy but could not because my entire left side was paralyzed. My father appeared beside the bed and said not to worry, that he would not let me die. I awoke, wept on Cathy's shoulder and went back to sleep. My psychologist believes the dream was therapeutic. And I have great faith in the therapeutic process. So much in fact, that I use my work to heal old emotional wounds.

Are the layers of paint on Riverbed depicting an old skin or scab? Does this paint enable the viewer to still appreciate the history of decay inherent in the found object while allowing for other associations unique to the artist's life activities? Do symbols of faith make significant impressions on the viewer similar to that of my own personal experiences? I've found for myself that communicating the personal without becoming narrative is a difficult problem and for the most part it has been a somewhat elusive challenge. Do the "real" fish in Riverbed add metaphoric content to a piece that would otherwise be less conceptual?

Rupert, some years ago now, when I sobered up from the same disease that killed my father I was a very angry young man. It means so much to me to have
a friend like you who understands the rage within the alcoholic and his family. The making of Riverbed has also helped me to vent that anger. From here, exhausted and emotionally raw, I turn to the stillness which meditatively awaits in an object entitled Repose 1988.

Out of a human desire for serenity in my life and an artistic need to channel my creative energies, quiet works like the subtle blue boxspring mattress called Repose emerge. Rather than denying my fear, I'm making an effort to use it as the fuel that sustains the emotional power I require to transform a tireless supply of materials. Bag 1988 and again Riverbed exemplify this preoccupation. Then, with the reductivist attitude that my mental health has come to require, I retreat into self-forgetfulness. Dreaming becomes a means of recovery from my excessive working habits. It is only now that I can prepare for remembering images and events, developing ideas, and exploring random activities like: stream of consciousness writing, intuitive three dimensional sketching processes, and non-editing salvage collection practices. All of these procedures leave my door open to discover the stuff I've come to integrate into those works which are more about inclusion.

Like my therapy sessions, artmaking for me is about penetrating a very well protected and unified containment of layers. And with peeling away those
skins comes unwanted self-actualizations, surfacing sometimes without warning. This process can be emotionally trying at times and I would not suggest it to anyone. But I will continue to take this course because it is what I do best.

About a month ago I returned to my studio after a midweek afternoon session with my therapist. In the process of preparation for artmaking which included listening to a Cat Stevens song called "How Can I Tell You", I began with more clarity than ever before to read the metaphoric significance in my recent works.

Unlike Untitled 1986 and The Flesh 1987 these new pieces are approaching a measure of self-disclosure. And as I fantasize about how my thesis show will appear, I picture each work of art claiming its own space apart from the others. As I continue my passage through the exhibit I arrive in an area occupied by a sculpture which incorporates an old decaying suitcase. (This is a piece I've been working on for a few months now.) The suitcase is filled with burgandy colored wax. Imbedded in the wax, a portable cassette player with two small speakers plays an uninterrupted sequence of "Lovesickness" music. Other materials are presently being considered for inclusion in this piece. I'll be sure to send you photos of the finished work.

I miss you a lot Rupe, John
Appendix
Plate I  Riverbed  1988
Plate II  Detail of Riverbed
Plate VII  Music Box  1988