Rhythms of Accumulation

A Thesis
Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Master of Fine Arts in the
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Much of my art exemplifies the impermanence and fragility of the physical world around me. Since it often involves materials in a state of entropy, my work tends to emphasize the traces, or residue, of their disintegrating existence. The art is frequently active, living, and in flux. As such, one perspective, one encounter, with the work may not give the viewer a cohesive understanding of the outcome. Silent, glacial events take place that over time can bring about dramatic, unforeseen changes. This fascination with how the traces of some of my sculptures mark out space has led me to explore less transient ways of activating space through my art.

Even though the materials frequently change from piece to piece, there is always a sense of working within a family of materials. My sculptures typically consist on one staple material. I have used, for example, large quantities of flour, soap, twine, honey, and steel wool. In my handling of the physical elements of the sculpture, I attempt to infuse the pieces with an obscure, mysterious presence that invites the viewer to approach and investigate them.

Labor-intensive process is also an essential ingredient in my work. Many of the sculptures evolve from the accumulation of an obsessive task. Others might view these physically demanding processes as a form of self-inflicted punishment; I find them to be a meditative form of play, for they free up my thoughts from trying to control the final product. By extending the time involved in completing a piece, a more balanced dialogue between my ideas and the work evolves. Through the labor, new and unexpected approaches and directions arise.
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CHAPTER 1

THE FIRST YEAR

When I entered the graduate program in sculpture at Ohio State, I felt like the square in Edwin Abbott Abbott’s turn-of-the-century, sci-fi novel, Flatland. The square lived in Flatland, a 2-D world of surfaces, a world without depth or height. One day, a sphere intersected his dimension. The square, however, only perceived a circle since that was the only segment of the sphere which intersected his plane. The sphere tried convincing the square that he was not actually a circle, but rather a volumetric object comprised of a series of circles, but the square, who had no sense of depth, height, volume, or space, simply could not understand. As a last resort, the sphere decided to whisk the square off to Spaceland to have him experience volume and space for himself. In entering this new, unfamiliar dimension, square was first completely disoriented, then ecstatic. His reality was permanently altered.

I came to the graduate sculpture program with a background in painting, drawing, and print making, and the art that I initially produced here reflected my difficulties in manifesting ideas in sculptural terms. In general, several of my projects suffered from my inability to take the sculpture from the planning stage of the drawing to a resolved object.
Black Cone

The road to hell is not only paved with good intentions, it is paved with a lot of tar. I discovered this after making my first sculpture here—a large cone-shaped piece coated in tar. I sought to create a seven-foot-high, six-foot in diameter hollow cone which would act as an extension for a speaker. With three-quarter-inch steel rod, I welded together a conical structure. I wrapped the exterior in mesh wire, and covered it with a thick coat of wax and black, sticky tar. A rope tied to the apex held the cone at a forty-five degree angle with the bottom end resting on the floor. In front of this, I placed a wooden chair, and in the top opening, I installed a speaker and a small cassette player. I ran the electrical wire up the rope and back down the gallery wall.

I intended the cone to act as a whispering cave. In listening to the tape, the viewer had to sit with his or her back to a large, dark hidden area to listen to the tape. In theory, my aim was to create a conflict between one's natural curiosity of trying to understand the voice, and one's uneasiness about being positioned away that voice. Conceptually, the piece did not measure up to my expectations. As it turned out, the black cone ended up as an exercise in welding.

The Funerary Boat

Since childhood, I have always associated water with death. When I was four years old, I was almost electrocuted by a faulty electrical connection in our house. While standing in a puddle of water, I turned the faucet to start a lawn sprinkler. Through the metal faucet handle I received an electrical shock so strong that I could not physically let go. Fortunately, my mother heard my voice, ran out, and pried my hand off the handle. Hours later, I still
could not extend either my arms or my legs, which were locked tightly against my body.

I began a work suggested by this experience in an attempt to make a boat reminiscent of a funerary barge, a symbolic vessel that fused water with imagery relating to death. To do so, I constructed a canvas boat filled with water that rained down on tiny mounds of salt. I chose salt because it acts as both a preservative as well as a fierce corrosive material when mixed with water; salt both protects life and destroys it. Out of steel rod, I welded together a flat, wedge-shaped frame large enough to hold my body. Around this frame, I sewed an enclosed canvas hull waterproofed with wax. I filled the interior of the boat with water, and poked small holes to allow the water to seep down. Directly beneath the boat on the ground I placed five mounds of course salt. The boat hung at my eye level in the center of the room by five ropes, each three-quarters of an inch thick: two in the back, one on each side, and one in the front. The ropes extended to the far ends of the room, dividing the entire space with their taut lines.

I intended the water from the moored, floating boat to rain down upon these miniature mountains of salt and gradually wear them down. It didn’t. My fellow graduate sculptor, Martin Cail bluntly described the piece best when he said that the boat looked like a sculpture that he could see in an art magazine, one that he would turn the page on. Like the tied-up boat itself, the concept of the project was going nowhere.

Contaminated Soil

Several weeks into making a ceramic project for the stream outside my studio, I read an article in The Lantern that the stream next to the Foundry was contaminated with low-level nuclear waste. The stream had gradually run into a small site where nuclear waste was buried in the 1960's. Because I was planning on placing a piece in the stream, I was naturally alarmed. I had to make another work on the stream that responded to its contamination.
I collected twenty soil samples from various points along a mile stretch of the reportedly contaminated stream to send to the agronomy department of Ohio State. I took my first sample from the part of the stream that flowed closest to the reactor, while my last sample was taken from the stream just before it entered a labyrinth drainage pipe that flowed into the Olentangy River. At each location where I took a sample, I left a small green flag. I placed the samples in sealed glass tubes, which in turn I set in hand made lead cylinder containers four inches high and inch in diameter. The tubes were numbered to correspond to the flags. I presented the project in three parts: the lead canisters on a shelf; maps of the stream on which I marked the location of the samples; and a slide presentation showing the locations of the flags where I took the samples.

Viewers of the work felt the lack of a correlation among the three parts. The slides and maps and lead containers needed to be incorporated together, they felt, as opposed to being displayed separately. Also, no one knew if the soil that I had collected was actually contaminated, since no actual testing had been done. In the mind of the viewer, the soil posed no ostensible threat. In hindsight, I had simply made a presentation about the contaminated stream, and not a piece of art. On their own, I realized that the objects did not convey enough information on the impending environmental issue.

Asking me to explain why these projects failed as a whole, is like asking a new arrival to a foreign country why he cannot speak the language fluently. Learning a new language, whether linguistic, visual, or spacial, requires the courage to make a lot of mistakes. Some of the failed projects were expressions of skills that I had recently required. Others were poorly conceived ideas, poorly expressed.

Fortunately, not all my projects of the first year floundered. It was through the few successful projects of that period that I was able to get an inkling for the direction in which my work would move. Four works, in particular, established the foundation for future explorations in process and materials were: an untitled work comprised of flour and soap; the piece entitled, Losing My Vision; another entitled, Tea Bag Blanket, and finally, a site-specific work entitled Blue Steam.
Soap and Flour

In the first grade, a student’s grandmother demonstrated to the class how to make homemade soap. In giving each of us a bar of soap that she had made the day before, she cautioned us that the lye in the soap had to neutralize before it was safe to touch. I could not understand why someone would create a soap that was harmful to touch. Convinced that I was bringing home a bar of poison wrapped in brown waxed paper, I threw the soap away in a nearby stream.

Part of the fascination with making works out of soap derived from this process of converting a dangerous concoction into a household product. While in Japan, I found a recipe for making soap that required simply boiling together water, lye, animal fat, and a small portion of rice. I used this recipe to make several sculptures, the most successful of which combined the soap with flour. In this sculpture, I filled the corner of my studio with a white rectangular slab of homemade soap (3" x 12" x 14") set within a larger rectangle of flour (3" x 24" x 36"). Because the two materials were positioned flush against each other and were the same height, the only way one could distinguish the two from each other was through the slight discoloration of the powdery, white flour and the moist, white soap. As time passed, the soap revealed its presence by turning a buttery yellow tone; the flour meanwhile, except for aging cracks, stayed nearly the same. The work had a mysterious, yet inviting, quality to it. In seeing these two white materials together, many viewers had a child-like compulsion to reach out and touch them.
Losing My Vision

At about the same time, I was working on a piece entitled Losing My Vision which probed deterioration on a more personal level by manifesting my fear of losing my eyesight. Out of a family of ten, I am the only one who does not need to wear glasses. The piece consisted of a pair of glasses that I made out of steel wire submerged in a hand-blown glass container filled with water. The six-inch diameter, eight-inch long container resembled a large, truncated test tube. A steel ring bracket set at my eye level held the container about a foot away from the wall. Stenciled on the wall, and immediately behind the container, I drew an eye chart comprised of eight capital letters “E” oriented in various positions. As the steel wire glasses rusted, they colored the water orange-brown, destroying any chance of a clear reading of the chart. Ironically enough, after a few weeks the murky cloud of iron oxide settled down, forming a layer of sediment at the bottom of the glass container, and clearing up the water again to complete the cycle.

The Tea Bag Blanket

Weeks later, I completed a piece which I called the Tea Bag Blanket, a six by four foot quilt made of more than two-thousand Lipton tea bags. I began by taking off the paper tags and turned my bathroom into a mini-version of the Boston Tea Party by steeping the bags in my bath tub, then drying them on trays. Once they had dried, I glued the bags end to end into long strips, and wove the strips together as one makes a pot holder from loops: weaving over and under. Packed tightly together in large numbers, the bags began to take on the weight of heavy quilt, one with a strong, hay-like scent. The filter paper became brittle, and it cracked open with the slightest touch. Wherever I placed it, the blanket left a
trail of tea leaf particles.

When drinking tea, I thought of how I was covering and warming the inside of my body. With a blanket of tea bags, I essentially reversed the process using the bags to fashion an object that, figuratively speaking, would cover and warm the outside of my body. The blanket evolved from a cover made of tea bags for a book that I had produced in Japan. Both the book and the blanket reminded me of lost objects unearthed during an archeological dig: each tea bag retained the history of its stained process.

Blue Stream

The large studio that I shared my first year at Ohio State had only one, small, cell-like window high on the wall and out of reach. The only pleasure I gained from this window was observing how it periodically framed the neon blue sky at dusk, a kind of sky that glowed, but gave off no heat. In tribute to my framed section of twilight, I wanted to create a piece that somehow captured, or reflected, that blue outdoors. I chose a section of the stream just outside of my studio as the site of this work. This part of the stream had a pathetic appeal to it: pinched between the Foundry and a massive parking lot, and with a large, gaping culvert, it seemed more like a drainage ditch, than a stream.

For eight weeks, I made over four-thousand flat, oval and round ceramic tiles by hand with which to line the stream. The tiles varied in size from as small as a potato chip to as large as a tea cup saucer. After a couple weeks of testing glazes, I selected a half dozen tones of blue, ranging from a coppery greenish-blue, to a dark indigo. Before placing the tiles in the water, I had to reshape the bed of the stream. Much of the teardrop-shaped area beyond the culvert was too deep; when I sunk the tiles in the water they disappeared in the murky silt. To ensure that they would be visible, I filled in sections of the stream with rocks collected from nearby. Like a gardener, I had to repeatedly tend the stream bed, since the run
off from thunderstorms frequently plowed through my labor. Once the weather cooperated, I proceeded to place the blue tiles around, and on top of each other, until I filled in the ten-foot by seventeen-foot area that spilled out immediately beyond the culvert. The four-foot high banks and thick overgrown vegetation, enclosed the space, making the spot an unusually tranquil retreat.

This was my first, true labor-intensive project. Producing the tiles required a crash course in ceramics. In a short period, I quickly learned to make clay, mix glazes, load and fire kilns, and bisque greenware. Ironically, it was fires reaching over a thousand degrees that produced this a serene, blue, watery piece. Ultimately, the work was a submerged painting in a stream—a Monet-meets-Andy Goldsworthy. For all the shortcomings of this enlarged bird bath, or waiting pool, weeks of hard labor had created a large, visually potent sculpture.

In hindsight, these projects succeeded over some of my other sculptures largely because they were essentially sculptural paintings or drawings: familiar territory. The flour and soap piece, with its canvas-size dimensions, and with its concern for issues of color and surface, acted as painting placed on the floor. The wall piece, called Losing My Vision, behaved as 3-D drawing in transformation. As with paintings and drawings, the work involved optical issues, more specifically, the perception of an eye chart on the wall. The woven tea bag blanket, in its assortment of rich, Rembrandt browns, and its flat paper surface, was reminiscent of old parchment maps. And, finally, the blue stream, as noted moments ago, was a painterly exercise in glazes.
Clement Greenberg told Anthony Caro that if Caro wanted to change his art, he first had to change his habits. After a first year spotted with what I saw as several mediocre, unsuccessful sculptures, I decided to make a New Year’s resolution in mid-June to end some of my bad habits. For a start, I vowed to stop packaging ineffectual sculptures in colorful drawings—a carry over from my painting days—and instead to delve directly into both the materials and the process of making my art. This change resulted in five sculptures that differ physically from one another, but together form a loose body of work predominately based on the exploration of simple materials through labor-intensive, hands-on processes.

*Black Stack*

The sculpture entitled *Black Stack* was a precarious cylindrical structure six feet high and six feet in diameter, that I made by carefully stacking 3,500 wooden blocks on top of each other. The blocks were an inch and a half high by an inch and a half wide, and varied from three to eight inches in length. I charred one end of each block black, while on the opposite end, I sanded the wood down to a knobbed shape and stained light brown.
Formally, I sought in this work to produce a structure through a series of contrasts. By aligning the square-shaped, charred ends flush to one another, I created a flat, dark, and foreboding exterior. This, in turn, formed the warm, sensuous interior of rounded off blocks which protruded and recessed because of their various differences in length. Another contrast was through the use of negative and positive space. Instead of stacking the blocks tightly together to build a solid wall, I placed them about an inch apart. This served several purposes: for one, it expanded the size of the work; it also gave the sculpture a dual nature, simultaneously making it appear as a heavy, stable wall, and a translucent, fragile screen.

With its precariously-high wall of blocks, the cylinder created an atmosphere of playful tension. The dark exterior helped reinforce this tension, since viewers often misconstrued the charred surface as a dense, stable material. After approaching the piece, however, one discovered the fragile nature of the wall. In this way, the work invited a push-pull reaction, the closer it drew the viewer in, the more self-conscious he, or she, became of knocking over the meticulously stacked wall.

In this piece, I sought to create a structure with sexual undertones, both in its structure and its division of space. The rounded off, protruding blocks inside the form eluded to phalluses. The repetition of the stacking pattern opened the work up to architectural associations as well. The visiting British artist, John Wigley, saw the piece as a chimney, while San Francisco art critic, Kenneth Baker, likened the work to an amphitheater: an audience of heads angled in toward the center.

In building a sculpture out of blocks, I wanted to try a new approach to making art. Instead of beginning with a fixed notion of a form to complete, and proceeding by producing the individual parts, I began by making the parts as a means of arriving at the finished product. I chose blocks because they could be conveniently combined and disassembled into an assortment of configurations; the art resulted in their arrangement, than in their making. The sculpture was a pivotal work for me: in constructing it, I broke out of limitations that pervaded earlier works. Unlike the flat pieces and wall-bound constructions, *Black Stack* was both a visually and spatially compelling structure.
While art has up to now generally been discussed in terms of two- and three- dimensionality, it would perhaps be more interesting to consider the dimensions that lie between...for example, the 2.1 or 2.2 dimension...

-Koichi Ebizuka

I like to think that of my piece entitled *Honey Wall*, explored the region between the 2-D and 3-D that Koichi Ebizuka describes in the passage above. Through the work, I sought to incorporate elements of my painting and drawing in a sculpture. By covering an entire gallery wall with countless trails of dripping honey, I simultaneously produced both a sculptural picture and a pictorial sculpture.

Altogether this work required over fifty pounds of honey comb, which I bought from a Northern Ohio beekeeper in pre-cut square blocks four inches to a side and one inch thick. To create a solid line of honey comb across the twenty-four foot long gallery wall, I placed seventy-two of these blocks side by side on a thin shelf of pine wood. By setting the shelf twelve feet above the ground, I emphasized the expansive surface of the wall covered in lines of sticky honey, as opposed to the horizontal line of honey comb. Within three hours of placing the honey on the shelf, hundreds of streaks of honey descended the length of wall beneath the shelf and pooled up along the cement floor.

To ensure that the honey easily flowed down the wall, I took several precautions, a few of which likely went unnoticed by the viewer. For one, I cut both the front and back of the comb with hatch marks to release the honey from its wax shell. This, subsequently, created a patterned texture since I alternately cut the blocks with vertical and horizontal lines. I also anchored the shelf a quarter inch away from the wall to allow the honey from the
backside of the comb to slide behind the shelf. By notching the back of the shelf with hundreds of thin gouges, I helped increase the flow of honey, and directed the dripping lines.

As with many of my works, the piece explored the effects of a fragile material in the state of entropy. With the most minimal use of gesture, a single strip of honey comb activated a large empty space. In earlier works, I was reliant on natural processes that I could not adequately control. In making Honey Wall, I simply choreographed the movements of the honey through the design of the shelf, and let the bees and gravity do the rest of the work.

For me, the sculpture acted as a visual Haiku--a slow, quiet event took place which required the viewer to be sensitive to the subtlest changes. In a way, it was a tragic narrative: the precious golden fluid flowed out of its safe enclosure, marked its tear-like presence down the wall, and finally pooled up on dirty, cold cement floor. Oddly enough, though, other viewers had the opposite interpretation. The visiting New York artist, Elena Sisto described the piece as reminiscent of a fairy tale. For her, the strands of honey were like golden hair, or spun gold. In general, she felt the work evoked a gluttonous, optimistic message: a spilling out of precious fluid. Still others gave the piece a more neutral reading by seeing the dripping lines of honey as a glistening curtain or veil; or a massive abstract drawing of one horizontal line giving birth to a myriad of vertical ones.

One of the greatest satisfactions for me of making the wall of honey was how quickly and effortlessly the piece came together. Unlike the labor-intensive works, I more or less had a set idea in mind before making the piece; the only deliberation came in deciding how high I wanted the shelf to be. The wall of honey was an important work not only because it fused my sculpture with my interests in drawing, but also because it open up a more spontaneous approach to making sculpture.
...like the crumbling away of two little heaps of finest sand, or dust, or ashes, of unequal size, but diminishing together as if it were in ratio, if that means anything, and leaving behind them...the blessedness of absence.

Samuel Beckett, Malone Dies

I began a series of sculptures made out of steel wool in a blatant case of material fetish. After having completed such an alluring piece with the honey, I wanted to work with a contrasting material. I was intrigued with the hair-like presence of steel wool, with how steel—the very metal that holds up skyscrapers—could take the form of a fabric.

The International Steel Wool Company kindly donated well over twelve hundred yards of steel wool for this project. It came wrapped in wagon wheel sized spools, which I rolled into a half dozen or so balls, ranging from twelve to sixteen inches in diameter. The scale, however, felt too familiar, and it attracted many unwanted associations: basketballs, medicine balls, etc. By combining the balls like massive beads of mercury, I wrapped them together until I stopped at two balls nearly three feet in diameter. When British artist, John Wigley joked that they reminded him of wooly mammoth droppings, I knew that I had safely transformed the objects into a new entity.

My treatment of the two balls read like a recipe: roll into a large, round form, soak over night in a solution of water and apple cider (to speed rusting process), pull out, dry, and let sit until cooled. Surprisingly, the balls did heat up from the oxidization of the steel, so much so, that in peeling off the plastic with which I had surrounded them, a cloud of steam continuously trailed off into the darkness. After drying the balls, they became extremely fragile. The slightest touch sent rust crumbling to the ground.
At this point, I became most interested in the decaying process of the balls. The ensuing two pieces explored different ways of using the rusted steel wool balls as marking devices. In the first installation, a friend and I filled my studio space with rings of rust created by placing the balls down, tapping along the circumference of the balls, picking them up, dropping them in a new location and repeating the process. In the second piece, I rolled one of the balls in a circuitous path down a loading dock across from the sculpture studio building. The process was the opposite of what a child does in making a snow ball, for here the piece shredded the history of its accumulation. The work was somewhat reminiscent of the Sisyphus myth, whereby Sisyphus is condemned by the gods to eternally roll a boulder up a hill only to have it roll back down again.

What attracted me most about these two pieces was the dialogue between the object itself and the traces that it left behind. This impersonal, industrial material began to take on natural associations of mossy boulders. The source of the piece stemmed, in part, from my giving birth to a stone, a kidney stone. Admittedly, I was not interested in redirecting the viewer back to a kidney stone reading of the piece. I sought a more general reading of the piece: a fabricated industrial stone returning back to its elemental nature; the inevitability of the effects of deterioration that surround us, that press upon our environment and our bodies. As with the *Honey Wall* piece, I was intrigued by how I could use these objects as marking tools, which connected the work with my background in drawing and painting.

*Cord*

With the work entitled *Cord*, I sought to create a long tube out of baler twine which I could knot into various forms. To make the tube, I began by purchasing four spools of baler’s twine--the equivalent of over three-and-a-half miles of cord. I then proceeded to cut and tie strands of the coarse, golden twine into individual rings about a foot in diameter.
Each ring had two hair-like tassels at the end of the knot, which I chose not to cut off since they built up an eerie texture on the exterior of the tube.

After knotting thousands of these rings, I threaded them tightly together with two additional strands of baler twine to create the tubular form. At first, I planned to make a gigantic knot by entwining the entire thirty-two-foot tube in on itself. While I wrestled with this massive fabric python, I realized that the weight of its singular form crushed the tube. To retain a stiff, tubular form that allowed the viewer to mentally travel through the curvaceous cavity, I had to distribute the weight of the object into three sections; one section basically acting as the prop around which the other two could entwine. The three sections formed a knot nearly six feet high and four feet wide which I suspended four feet off the ground by the two cords which joined the tubes.

This sculpture was largely a formal piece that resulted from a labor-intensive process. Through the entangled form I sought to convey a sense of a serpentine tube wrestling with itself, a tube caught up in its own support system. For others, the piece conjured up various anthropomorphic associations: an umbilical cord, the arteries of a heart, an intestine, an esophagus, all of which fit within my general intentions behind the piece. In hindsight, the knotted tube was a success, but under very strict limitations, namely, as another largely formal work that evolved out of the exploration of a single material.

Threshold

The piece entitled *Threshold* was a departure from my previous body of work. *Threshold* broke free of many of the restraints that I adhered to in previous sculptures. Other sculptures involved manipulating a single material through a labor intensive process that often included an element of impermanence. With this new project, material considerations were secondary to my interests in dividing a space, and thereby activating the viewer's
moments within it.

I sought to redefine the interior of the gallery space with my own precarious architecture by stretching a thirty-seven foot long steel cable diagonally across the gallery at a height of thirteen feet. Balanced upon this cable at opposite ends of the length of the room, I placed two laminated arches of wood. A single rope stretched over each wood arch, supported a teardrop or gourd-shaped bag at each end, suspended slightly above the floor. The bags were of sewn cloth filled with flour and coated with rubber, that from a distance resembled sheet lead. The two arches were not identical: one was natural wood, and had a grey painted cord and grey rubber bags; the other was stained ebony with a rope painted black and black rubber bags.

For me, the piece had several fundamental shortcomings: the way this sculpture defined negative space remained problematic primarily because I misled the viewer into believing that the weight of the rubber bags caused the wood to bend into an arch; actually, the wood was fixed in a lamented arch shape. On top of that, the rubber coating of the bags was an unnecessary cosmetic addition: the piece would have been more direct with just the canvas of the flour bags exposed. Even with these flaws, the two archways enabled me to explore an alternative way of conveying space in my work. The negative space formed by the two arches was as essential to the piece as the arch structures themselves. In past work, my sculpture simply occupied space, only occasionally altering, or redefining, the area surrounding it. Producing this piece made me aware for the first time of the potential of using space itself as a material.
CHAPTER 3

MATERIALS

The materials that I use, and the way in which I manipulate them, have been determined by the austerity of my aesthetics, by my tendency to hone the work down to its essential core. The majority of my sculptures have explored a single material at a time, which changes from piece to piece. In this growing vocabulary, I have gradually developed a sense of working within a family of materials.

As with the Arte Povera artists, I predominately use generic household materials, in my case, materials such as flour, honey, soap, steel wool, water, and twine. I chose these materials for several reasons. In wanting my art to reflect my daily life, I use materials that come from my household. These materials sometimes conjure up memories and associations with my past. Other times, these soft, fragile materials simply provide a basis for my process and labor intensive art.

When first encountering my sculptures, viewers are often baffled by the actual materials used: they may experience a moment of disorientation, a reversal of expectations. At a certain distance from a sculpture, this should to be expected. Even up close, several of the objects retain the mystery of their materials. The flour and soap floor piece, The Tea Bag Blanket, and the steel wool balls, all elicit doubting-Thomas pokes. In touching these fragile pieces, however, the observer unknowingly acts as an accomplice in their deterioration.
My sculptures’ origins become obscured, in part, because of the quantity of the material involved. As its quantity increases, the material becomes transformed from itself and gains a new presence; a system, or pattern, builds up and disguises the individual forms. To many viewers, the woven tea bags first appeared to be an animal hide, or sewn leaves. They had to struggle with what they were seeing, and dissect the work into small parts to understand it. Other times, the obscurity stems from my handling of the material. In many of my sculptures, the boundaries between the natural and the manufactured dissolve and become ambiguous. Manufactured materials begin to resonate an organic existence: industrial steel balls take on the feeling of mossy boulders; store-bought tea bags look like rumpled leaves.

In breaking with my background in painting, I essentially rejected the idea of surface as a region separate from the object as a whole. To me, surface is simply the outer boundary, or plane, of the object. By completely covering over an object with paint, for instance, the material below reverts to a structural prop for the surface. The viewer loses vital information about the history and characteristics of the object below: its texture, structure, density. My materials have inherent expressive qualities that I wish to preserve and accentuate. I let the materials speak for themselves, instead of disguising them in some way. When I do alter the appearance of a material, the alteration penetrates the entire object destroying any separation between the object’s interior and exterior. Because the steel is evenly rusted throughout the ball, making a distinction between the surface of the object and its core becomes irrelevant.

By staying within the earth tones that my materials naturally take on, I move within the parameters that the material sets for itself. I enhance each material in a way that is particular to the material itself: charring wood, staining tea bags, dirtying twine, and rusting steel wool. In this way, I try to maintain the vulnerable physical state of these sculptures.
CHAPTER 4

PROCESS

Most of my sculptures in the past two years incorporate two divergent kinds of process art: performative process, and labor-intensive process. The pieces that emphasize the performative process of the object are comprised of fragile, ephemeral materials which subtly change forms, or deteriorate, over time. Because the art is in a state of metamorphosis, one’s focus moves away from the object itself, and instead to the transformation that the object undergoes. In the other sculptures, the history of the process by which the pieces were made is central. Here, process art describes work that results from a labor-intensive activity, work that exudes the history of its making. In grappling with the objects, the viewer must factor in the process, the time and labor, involved in its creation.

The Performative Process

The soap and flour piece, Losing My Vision, Honey Wall, and the variations on the steel wool balls, have all included materials that enact silent performances of deterioration. In the floor composition of soap and flour, the process involved the distinction between the white soap and flour that became visible through their aging. In Losing My Vision, the rusting steel wire glasses acted out a performance symbolizing the deterioration of one’s eyesight. In Honey Wall, on the other hand, the performative process involved the
choreographed movement of honey slowly dripping down the gallery wall from square combs of honey resting upon a shelf. The persistent crumbling away of the hair-like spheres marked the process of disintegration of the steel wool sculptures.

In these performative pieces, time was a crucial element to the art. Because the work was active, it defied the observer’s attempt to take a mental snap shot of the art, to encapsulate the art in one experience. By entering in the middle of a process, the viewer could not grasp the art in its entirety; an event was taking place that was beyond one’s immediate, direct experience. Other reasons, as well, compelled me to make these transitory sculptures. In their state of entropy, the sculptures became active, living entities. They acted as a metaphor for the life process itself, for the natural cycle of transformation from birth to death. In this respect, as a new form emerged, a prior one was lost.

The Making Process

The other type of process art involved the time and labor spent in creating the sculpture. The works entitled The Tea Blanket, Black Stack, and Cord, all grew out of a long, involved, and at times, painfully repetitive processes. In wondering what compelled me to carry out these self-inflicted projects, I am reminded of influences from my childhood in Vermont, as well as my two-year stay in Japan. More recently, however, the use of process seemed to have resurfaced out of my need to shape and resolve my art through the labor of its making.

In response to the energy crisis in the early 1970's, my parents changed from heating the house with oil, to heating the house with wood. With the change came the arrival of a new family member: an intrusive, bulky cast iron stove. The stove served an assortment of functions besides heating the house. With it, we dried our sweaters and jeans, warmed up pans of water, and even had an occasional cookout. To feed this new family member, a
dump truck arrived each fall and spilled out a jumbled pyramid of split wood at the end of the driveway. After school, my brothers and I reluctantly picked away at that rubble, reassembling it just a few yard away into neatly stacked rectangular rows. Without knowing it, I was creating my first sculptures. The basic component of my future process-oriented sculptures may have been latently forming in those stacks of wood, one which involved reconfiguring a large quantity of raw material through a repetitive action.

Almost ten years later, this labor-intensive approach emerged in my art work while living in Japan. I had been flirting with Zen Buddhism for a while: reading books on Zen that paradoxically told me not to read books on Zen. The idea of gaining insight, or self-awareness, through one’s daily routine, through such seemingly pointless tasks as buying Zen books, or counting breaths, still appealed to me. I finally decided to take the plunge into the cold, four-in-the-morning air and begin meditation at the local temple. Gradually, I did come to a realization, namely, that the practice of counting breaths didn’t suit me: I was seeking something more productive and tangible. Coming home one morning after meditation, I decided to cut up my black velvet meditation pillow along with all my black clothes. Instead of counting breaths, I began to count stitches while sewing the material back together into a large, flat ring. After completing a seam, I stenciled the number of stitches in chalk along the line. The piece ended up looking like a road map labeled with distances. From this impulsive exercise, I understood how I could fuse together my desire to make art with my desire to meditate, how the two might coexist and inform each other.

During my first year in graduate school, I was frustrated by my inability to realize several of my sculptures. They could live on paper, but once I tried to construct them, they came out stillborn. Instead, I turned to producing multiples as a way to reverse the point of entry into the work: from the conceptual to the physical and material. By using more intimate, hands-on methods of construction, such as, stacking, wrapping and weaving, the process remained manageable. With multiples, I could meditatively cut and stack blocks, sew stitches, or tie knots, which in turn focused my attention on the process itself, and freed me up from fixating on a precise finished product. A more balanced conversation occurred between the material and the process of its making. Essentially, it provided a method by
which I could think with my body, mull over my decisions, and explore unforeseen directions that developed. From out of the work, the sculpture came into being.
CHAPTER 5

INFLUENCES

Mark Twain once said that it is one's environment that makes climate. If this is true, then my artistic climate must have four seasons, because four prominent influences from my environment have greatly shaped my art: growing up in Vermont; repeatedly moving and traveling; living two years in Japan; and finally, coming from a background in painting and drawing.

The earliest influence on my art has been my growing up in Vermont. Nestled in the Green Mountains, I was surrounded by woods, streams, grassy fields, crumbling stone fences, and old, paint-stripped barns. Many of the materials that I use for my sculptures--the baler twine, homemade soap, honey comb, and charred wood--for example, reflect my life in Norwich, Vermont. This connection to nature gets reinforced all the more by my treatment of the materials that I use and the way in which I rework them until they take on a natural sensibility.

Another major influence on my work has been my nomadic life. In the last seven years alone, I have lived in seven U.S. cities: South Bend, IN; Middletown, CT; Los Angeles, CA; San Francisco, CA; Portland, OR; Washington, DC; and Columbus, OH. I stress U.S. cities, because during this same period, I also spent two and a half years overseas: living in Japan for two years, and then traveling literally around the world through South East Asia, Egypt, and Europe for the remainder. Constantly moving from place to place has forced me to travel lightly, to repeatedly purge myself of unnecessary, cumbersome objects. This is perhaps reflected in my use of ephemeral materials. That my art deteriorates, in part, ensures that I maintain my sense of mobility. Of course, I have occasionally produced relatively large, heavy sculptures. In such cases, however, I am compelled to divide the work up into
multiple components to preserve a manageable size and weight. As essential characteristic to the piece entitled *Black Stack*, for instance, was that the hundreds of pounds of wood broke down into 3,500 light, hand-sized blocks.

In these nomadic wanderings, my time spent in Japan as a teacher of English has had a great effect on my art. It was there that my art shifted from making prints and posters to constructing sculptures. By originating in Japan, my sculpture has taken on many characteristics that people often associate with a Japanese aesthetic: the use of natural materials, the attention to pattern and process, the simplicity of form and detail. The Japanese have a unique sensibility that even they admit is difficult to put into words. Flower arrangement, haiku poetry, rock gardens, Butoh dance, have all evolved out of the Zen Buddhist belief in the creative powers of simplicity. The influence is visible in many of the sculptures that I have produced in the last two years at Ohio State. Both the tea blanket, which was comprised of woven Lipton tea bags, and the slabs of soap derived from works begun in Japan. The idea for the sculpture entitled *Black Stack*, as well, came from a game that I played with my Japanese students while teaching them conversational English. In this game, students took turn stacking blocks on top of each other until the tower they gradually built up toppled over.

The fourth significant influence on my sculpture has been my background in the 2-D arts. I began my artistic training in what I refer to as Flatland, the world of painting, drawing, and print making. In Flatland, art is typically surface oriented, wall bound, and sculpture, in the words of Barnett Newman, "is what you bump into when you back up to see a painting." This background has significantly affected the formal aspects of my sculpture. Until recently, many of my sculptures have been flat objects, from the blanket of woven tea bags to the wall of dripping honey. In the wall of honey and in the steel wool balls, the connection to drawings was readily apparent, with the drips of honey behaving like a mural, and the rings of rust resembling drawing in chalk on a sidewalk. Often one can recognize sculptors with a background in painting because of their compulsive use of color. It is the opposite, for me: the lack of color in my art results from my rejecting a painting sensibility.
CHAPTER 6

THE THESIS SHOW

Like the weather, my movements are only predictable a few days in advance. In the second grade, my friend Ford Roszicki had a birthday party. He asked everyone to bring a pet for a pet contest. Because I had a reputation for having a pet rabbit, his parents must have expected me to bring one to the party, for they had already prepared a ribbon to give me that read: The best rabbit of the show. For reasons unknown to me now, I chose to bring a goldfish instead. And so, when the award were handed out, my goldfish easily took first place in the best rabbit category. The story illustrates how even as a child my fickle ways caught others by surprise. I abruptly change my mind even at the last moment. This drives my friend, Ann Millet crazy. Every time we go to a diner for dessert, I repeatedly mention how much I want to order pecan pie, and then at the last moment when the waitress arrives, I blurt out an order of blueberry pie a la mode.

My thesis project is no exception to my fickle ways. Plans laid out in late March gave way to a dramatically different arrangement in mid-June; different, at least, in appearance. Conceptually, my work continued to revolve around the idea of creating a sculptural landscape comprised of work that exemplified my interests in material and process. The steel wool piece remained part of the show, only instead of playing a supporting role, it became the principal work. Otherwise, a new work entered the show, a piece comprised of columns of twine. I chose this piece largely because it helped reinforce the allusion to a natural environment set up by the steel wool forms.
At the entrance to the installation, I placed seven twine columns, with which I sought to create a nocturnal, woodsy landscape, one reminiscent of images that I had from childhood fairy tales; a place to meander in--foreboding, and yet, protective. To do this, I cut and compressed the baler twine tube that I had made for the piece entitled, Cord, into two eight-foot tubes, and then proceeded to make five more tubes. I made the tubes in a variety of widths and heights: their diameters ranged from five to thirty inches, while their heights ranged from seven to nine feet. I painted the exterior the tubes with black latex paint, which turned the fabric hard and prickly when dried. For some of the tubes, I watered down the paint to leave the twine soft, moist, and limp. Instead of dying the fabric, I brushed on the paint since this created a contrast between the natural-toned interior and the black exterior. The tubes became dark and musty. All of the columns had holes, or mouths, or orifices, exempt two which I created the holes by fusing tubes together. Some of these additional tubes acted as appendages, or branches, by passing through the trunk section and cascading down to the floor. Other columns had smaller throat-like tubes contained entirely within the larger body. The two exceptions had the bottom part of the tube lifted up slightly like a gigantic snout to expose the natural twine interior.

To create a sense of a charred wooded area, I hung them from the ceiling at arms length away from each other. Alotgether the black columns created a sense of being on the edge of a wooded area. Beyond them and filling two-thirds of the gallery were the steel wool forms. With this work, I wanted to create a rock-like landscape of amorphous forms. To do this, I went to a scrap yard and purchased over three hundred pounds of razor-sharp steel shavings. The drill press shavings were thin and rusted, and shaped like rotini, or corkscrew, spaghetti. I bunched the material up into a couple dozen or so amorphous forms, and bandaged the objects up with layer after layer of steel wool, until the shavings were concealed within a hairy outer skin. For the other half of the forms, I simply wrapped wads of steel wool together. I bound up a small herd of these forms, some as small as footballs, others as large as panda bears. Two distinct types of forms emerged: light ones comprised solely of steel wool, and heavy ones that were a mixture of steel shavings and steel wool. With the solid steel wool, I tore away at the material ripping the forms open, peeling them
like massive, hairy, steel flowers. To rust the steel wool, I placed all of the objects outside. Mother Nature cooperated with a couple weeks of wonderfully nasty wet weather. To assist the process, I applied vinegar to the form's internal regions, which rusted the steel wool a dark, bruised, purplish brown.

For the installation, I began by placing the steel wool forms at the edge of the gallery, against the walls. One by one I rolled the forms across the open space in the middle of the room. The form of each object had an effect on the trajectory of its path. The conical-shaped forms, when rolled, left a circular path of rust. Other more complex forms left a wobbling trail. Instead of covering the entire floor with a rug of rust, I intended to leave the floor exposed in some places, to preserve the traces of some of the paths. The work was a combination between a landscape and a drawing. In a way, it looked like a section of the American Southwest gone awol: decaying orangish-brown boulders of various sizes and shapes strewn around the dust-covered room. In another way, I saw the piece as I large floor drawing, a renaissance conte drawing on the floor that viewers collaborated on by marking with their foot prints. Two people had even used the chalky rust to write graffiti with.

The gallery in the Hoyt Sherman Studio Art Center is a peculiar space with walls that seem to breath in and out depending on what art is inside it. In installing the columns and the steel wool boulders, I had no idea how small the space would become. In hindsight, I think the installation would have benefitted from a interior space that had more nooks and crannies, long hallways, and a variety of rooms. I had created so many steel wool forms that the space had become cramped. After realizing this while I rolled the forms, I began to stack them in places likeocks for a stone wall. Even so, I was pleased with the outcome, with how easily my sculpture had absorbed and altered the space into a brooding landscape.
CONCLUSION

I was amused to discover that one of the earliest definitions of the word thesis comes from an ancient Greek word that described the repetitious movement of the body in keeping a musical tempo. The element of time, and simple, repetitious actions carried out by the body, have informed my art throughout my graduate studies at Ohio State. Unlike many sculpture students who come here after four years of art school, I came to Ohio State without any formal training in sculpture whatsoever. This was both a blessing and a curse. It inclined me to want to absorb new techniques and skills, such as mold-making, welding, ceramics. Each new skill, however, came with the distractions of making accessible an entirely new body of work to explore. Being true to my nature, after acquiring these skills, I chose to spend my entire second year assembling work the old-fashioned way, using my hands with little technical assistance. I needed to absorb these skills so that I could confidently return to my process-oriented work.

My first year at Ohio State was one of reckless exploration. During my second year, I focused myself and attained my goal of building up a body of work that reflects the influences and history that have helped shape me. Throughout this body of work, I repeatedly incorporated process and an attention to materials to create my sculpture. The art that I have produced here provides me with a solid foundation on which to build.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Figure 1: Contaminated Soil
Figure 2: Losing My Vision
Figure 3: *The Tea Bag Blanket*
Figure 4: Blue Stream
Figure 5: Black Stack
Figure 6: Cord
Figure 7: Untitled installation from the thesis show
Figure 8: Untitled installation from the thesis show