

Necessary Imbalance:
Ceramic Sculpture as Human Social Analogue

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the
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Necessary Imbalance:

Ceramic Sculpture as Human Social Analogue

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NECESSARY IMBALANCE:
CERAMIC SCULPTURE AS HUMAN SOCIAL ANALOGUE

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this visual investigation is the relationship between the individual and the larger group. I often struggle to understand myself, my curiosities and motivations and how they relate to the greater society. I am a multicultural-multiethnic man, living within the greater context of American society. Being a visually distinct member of the American social landscape is infused with difficulties regarding race, bias, and negativity that are often based on perceived differences. My struggle to understand my relationship to the larger community has resulted in an attempt to depict the core of inter-human relationships by using ceramic sculpture as form of analogue for these social relationships. Creating objects from clay, wood, and steel has provided a sense of security that helps me recognize my concerns regarding difference by crystallizing them in the physical realness of objects which provides a distinct perspective that engages social bias.

Identity, whether it is personal, social, or cultural is constructed from a *mélange* of fragments that edifies the value of accumulated experience. The work produced in response to this understanding is accretive and amalgam. More often than not these visual experiments in self understanding are executed in clay. Repeated ceramic forms provide analogues for human individuals or groups. The visual undercurrent of this work is borrowed from minimalist portraiture, still life representation, as well as fragments of experience and memory.

By creating these objects, I am able to approximate the skeletal structure of social experiences that represent my understanding of self within the greater society. The constituent parts of these works are of a type or kind but not identical to one another, which is indicative of the handmade ceramic vessel as well as the racial / ethnic landscape of the American population.

The crafted visual environment of this investigation provides the viewer an opportunity to consider subjective and personal truths regarding similarity, difference, grouping, identification, authenticity, and race.

My own genealogy and sense of self is a touchstone, that when coupled with the innocence of curiosity, is responsible for the existence of these objects documented in fired clay. This method of creative documentation strips away the flesh of social conventions leaving only a skin covered skeletal rendering of society that uses ceramic shape and form as surrogate for the human individual.

This work serves as a primer to the disentanglement of identity from the dizzying complexity of the greater social landscape that can include the notion of difference as an unwavering negative. Identity is among our greatest treasures and as such must be protected from abrasion, attack, and neglect. In order to achieve this goal, we must understand ourselves as well as our perception of, and relationship to, others. I accept that this work advances my own personal agenda of understanding, and as such, have tried to avoid blatant negativity and judgment caveats that lean toward social propaganda rather than the documentation of curiosity.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of the self and its relationship to the larger group is the primary and essential content of my work. My self-concept is intertwined with a genealogy that is fundamentally "Black" and rooted in the American culture of Black identity. The contemporary African American experience is a rich and complex issue that many cultural anthropologists and sociologists have endeavored to explain and elucidate. However, as an artist, my goal, my burden, and my charge throughout this visual investigation is to develop a collection of objects that establish a visual metaphor to illumine indelible markers of individuality within the larger group or population. By creating sample populations in the form of ceramic sculpture and creative artifact I hope to express the idea that even though some of these objects may appear to be different from one another these apparent differences are an important component to the composition of the larger whole that must be cherished and protected, rather than excluded and devalued.

American culture is an inescapable *mélange* of fragments and traditions derived of variegated origins. It is necessarily built from collections of individuals from varying cultures, experiences, and understanding. Our culture is derived of groups and divisions that are nascent to the construction of our society. Stories of American ancestry include tales of struggle and triumph that have contributed to the economic, agricultural, and cultural foundation of our "modern" American society and it is within this context that I find myself and my work in clay. This process of making began as a rendering of self and society but I feel that it has developed into something else. I fear that the story of the

American minority in contemporary society is too complicated and troubled by the entanglements of negativity, guilt, and ignorance. It is imperative to make an attempt to improve the understanding and subsequent perspective regarding bias. By this, and no other means, can each individual catch a glimpse of ourselves and improve the culture in which we live.



Figure 1 *Henry Venzant and Rhonda (Herman) Venzant*

My genealogy flows from both European and African family lines. Ancestors on both sides of my family became bound to agrarian culture and lifestyles upon setting foot in this country by force and by choice. I have stood in cotton fields and dairy barns and know a connection to both as my family is historically and experientially, bound to American agriculture. My mother is the daughter of White-German dairy farmers who settled in Wisconsin. My Father's lineage is derived of slavery and sharecropping

common to many of the Black families of Mississippi. My understanding of this cultural foundation makes issues of race a real and contemporary component of my self-identity.

When I was young, my maternal grandfather, who was White, taught me how to clean, sterilize, and milk dairy cows, as well as which signs of stress to be wary of in a delivering Holstein cow. On the other side of the family, a Black uncle showed me how to prevent the sharp, desiccated husks of the cotton plant from lodging beneath the fingernails. With practiced hands these family members took my own hands into theirs to help guide me through some realities that are peculiar to the American experience, whether it be lighting earth thawing fires to bury a still-born calf in a harsh Wisconsin February, or protecting the soft white quick of your fingers by pinching thumb over fingernail in a Mississippi August.

The significance of my work is not measured in butterfat content or cotton bushel density. I choose to grow and cultivate works in clay. I was fascinated by my grandfathers work on the dairy farm and entertained by my uncle's stories of his upbringing and the jobs he and my father would take on to have a little change in their pockets. However, I am not a farmer nor am I a day field laborer... I am an artist. As such, I am charged with finding a way to share something of myself with the world that has some relevance.

I often find myself in social situations where I am the only visible minority and regarded as an outsider. As the son of a White woman and a Black man I am often somewhere at the fringes of a group by being somewhere in the middle of it. This affords both perspective and at times personal hardship. Immigrant origin is commonplace in the American social landscape and blended cultural heritage is an increasingly common occurrence in contemporary American. However, racial minorities are still viewed as

strangers in some communities and as a result I am interested in the social formation and persistence of groups. Many of the objects that I craft place unlike groups or individuals in close proximity to one another, becoming neighbors and strangers simultaneously. They are reminiscent of the work of sociologists whose investigations help me to better understand myself.

Strangers within our midst are indeed the strangest of all--not because they are so alien, but because they are so close to us. As so many legends of 'wildmen,' wandering Jews, and feral children remind us, strangers must be like us but different. They cannot be completely exotic, for, were they so, we could not recognize them. (Napier, 1992. p.147)

One evening in the second grade I was overcome with the burden of “being strange”, I called out from my bed to my parents in the adjoining room. I had been up most of the night, crying, frustrated, confused, and unable to clear my mind of what it meant to be “different”. I was unable to adequately explain to the other second graders that my family and I were not “from Africa” and that my White mother did not adopt me.

Our class had just been officially introduced to the globe and some of the children took turns pointing out where on the map their families came from. I remember some of the kids asking the teacher how to find Poland and France. I knew that Africa was a continent, not a specific country so when it was my turn, I shared that my mother’s family came from Germany and asked the teacher to point to it. I did not know that because I was the only Black student in the class that I would be expected to say Africa and subsequently explain the history of the Middle Passage and the other trapping of slavery.

The embarrassment and frustration I felt from being singled out haunted me. That night I called out to my parents from my bed “I am sick of being treated like a Nigger”, and their response helped to solidify my cultural identity.

What I learned from my father that night involved a belt, a book, and stories of his own experiences. My father's lesson exposed me to the idea that there is no escape from whom you believe yourself to be and that being a Black man in America comes with its own burdens and responsibilities that do not need to be further complicated by self doubt or guilt about being Black. I could not choose how others would see me but I could change how I saw myself. It was not a kind lesson, nor an easy one for my father to teach, nor I to receive. It left, however, no doubt about how people would identify me and what, if anything, I could do about it. It is that lesson coupled with Napier's thinking about strangers that come together to provide thrust to my current visual investigation regarding the various interactions between an individual and the group. Reinforcing the importance of difference as a vehicle for social and cultural understanding is too often an overlooked perspective. Now, however, unlike that day in second grade, I choose to enter the dialogue regarding origin, identity, and authenticity by investigating my own curiosities regarding groups, borders, identity, and difference.

Identity is more than a common human attribute. It is an essential component of human life that is too precious to neglect or tread upon. Protecting, investigating, and understanding identity at the individual level is a practice that I feel is necessary to begin the work of excising the negative stigmas that can be attached to difference in the larger group of community. It is the stigma alone that must be diminished and removed from our psyche, not the distinguishable physical traits and characteristics that brace our individuality.

Difference is a thing to be observed, acknowledged, appreciated, and venerated. I feel that our society has not yet evolved to a point that difference and physical distinctions are seen as objective components of society that are free of negativity and

neglect. I believe that in order to come together as a cohesive and supportive society that we must come to accept that our individual differences have the capacity to drive us apart or bind us together, depending on perspective. Accepting this reality will allow us to acknowledge our fears and proclivities, which in turn creates better relationships and healthier individuals.

The objects and images I create are not historical works underscoring the mistreatment of peoples in a time past. Instead, they are reflections of contemporary experience...distilled and abstracted incarnations of the balance between self and society in the present. I make this work to understand my thoughts and feelings about myself and my relationship to the greater society and to protect myself against psychic abrasion and attack caused by careless treatment of identity and difference in society.

I make this work from a desire to reach out and share my thinking, observations, and experiences regarding identity. My own multi-ethnic, multi-cultural composition is a direct reflection of the changing face of our society, but too seldom do stories and perspectives like mine find an audience. Any single explanation of what it feels like to be a Black American is skewed and incomplete just as any investigation with a sample of one is inconclusive. However, these stories, thoughts, and feelings must be told, shared, and experienced but are often spoken in a whisper, so quiet and meek that only very few can hear, or proclaimed in shouts that have no room left for the subtlety and nuance of conversation. Through my work I am trying to demonstrate the importance of a middle road in the conversation regarding race, identity, and bias. As a society we are too comfortable advancing the false belief that we are defined by our work, our belongings, or heritage when these attributes are components of self and are in no way complete representations. My intention is to present a collection of crafted objects that express my

understanding of “otherness” by exploring the organization of my own genealogy, and experience, documented in the language of clay.

Clay and the ceramic process have provided an important voice to my questions of self and group. I feel that by sharing these works with others that we (I, the maker, and they, the viewer) can move away from the shouts and whispers of the past and begin to speak with each other in managed and moderate tone that accepts difference as a part of our shared American Identity.

I have chosen to use ceramic objects and vessels rather than figurative representations of people to allow the viewer an opportunity to occupy the works for themselves with their own beliefs, thoughts, and convictions intact. By leaving out readily identifiable figures I create portraits and recreations of relationships that are indicative of human relationships without developing a social narrative that interferes with or co-opt the viewer’s experience of the work.

CHAPTER ONE: AMALGUM SCULPTURE

I choose to craft piles because their amalgamated nature reminds me of the larger community and the beauty I see in it. My studio practice is an exercise in comparison, observation, and meditation that allows me to record my observations and thoughts about society and my place in it. A single shape when crafted over and over again begins to sprout new and variegated complexities in ways that have the capacity to resemble aspects of human relationships.

These piles and mass grouping are created, piece by piece, at the potter's wheel or work bench. As the population of ceramic objects increases during each cumulative making session, my mental focus drifts away from the concerns of physical construction and tangles instead with thoughts about people, culture, bias.

The "mental drift", that occurs while I work is an important element of my crafting process. These sculptures are created in clay through repetitious process, not to improve technical skill but rather sharpen my own understanding of my internal workings and thoughts. As I work, subtle details of size and shape start to become unavoidable markers and indicators of individuality. Slight changes in form and line develop into characteristics akin to variations within the human population that allow us to identify distinct individuals within the larger group.

Because this manner of working creates physical objects as evidence of this experience I am able to observe these differences and similarities after completing the making process. Placing these objects in close proximity to one another begins the process of creating a sample population to be studied and considered. This practice of amalgam sculpture seems intrinsically related to bucking hay bales in my grandfather's

fields in my adolescence. Large swaths of golden rod, columbine, and clover sporadically take root throughout various areas of alfalfa fields creating a subtle patchwork of color and texture. Being familiar with the field prior to a cutting allows you to recognize where in the fields any particular bale may have come from. Discrete clues regarding the origin and composition of each bale can be discerned in the observation of pink or yellow flecks but requires a great amount of familiarity to discern.

Categorizing information into groups or types when the number of elements to be compared greatly exceeds a pair or a handful allows us a psychological shortcut to expediently navigate our surroundings. Unfortunately, when the process of categorization is not carefully parsed and attended the search for distinction is quickly overwhelmed. The result is that individuals or sub-groups are quickly overlooked and undervalued so that the gamut of information in a given population becomes simplified at the expense of the richness of that information.

The organization of these crafted ceramic groups and piles are dependent upon the shape and character of the individuals that occupy the work. Through the repetition of form, patterns and textures begin to emerge from the whole; the inherent value of the individual once again becomes important. Prolonged and objective observation of these piles and masses reveals that it is the character of the individuals in each population that brings richness to the group.

Personal Reflections

Within the work *Personal Reflections* (Figure 3) a single repeated shape occupies much of the physical space of the composition. The shape is a small plate known in the Japanese Karatsu tradition as “*tochin*”, which is little more than a small plate for pickles. For students of historic Karatsu, the *tochin* is the first rudimentary form to be encountered and mastered at the potter’s wheel. The small disks are produced individually in a process that is repeated hundreds, if not thousands of times as a prerequisite to other pottery forms. The process of creating each small disc is regimented and controlled, emphasizing repeated gesture and process. My first encounter with this shape and process was my first true introduction to meditation.

The act of creating this small shallow shape becomes a meditative task that liberates the maker’s mental faculties by rooting the mind of the maker in the present moment. Introspection and self-discovery then become byproducts that result from the practice of existing in the “here and now”. Making *tochin*, in number, prepares and stimulates the mind for what is innate, powerful, and beautiful in the life of the maker. Once the process of making these small dishes becomes rote, the mind is able to fill with images and reminders of deep personal importance. The underlying concerns of the maker begin to surface and percolate from within. In my case, making *tochin* presses me into considering who I am, what is important to me, and how I came to be an object maker. I look at my hands, and at the clay, which forces me to consider the many things that my ancestors must have done with their own hands and what I am to do with mine.

I am a Black American who has come to know some aspects of the Karatsu tradition as a touchstone; a metaphorical port of call in my own making practice.

Statistically I am an abnormality. I am the Grandson of German dairy farmers, and freed Blacks of Mississippi. My cultural roots are variegated and tangled. Agricultural opportunity and enslavement are a part of my family history. When making tochin, the clay moves through my hands, it helps me feel connected to my family, my history, and my world. The ceramic process allows me to participate in a relationship with a material from the earth that I feel deeply connected to.

Personal Reflections is an amalgam sculpture that derives meaning from the qualities of togetherness that are represented by the pile. A pile is big, being made of many parts. The physical contact between each piece creates a distinct location within the group that supports and defines the composition of the whole. The pile occupies a space with overt and identifiable margins. The pedestal becomes something of a frame that is rather like the slide of a microscope, allowing the careful study of its contents. The inherent construction of the pile obscures the view of the pieces in its interior. The fact that some pieces are sheltered from view does not mean that they are unimportant to the structure of the whole. The arrangement appears random or scattered which belies the fact that pattern and relationship is a pillar of the work. The bowls shift and settle under their own weight creating physical relationships that are based in convenience and necessity.

Gravity and the natural arrangement of the work organize the voids and shallows into a system of closeness that I see as akin to human interaction and society. Seen as a portrait or still life of American society *Personal Reflections* could be interpreted as a statement of unity and acceptance. Conversely, the piece could be seen as a portrait of a population too crowded and encumbered to be adequately observed.

The small size of each dish indicates a use that would be private or personal if the

objects were employed in the service of food. As a symbol the small dishes are not immediately recognized by the viewer as a representation of people or society. Their form implies a use that is familiar to the domestic space of food and home rather than the arena of portraiture, social commentary, or documentation. By using white and brown slips in the pile of dishes, I aim to provide the viewer an opportunity to see the pile as something more than just a stack of plates.

I have intentionally limited the number of immediately recognizable figurative elements within the greater exhibition, because I do not believe that it is necessary to so strongly direct the mind of the viewer into an unambiguous conversation regarding identity, race, and society. By including this color variation I am attempting to encourage the viewer to look more closely as color has the capacity to influence and communicate.

One of the established practices of narrative photography is to compose or discover a physical environment that has been occupied by a person or people that is rich with evidence of a human presence but to allow no actual person to exist within the composition of the image. In this way the photographer can use an image of a cluttered desk or the ring within a bath tub to transcend the narrative of a single individual or small group. This allows the psychic draw of the image to insert themselves, someone they know, or someone they think about and thus inhabit the work. By not including the individual, the artist is creating a composition about people rather than a narrative that is beholden to only one person. It creates a space for the viewer to exist in the work and gives that viewer a reason to engage the image and make it personal to them.

The idea of the “empty” composition is a constant consideration within my work but one that must be tempered with something of the maker to be effective. I have chosen to infuse this composition with my own eyes because the grand aesthetic of my

ceramic process carries within it, heavy notes of geologic process and ceramic craft tradition. It is important to me that the viewer see and recognize these qualities of the work but my concern is that without some overt connection to humanity the symbolic link I am trying to establish between ceramic object and human individual will be lost. The image of my eyes supports this link by creating a composition that is under constant and unflagging observation.

Idiom

Idiom (figure 5) is yet another abstraction of a system of social construction. Each individual component of idiom is unique in form and surface. This portrait is a manner of documentation that is based in mass and weight. Once again the individual elements of this composition lend their unique characteristics to the character of the pile. The accretion of individuals creates a singular mass that cannot be fully understood except by dissection, comparison, or analogy. Unlike the previous work *Personal Reflections*, *Idiom* is an attempt to represent a look out into the world rather than into myself.

At first glance this pile seems to relate more directly to geology and anthropology than sociology or portraiture. We recognize the portrayed (pile) object as a new and previously unknown thing that seems to be a pile or nest of geologic artifacts. *Idiom* is not a answer, it is an expression or experiment. As such, it is based not in the hard and fast conventions of sociology, but in the plastic and fluid ether of memory, feeling, and concern.

The individual units of *Idiom* are dark, near-black, and rich earthen-red browns. These crude bowls are artifacts of a quizzical process and I was immediately taken by these guttural forms. The shape, color, and heft caused me to think more about what these objects were until I recognized them as a counterpoint to *Personal Reflections*.

Before I encountered these raw and primal shapes, my search for authenticity and identity was bound by the craft and tradition of the potter's wheel. I recognized that I was not using all of the methods and techniques available to me but I was unsure about what directions to take until I literally discovered these forms. The bowls of *Idiom*

contribute a mass and presence that I could not discount or ignore. The individual units of the composition are visually distinct from any other group of pieces within the exhibition and yet gravity and friction work on them just the same to establish mass, volume, and a distinct presence. I began to recognize something familiar and then I realized that it was a type of synthetic culture.

Many of the other works rely on slip and paint surfaces to change their appearance. These liquid coverings coat the entire surface of the other works, allowing them to appear as something other, something different than what they are. Applying slip by pouring the velvet liquid over a pile of geologic bowls forced me to consider the possibility that what I had been thinking of as skin was really an attribute of culture or society. Watching the slip break and flow over each of the bowls, seeing it fail to coat and cover the whole of the surfaces struck a deep chord in me and reminded me of the fallibility of labels. By pouring slip onto the mounds of formed and fired clay I was unable to coat and blot out the totality of surface. The pores of the discovered brown bowls readily accepted the slip where it trickled and dripped but it did not cover and conceal the qualities that had drawn me to these objects in the first place.

Previous to this exercise I saw the application of slips and paints as a veneer of skin which was able to increase or change the value of each individual ceramic object. For the most part what I thought of as “refinement” was really a value judgment. *Idiom* challenged my thinking and feeling regarding perceived differences.

Italian majolica is a clear historic example of attempting to increase the value of an object with a veneer. Majolica works were originally created in an attempt to mimic Asian porcelains which carried great monetary value at the time. Majolica attempted to adorn red and brown earthenware clays with a thick white material in an attempt to

mimic or duplicate the high-fire porcelains imported from the East and blot out the pedestrian qualities of the earthenware clay.

Mental labels of most types are a form of cognitive short-hand that helps us organize our lives and can simplify the navigation of our social environment.

A map, for example, is not the region or geographic location it depicts, rather a map is a symbol of the depicted geography and in so far as the structure of the map is similar to and generated from the structure of the physical or political geography, the map is useful. (Alfred Korbytsky, 1951, p. 750).

The usefulness of representational sculpture also hinges on the development of symbol as analogue for the subject. These works do not chart political boundaries and topography. They become waypoints or cairns that depict a journey into self and society.

One and the Same

Most American children grow up knowing a specific game of tag as duck-duck-goose. Where I grew up in the Twin Cities Metro area of Minnesota the game is known as duck-duck-grey duck. Regardless of regional names it is a game of tag in which children sit in a circle. A single participant, the person that is “it”, sequentially identifies the other players as same or different by naming them either “duck” meaning the same, or “grey duck” meaning other. Once the grey duck is identified and singled out, the players race around the circle of seated children to claim the freshly vacated seat of the child they have identified as different (thereby ousting the grey duck from the group). This is in no way an exhaustive description of the subtleties of this classic game and yet this children’s game is far from innocent. Duck, Duck, Grey Duck has become an apt metaphor and constant reality in our daily life. The goal of the game is to engage children in a mildly physical game of tag that engages the participants in a repeated assignment of identity. The game works because the role of the other or grey duck is constantly changing. Outside of the game, identities can be assigned that are not changed by a tap on the head.

Personally, I am often the racial other and as a result I am seldom free to simply sit and observe the antics of the group from a seated perspective. Instead I am always running, either chasing or being chased by the identity of different. Duck, Duck, Grey-Duck has become habitual practice; I play the game of assigned identity whether I am prompted to or not. It is this compulsion that led to the development of *One and The Same* (figure 4).

One and the Same is a primer on the dynamics of labeling, identification, and isolation that are components of our everyday lives and experiences. *One and the Same*

provides the viewer an opportunity to scrutinize their own internalized mental labels such as same, different, belonging or not. This form of automatic mental categorization helps us to simplify and organize much of our visual world, but can impart an unfortunate convenience cost that limits our ability to perceive the richness that is provided by the strangers in our midst.

The visual dynamics of *One and the Same* are akin to the game of Duck, Duck, Grey Duck. A single brown bowl demands the attention of the viewer once it has been recognized in the group. Though there is only one, the one brown object becomes a curious addition to the composition, something odd, or out of place. The rest of the bowls of *One and The Same* are white in color. A close study of the composition would reveal that the brown bowl has as much, if not more, in common with some of its neighbors than some of the other bowls have with one another. The spiraling rings of the bowls' exteriors, variations in the sweep of the cavity, the thickening developments of the rims all provide categorical information, and yet we see the brown bowl as different because it is most obvious but not necessarily the most different.

The bowls of this composition are relatively large, about a foot in diameter. The composition of the work is arithmetic and simple, which is in direct contrast to the complexity of the experience the work represents. By economizing the visual landscape, the work confronts the viewer with the inclusion of an object that seems not to belong. The simplicity allows the viewer to devote more processing power to other tasks, such as considering why the brown object seems out of place, or not.

Jennifer Richeson, an associate professor of Social Psychology at Northwestern University, studies the topic of groups, grouping, and prejudice.

Racially biased people expend valuable brain power when they suppress racist thoughts in order to avoid making a racial gaffe when dealing with black people....the diversion of brain power to suppress racism can have a residual and enervating effect on brain power for some time after the contact with a black person has ended. (Richeson, 2004, p. 50)

By making this work I am transported to a place of thoughts and concerns that I do not feel I would be able to inhabit without the familiar touch of clay. The neutrality of Clay allows me the opportunity to address Richesons' observations regarding the impact of bias without incorporating the social residue that clouds the importance of her claim. Clay is able to record and conserve much more than the touch of the hand. Force, feeling, empathy, and restraint are as much a part of each of these objects as the sweep of line or the play of shadow.

CHAPTER TWO: GOURD FORMS

The ceramic process has a long and storied place in human life and has played an important role in the development of our numerous cultures and societies. Ceramic vessels provided durable storage and transportation containers as well as individual serving containers. Roof and sewer tile changed our relationship to the environments in which human populations congregated and the production of brick allowed the metamorphosis of clay mud into a hard-wearing-stone-module that has had a profound impact on architecture. Though clay has filled many distinct roles within our social development the nomenclature of the ceramic vessel is permeated with references to the human figure.

Lip, neck, shoulder, belly, and foot are common terms in the discussion of ceramic vessels and the link between ceramic form and human figure does not stop with this convergent evolution of terminology. The act of making ceramic objects imparts them with distinct clues that transcend the material and process characteristics of the production to become metaphysical links, if not representations of the people and places in which the object is made. Care, concern, and generosity are only a few of the observable qualities that can be imparted by the maker. These subtle characteristics compound into a kind of metaphysical signature that are in accord with the individual that created it. This link between an object and its maker is more than a forensic phenomenon to be analyzed and quantified. It is the reason that art (in all its forms) is as diverse, rich, and engaging as it is. The transcendent ramifications of the creative process are implicit to the crafted object and as such have the capacity to serve as a spiritually imbued object as well as building block, storage container, bathroom sink, or coffee cup. The act of

making is an opportunity to directly express care and concern or a lack thereof.

The amalgam sculptures are largely constructed from bowl forms that are founded in my familiarity with traditional ceramic craft. They are vessels of serving and sharing conscripted to represent my investigation of the relationship between individual objects as human analogue. I started to look for a shape that I could make in clay that I felt had the capacity to serve more specifically as a human analogue. A shape that promised not to spill, that showed evidence of being pushed out by whatever special thing it held inside, and that did not hint at the domestic service of food.

Nature is filled with shapes of this type and they are more often than not employed to protect genetic information or new life. Gourds, eggs, and seeds have been shaped by time and circumstance into protective vessels that ferry the essence of their progenitors into the next generation. I settled on a form derived from a small decorative gourd. The shape moves away from the realm of pottery by being devoid of lip or foot but maintains a swollen body and tapering neck that preserves its “vessel-ness” while simultaneously allowing the forms to stack together into self supporting mounds.

I employ this shape in a studio practice that allows me to note and track the subtle distinctions between individual gourd shapes as they leave the potters wheel and begin to accumulate into larger populations. The method of making gourd forms takes on the familiar meditative qualities of the amalgam sculpture but this parallel practice brings with it a new dynamic that seems intuitively important but that I could not at first fully understand. When I could not find the words to describe why I felt driven to this re-investigation of individual/group dynamics by using gourd forms I found the words in Napier’s writing. “the dynamics of the creative act itself are entirely dependent on the successful superimposition of two unlike things that merge to create some novel

outcome.” (Napier 1992 p. 147) I was repeating the process of making with the intention to link the bowls and gourds to one another, restating the importance of a careful consideration of the crafted pile and the similarities and differences that are present in a population of any size. By establishing a new form in my studio practice and using it in a related but non-identical manner, I was establishing a broader framework for the symbolic use of the crafted objects as human social analogue. The use of the gourd form elevates the running dialogue of the exhibition by providing a second perspective in the symbolic representation of groups and that creates a space in which bowl, gourd, and human become interchangeable.

Multiple Perspectives

Multiple Perspectives (figure 6) is crafted from ceramic objects that may remind the viewer of dried gourds, the shells of a bird's egg, or the shape of a light bulb. The egg, gourd, and light bulb are all vessels that guard potent and mysterious phenomenon such as life, spirit, and light. *Multiple Perspectives* is a triptych composition depicting populations of slightly varying shape and size with readily apparent brown and white constituents.

One representative pile in the triptych is white in color, another, mostly white, and the last is equivocally composed of white and brown gourd shapes. To my own eye the blended composition is of greatest interest and most able to hold my gaze for an extended period. This personal observation may have something to do with an innate desire to be comforted or immersed in the familiar qualities of integration and yet I am reminded of family portraits, snapshots from photo albums, and the blended crowd of my family events. Biologically programmed responses to the presence of "otherness" in our social arena elicit powerful reflexes to scan and evaluate our surroundings and the people near us. However, this work calls into question what "otherness" *is*; a persistent intellectual conundrum that is not explained away by a double take.

Because this work is composed of three populations of varying constitution that are placed next to one another the structure of the triptych suggests a compare and contrast approach that requires the viewer to interpret the individual populations as well as the three groups as a related whole. The dynamic of the compare and contrast approach evokes the mental projections of labels onto the gourd forms to categorize and identify the individual components which helps to develop a sense of their nature. The

human mind is constantly searching for patterns and relationships in an attempt to make sense of the world. By presenting the viewer with a limited spectrum of color, the work takes advantage of the natural process of identification and the need to orient information in the context of what is known and understood.

The eye and the mind are drawn to items and objects that seem not to belong or are strikingly different in appearance to the greater visual field. The work raises the issue of recognizing difference through the juxtaposition of the differentially populated groups. The triptych demonstrates the importance of analogy in that the viewer is not asked to judge or value any particular aspect of these ceramic piles but simply identify and consider them. In our social lives the presence of “strangers” or “otherness” is often linked to anxiety or a sense of insecurity which is rightly placed when these feelings are developed from our need to identify potential threats or process new information but wrongly placed in situations where safety and familiarity are ensured.

Because the numbers of individuals within each population is relatively few in number, seeing the organization and structure of the work is a relatively unobstructed activity, however, identifying the meaning of these three sample populations is a slightly more complicated issue. Self-concept and identity are not fully self-derived, how other people identify you and your awareness of this ascribed identity informs the direction of one’s internal, personal compass. The ceramic elements of *Multiple Perspectives* are crafted with iron-bearing clays from my ancestral German homestead in Wisconsin. The use of fertile, brown clay is not evident in the finished visual product of *Multiple Perspectives* but none the less this fact is woven into the identity of these objects. The clay slip and paint I have used to color the surfaces of these gourd forms directly influences their appearance and the third level of distinction comes from the

interpretation and superimposition of labels on behalf of the viewer and it is at this level that bias has the opportunity to permeate the dialogue.

Sample Population

A sample population is a sub-group or cross-section that has been removed in some way from the whole. The examination of a group within a group allows a more detailed study of the individuals that maintains some of the interpersonal dynamics and relationships that are present in the larger population. This is the sociological grounds for the study of sample populations. The practice of selective exclusion/inclusion is employed as a way to better see and understand aspects of the larger group that are difficult to observe and experience in the larger whole. Artistic composition is directly linked to this practice in that an artist is tasked with demonstrating, illustrating, and clarifying concerns and understandings that are taken from a larger context. Some concerns such as love, political struggle, or, in my case, the origins of bias are complex concepts that are variegated enough to be difficult, if not impossible to elucidate without refocusing on a particular aspect of the issue. By limiting, eliminating, or emphasizing the seeming chaos inherent to a concept it becomes possible to identify a perceptible order and structure that is often direct and elegant.

A sample population becomes a metaphor, an attempt to understand something so large that it is difficult to fully hold in the mind. It is a way of looking at something small and tangible that can be understood, in order to make observations and discoveries that can be applied to the larger issue.

The work *Sample Population* (Figure 7) places ceramic gourd forms onto individual wall-mounted platforms. The platforms are just large enough to support a single gourd form and though the spacing between platforms is great enough to limit physical contact between gourds there are a few instances in which gourds touch and

interact. The arrangement of the platforms is an organic accretion that begins at what will become the densest area of the composition and then radiates outward. Each platform is placed in proximity to one another with special regard given to the gestalt of the composition. There is no single dominant visual element within this work that draws attention to itself so rhythm, pattern, and proximity establish the visual center and focal point of the work. Each gourd form is visually distinct and no attempt has been made to copy or recreate a particular type or kind. White, brown, mottled, mixed, glossy, matte, wrinkled, and smooth, each gourd rests on its own pedestal. The work is a collection of individuals that exist in relationship with one another.

The common goal of creative call and response is to first identify a meaningful experience, and then, find an interesting way of sharing the essence of that experience with others. John Steinbeck, an American writer found a way of relating observations regarding place and person in a direct and poetic manner. I feel that the work *Sample Population* is an example of creative dissection and observation that is mimetic of Steinbeck's approach.

In his work, *Cannery Row*, Steinbeck first sets the location for his observations.

*Cannery Row
in Monterey*

In California is a poem, stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, nostalgia, a dream. Cannery Row is the gathered and scattered, tin and iron and rust and splintered wood, chipped pavement and weedy lots and junk heaps, sardine canneries of corrugated iron, honkey tonks, restaurants and whorehouses, and little crowded groceries, and laboratories, and flophouses. (Steinbeck, 1945 p. 1)

The power of description in Steinbeck's writing far outstrips anything I am able to compose in written description or defense of my own ceramic works but his observations and directness kindles a desire to know more about the kind of people and type of things

that happen in the place he has described. It is a way of sharing the heart of a place and its people through unexpected analogy, a practice I employ in my own work. Steinbeck goes on to tell about the people of cannery row.

Its inhabitants are, as the man once said, "whores, pimps, gamblers, and sons of bitches," by which he meant everybody. Had the man looked through another peephole he might have said, "Saints and angels and martyrs and holy men," and he would have meant the same thing. (Steinbeck 1945 p. 1)

It is this poetic clarity of description that I hope becomes evident in my own work, and though I am not a writer, I hope that the poetic visual qualities of my crafted objects drives the viewer to realize a previously unrecognized longing (within themselves)...a small void to be made less deep through a careful study of themselves and those around them.

Through his words, Steinbeck establishes a hierarchy, moral divide, or categorical system that is inclusive of everyone but acknowledges that the differences between identifiable groups are a matter of perspective. The sons of bitches, and martyrs, as well as the holy men and pimps have a place within the larger group that keeps their identifiable characteristics intact. Steinbeck does not directly state that the whores and saints are one in the same; he simply suggests that these types of people are a part of the place, and like the smell of fish, or the presence of rusting heaps, these make the place what it is.

My difficulty in describing this work is related to the fact that within the field of ceramics and sculpture success is not calculated by the clarity of words on a page but rather, the ability of an image or object to connect with the viewer, draw them in, and allow them to interact with the content of the work. By talking about *Cannery Row*, I am

also talking about my own work in *Sample Population*, and hope to illuminate the connection between ceramic object and human individual that links my work to the greater social landscape to which we all belong.

Necessary Imbalance

The work *Necessary Imbalance* (Figure 2) is an attempt to represent the relationship between self and group that I feel is seldom considered. Human relationships are dynamic by nature and pit the needs and aspirations of the individual against goals and requirements of the group. A sustainable relationship requires the capacity to shift the balance of the individual/group complex to favor one side or the other depending on circumstance. The individual/group relationship must pivot and reorient in accord with changing situations and pressure or it is subject to falter. I believe that this adaptive quality of the individual/group relationship is intuitively understood in contemporary society but I am concerned that a sense or feeling regarding this necessarily shifting balance is not enough for us to fully appreciate the importance and fragility of this relationship. By interpreting this relationship in sculptural form I am able to represent this individual/group dynamic in a paused condition that advances our awareness of this phenomenon. Representing this delicate “me/we” relationship in physical form takes an easily overlooked concept from our social and subconscious life and places it in the context of our physical surroundings where it becomes an attention-grabbing object that celebrates the beauty and of human interaction by emphasizing its fragility.

The visual quality of the work borders on the dainty, the composition consists of two ceramic elements that rest on either end of a flexible steel rod. One of the constituent ceramic elements is a mottled brown gourd form that is representative of the individual; the other ceramic form represents the group by way of a modified gourd form in white that is composed of clustered spheres. The central support of the work lifts the focus of

the piece from the ground and allows the force of gravity to manipulate the line of the composition. The weight of the ceramic forms pulls down on both sides of the composition and yet the balancing point is not centrally located along the sagging horizontal support creating a see-saw representation of the one and the many. The resulting asymmetry connects the two halves of the composition in system that is necessarily imbalanced.

Necessary Imbalance is prone to jostle and sway. Currents of air or the occasional touch from a viewer shows that the fulcrum does not divide the composition into two halves; instead it binds the elements into a physical relationship that can be adjusted and manipulated, to a point. Just as the balance of this physical work has limits, so does the balance between an individual and the group. If moved too far out of balance in either direction the composition will fall to the ground. If the parts and pieces loose contact with one another in such a way as to damage the integrity of the relationship, the entire system becomes compromised. This delicate and vulnerable balance exposes the entire composition to potential harm but it is this balance that is the engine of change and growth.

The relationship between an individual and the group is a dynamic relationship that is at the core of society, culture, and humanity. We need to be individuals and yet we also have a need to be a part of groups. Within a range, the hierarchy between the individual and group can shift, allowing both to change their relationship to one another. The relationship is elegant and dynamic but not indestructible. This dynamic relationship between individuals and groups allows them the opportunity share or withhold resources from one another in order to grow and change which in turn encourages reciprocal development.

The composition is organized in such a way as to place the individual gourd form and the cluster form as far apart as possible. Like *Multiple Perspectives (Figure 6)* there is a compare and contrast element that requires the viewer to consider the two gourd forms and the relationship between them but unlike this previous work the composition of *Necessary Imbalance* is a scale or balance that reflects the weight and leverage of its parts. Tools like a balance are often employed to establish value or weight based on comparison to a known mass which allows for an objective measure and a subjective ascription of value. This composition however, emphasizes the relationship itself and as the fulcrum is adjustable the work does not judge either side as more valuable or important than the other. This is not representation of a static, unilinear relationship in which only one side is able to be lifted to a higher vantage than the other. The composition demonstrates the import and fragility of a relationship that we all participate in but seldom consider.

CHAPTER THREE:

KARA WALKER: A DIFFERENT APPROACH

Multiculturalism and the dynamics of race are difficult subjects that have the potential to exclude and isolate the viewer. Race is far from a taboo subject in our country but is a topic so filled with opinions and confused feelings that meaningful conversation is constantly difficult. It is important to me that the work I create regarding race reflects my point of view, observations, and experiences while lacking the palpable militancy and fire that often accompanies this dialogue. I evaluate each object I create as a lever attached to internalized guilt or some other racially activated emotion that can cheapen the experience of seeing and prevent meaningful exchanges. Then I try not to pull it. This sensitivity to interpersonal exclusion is central to who I am. It is a part of the reason that the work I create exists as minimalist expressions rather than readily identifiable and racially charged symbols and images. It is important to me that the viewers of my work come to understand that race and issues of color are important parts of my visual investigation but not what makes me tick.

Topics boiling with anger and feelings of entitlement are not motivating factors in the development of my visual vocabulary, but curiosity is. By paring down the visual field of my work and borrowing from the economy of minimalism I strive to remove much of the unnecessary and restrictive political and emotional baggage that often obfuscates discussions of identity and multiculturalism. The work I create is intended to be viewed as contemplative representations of groups, individuals, and relationships.

Powerful and moving artists such as Kara Walker make a different decision regarding intended viewer interactions. Walker creates her work directly from the

American visual mythos of race. Her work is ripe with aggression; it launches the viewer into a subjective narrative of racism, class, and gender. Work that is constructed from the cultural capital of race can become a type of monument that is trapped in the context of history; dependent on the propagation of pacification and impotence. As a result Walker's work exploits the cycle of victimization and demands direct confrontation.

Walker's images are constructed of high contrast white/black representational figures in the manner of silhouette portraiture and are powerful communicators of angst, tension, and injustice. The work strives to be "intentionally provocative", eye catching, and ominous but it is created from the abstraction of post memory; a mental projection of a time past rather than the time present. If, as the writer James Joyce once said, "History is a nightmare from which we are trying to awaken." Walker's intent is to cast us into a dream that allows the darkness and atrocities of the past to tear into the light of the present.

Where Walker strives to start a fire, I hope to shine a light. What is different within our parallel investigations is that my approach is able to address some of the subtlety of identity (ethnic and other) without so directly treading on the self-concept and identity of contemporary society. I do this by accepting that all of us, regardless of where we come from, know what it feels like to be the Grey Duck.

Walker is interested in provocation and illuminating the continuation of Black social stigma. The work is dramatic and it revitalizes the practice of silhouette portraiture by combining representative human figures and the context of American slavery. The work is created without the desire to soften the impact of the subject matter. Instead, Walker strives to create the provocative image. With this clarity of purpose, Walker capitalizes on the emotional and psychological reaction of the viewer to both American

slavery and her use of it in the crafted image.

The imagery and subject matter of Walker's work is polarizing and manipulative. The physical scale of the figurative image forces the viewer to adopt the role of impotent observer. Numerous scenes and situations [within Walker's work] are presented in such a way that the viewer's resistance to abide the often psychologically negative realities of the presented image becomes a dominant element in the appreciation of the work. The viewer is forced to object to the inhumanity and dehumanization of the illustrated subject. The identifiable features of the subjects, including implications of light and dark skin, are exaggerated to the point that the subjects become caricatures of people rather than true-to-life renderings of individuals. The result is an animated exaggeration of a concrete socio-historical period. The only psychological position Walker chooses not to challenge through her use of constructed imagery is that of the viewer who is willing to rail against the presented image in an attempt to rectify injustice.

Walker's intent is to exaggerate and emphasize the suspension of humanity that formed the central components of slavery. By doing so, Walker alludes to the persistence of inequality in the present. The images carry with them the ability to exclude and perhaps even shame particular segments of the contemporary public.

The use of the rabbit figure in *Camptown Lady* (figure removed due to copyright restrictions) represents the threat of rampant child birth and not death or physical harm as could well be concluded by the presence of a shot gun wielding figure. The work is a statement about the subjugation of a black woman to a dominant White-male-figure. The riding crop and the carrot suspended on either side of the lady is the proverbial carrot and stick used to simultaneously prod and reward, ensuring the perpetual propagation of the rider's will. Walker's intent is transparent and leaves no doubt regarding her own beliefs

and feelings regarding the American social landscape as having room and need for improvement.

CONCLUSION

In some ways the simplicity of my work is intended as a trap that is set with the intent to ensnare unsuspecting viewers in a dialogue with the work regarding groups and individuals. While it is possible to view any one composition as a collection of objects that has little to do with the social component of accepting difference the compound effect of all the sculptures working together provides the opportunity to become immersed in the work of finding value in diversity.

[A]ll people can learn to center in another experience, validate it, and judge it by its own standards without need of comparison or need to adopt that framework as their own. Thus, one has only to constantly appropriately, 'pivot the center.' There is space for everyone. Valuing difference requires us to interact with one another, understanding another's traditions, values, race, gender, culture, class, shared ideas, and the like. While we recognize our shared ideas, we must appropriately acknowledge and learn from our differences. (Yancy, 2004. p.256)

Appropriately acknowledging and learning from our difference is an exceedingly difficult task, but one that I think is possible. Though clay has the capacity to be an incredible mimic in that it can be used to render numerous shapes, surfaces, images, forms, and colors, I am not nearly so malleable. My recourse has been to use and develop methods of working that I am passionate about in order to develop my own ceramic language, hoping to find something that is more than just meaningful.

I happen to think that seeing these objects packed close together is incredibly beautiful. I am asking the viewer to pay attention and to move beyond what they see in front of them. These piles of rocks, bowls and dishes are just that, but I am asking the viewer to consider them as symbols of something that is worth caring about and trying to protect. I am the type of person who can walk right through an impressive flower garden

only to find myself staring at the moss, algae, and critters swimming in a nearby gardening pail. It is not that I don't find flowers pretty, they just don't grab me and make me want to see and know more. In the various compositions I am able to find patterns and unexpected relationships that involve more than just my eyes. I think it is exciting to dissect these works by letting the words from the conscious mind fall away to the point that I am able to relate to the group of objects as though I am a part of it.

Repetition of form is an important part of my studio practice and by employing it I am not trying to find an efficient method to make a lot of the same thing. I am searching for something that is new, in a practice that is familiar. Surprise and discovery is what keeps me coming back to make more and more of an object.

By paying attention to the details of these piled and arranged objects it becomes clear that each of the parts of the whole occupies a unique place within the population. Recognizing the relationships between the members of groups and piles allows a bridge to be formed between these *things* as ceramic objects and these *objects* as symbol for human relationships.

The process of making multiple objects in succession provides an opportunity for the subtle characteristics of the individuals to add richness to the character of the group. The process of stacking and balancing these group compositions allows me a chance to encounter unique and necessary relationships between individual components as well as the relationship of an individual to the whole group. I believe that if this mode of seeing is translated from the space of the exhibition to the greater society we will have come a long way in achieving the necessary perspective required to mitigate bias.

As a racially mixed person I have developed an understanding of bias that I feel is valuable and worth sharing with the greater community. My experience of not belonging

has made me hyper-aware of the delicate balance between the individual and the group. I have tried to incorporate this awareness into an understandable collection of objects that enters into the conversation of bias without blame or judgment. Issues of race are hard to confront directly because they are so deeply rooted in our country that they are difficult to get to without a great deal of force. While I respect the efforts of artists like Kara Walker to bravely tangle with this issue, I believe that there is a difference between propagating something because of the torment it has caused and questioning it in an attempt to find resolution. I believe, strongly, that we can do more with the strangers in our midst than just get along. I think that the solution is less about treating others as we ourselves would like to be treated and more about treating others with enough respect and understanding to treat them in the way that *they* would like to be treated.

A healthy society requires strong relationships and robust individuals that are appreciated for who they are rather than what we would like them to be. The capacity to make this change in the balance of our relationship with one another is present within our society. But shifting this balance requires us to fully appreciate who we are, where we come from, and the value of things we do not understand. These ceramic works are an attempt to better understand my own perspective of the relationships between individuals and groups. These objects are intended to demonstrate that we color the people and situations we see and encounter each day with the baggage and labels that we carry with us. I hope that spending time with these pieces and thinking about them provides all of us a chance to experience some of the subtle and absurd qualities that bring us together as distinct and important parts of a larger whole.

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VITA

Domonique Anare Venzant was born in Menominee, Wisconsin and grew up in West Saint Paul, Minnesota. He attended Henry Sibley High school in Mendota Heights, Minnesota. Before his graduation from high school in 1998 Domonique would be named the all metro special teams most valuable player in football, Captain of the swimming and diving team, and earn the marching bands highest honor, the Warrior Award. Venzant went on to Augustana College in Sioux Falls, South Dakota to pursue biology. He quickly became employed as the assistant to the science equipment repair technician and earned an emergency medicine technicians certificate while still a freshman. He went on to finish his baccalaureate program in 2002 with a biological science degree and having taken one ceramics class as a liberal arts requirement.

In 2003 Domonique was diagnosed with Spina Bifida Occulta, a congenital deformity affecting the spine. The unexpected diagnosis encouraged him to reconsider his life goals, aspirations, and physical capacity. He continued to explore the ceramic medium through intensive apprenticeship with Richard Bresnahan and later Simon Levin through which the idea of teaching ceramics became solidified as a practical opportunity. Venzant attended the University of Missouri-Columbia in pursuit of a Masters of Fine Arts degree. His successful completion of the MFA in Ceramics (Dec 2010) marks the first time in the history of the University of Missouri that this Degree has been awarded to an African American. Domonique hopes to continue to share clay and the ceramic process with students and will begin a national search in order to do so.

2. NECESSARY IMBALANCE



96" X 5" X 70"

Clay, Steel, Conduit, House Paint, Ink, Wood Sphere

3. PERSONAL REFLECTIONS



36" X 36" 20" (Variable)
Clay, White and Brown Slip

4. ONE AND THE SAME



Each Piece 12" X 12" X 5"
Clay, White and Brown Slip

5. IDIOM



60" X 60" 38"
Clay, Slip

6. MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES



Three Groupings 9" X 9" X 6" (Variable)
Clay, slip, House paint, Medium Density Fiber Board

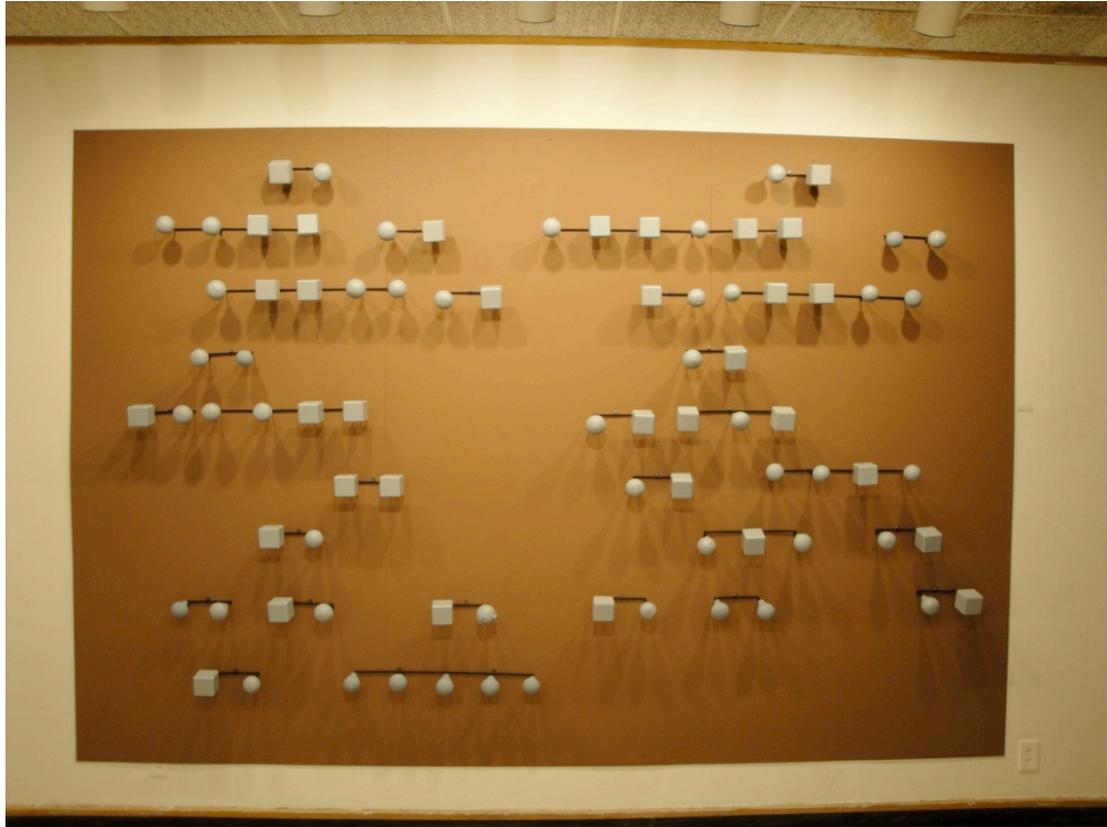
7. SAMPLE POPULATION



48" X 192" X 5" (Variable)

Clay, slip, House Paint, Medium Density Fiber Board, Wood Screw, Hard Board

8. FAMILY CODE



96" x 144" x 7" (Variable)

Clay, Steel, Medium Density Fiber Board, House Paint, Threaded Rod, Well Nut, House Paint, Hard Board

9. FAMILY PORTRAIT



36" X 24" X 68" (Variable)
Clay, House Paint

10. DUCK-DUCK-GOOSE



36" X 42" X 5" (Variable)
Wood-Fired Clay

11. UNTITLED (Amalgam Sculpture)



12" X 9" X 14"
Wood-fired Clay

12. UNTITLED



10" X 10" X 16"
Wood-Fired Clay

13. FOUNDATION



Each Plate 24" X 24" X 7"
Clay, Slip, Brown House Paint

14. KARYOTYPE



48" X 48" X 5/8"
Wood Panel, House Paint