

FORMS OF REPOSE

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Master of Fine Arts

by

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The Undersigned, Appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School,
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FORMS OF REPOSE

Presented by Natalie Elizabeth Hellmann, a Candidate for the Degree of MFA
Hereby Certify that in Their Opinion it is Worthy of Acceptance

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DEDICATION

To my mother who opened my eyes and heart to see and my father who brought me to those early trails. I love you both beyond measure.

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It is with an appreciative and humble heart that I extend thanks to all whom have guided and illuminated the path to this work. Your kindness, generosity and support has nurtured my steps throughout and cannot be shared in words alone.

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FORMS OF REPOSE

Natalie Hellmann

R. Bede Clarke, Thesis Supervisor

ABSTRACT

This creative research explores the interconnectivity between objects and experiences in nature as an impetus for encouraging a reciprocal and sensitive understanding of ourselves in relation to the world. Drawing inspiration from harmonious moments of felt experience, my work comments on the potential for mundane objects and materials to express relationships of fragility and beauty. Through arrangements within composed and self-contained environments, I seek to craft delicate forms, lines and shapes of intimate scale and minimal palette. The works in this investigation seek to build bonds between the role of permanence and a specific language of marks and forms that instill a tranquil state of balance and being. The use of porcelain and non-ceramic materials such as paper, silk, steel and graphite is presented through installations, sculptures and drawings.

These works seek to open and affirm connections between viewers and their surroundings by emphasizing careful and meditative interactions. Cultivating small truths and relationships between objects and materials, I present to viewers, a sense of beauty that is fragile and easily hidden from sight. It is through these quiet truths and intimate relationships that I strive to elicit stillness and a state of mindful repose.

When the doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw 'the tree with the lights in it.' It was for this tree I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with the lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the mourning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with the lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I'm still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colors died, the cells unflamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with the lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam. (Dillard, 1974, 35-36)

A nest-house is never young. Indeed, speaking as a pedant, we might say that it is the natural habitat of the function of inhabiting. For not only do we come back to it, but we dream of coming back to it, the way a bird comes back to the nest, or a lamb to the fold. This sign of return marks an infinite number of daydreams, for the reason that human returning takes place in the great rhythm of human life, a rhythm that reaches back over years and, through the dream, combats all absence. (Bachelard, 1969, 99)

I. INTRODUCTION

Repose can simply be defined as an act of rest. Stillness, tranquility and a centered mind free from worry make repose a desired state and experience. In thinking back to my own childhood, I clearly see myself gently touching and collecting stones in creek beds and small shells from the lake my parents and I would swim in during the summer. My fascination with these small objects from the natural world remains animated by stories that tell of the companionship and careful attention I found in and gave to these forms. It was in the intimacy of those moments of observing and sifting through stones that I experienced and perceived beauty. In recognizing the still calm and quiet elation this aesthetic moment provided, I returned home with my collection determined to recreate the feelings that surrounded this experience again. Whether I was arranging by shape, color or surface, I know I was challenging myself to really see and contemplate each individual object, while building reciprocal relationships within the larger whole. This belief in the potential for objects and materials to contain an intimate beauty and elicit repose through intentional design and layout is the impetus for my work.

This act of seeing beauty and potential in the mundane became both habit and ritual early in my life, directly shaping my worldview into one of optimism. The world, while chaotic and overwhelming, could be paused ever so briefly by the beauty of words spoken, small expressions performed or the unrepeatability of qualities held by natural objects. However temporal these moments were, they challenged me to always be more mindful of my interactions and more responsive

to my environment. Above all, the habit of looking for rest and repose brought me to ceramics and drawing as means to make forms and marks that could evoke this felt experience in myself and in others.

The heart of this work finds me immersed in rolling thinly crafted porcelain slabs and skating graphite across paper. It is with the dominant voice of my ceramic, palm-sized forms and the mapping of drawn surfaces that I find my greatest pleasure in the composing and arranging of my work in space and on paper. I enjoy this because it calls me to build equanimity between elements. In my work and the larger community, I feel the soul of the individual is supported by a bond to the larger whole and specifically the natural world. Here relationships are fragile and request that we develop a responsive empathy and grace. With a pencil in my hand hovering centimeters above the paper or the clustering of small ceramic forms littering the floor around me, I anticipate how subtle shifts of space and line can accord and return a sense of peace.

In experiencing these moments of aesthetic participation, both in life and in the studio, I have found an affinity with a language built upon the reciprocal and resonant interactions possible between objects and materials. This language is quiet and grows from the sensitivity and care I extend both in my making and composing. Through my use of porcelain, paper, silk, steel and graphite, I present a temporal experience rooted in this sensitive interdependence. Within this body of work, I seek to cultivate intimate relationships with simple objects and materials. Through their interactions within composed and self-contained environments, I strive to elicit a state of mindful repose.

II. SHAPE, LINE AND GESTURE

This body of work explores a dedicated and loved vocabulary of shapes, forms and lines. While their participation and representation may shift between my two and three-dimensional drawings and sculptures, the concrete and spiritual nature of their origin is what remains to fuel this work. In this chapter, the significance and importance of these elements and the gestures they exhibit are discussed.

In the time spent making and contemplating this work, I have pulled from myself a confession that I didn't know needed recognition, and to my surprise, would constitute the wealth of my research as a graduate student. This confession is that I am still gripped by the same questions that happily puzzled me as a 6 year old child. I have never stopped asking myself, "How can this object create such an experience of relief and stillness? What is it that leaves me so contentedly full and anxiously hungry at the same time?" My younger self recognized these moments for their strange transcendence. Inspired by the smallest of stones, twigs, or broken egg shells, these experiences were rich and temporal and caused what I felt was a magical slowing of the day. I learned quickly that this kind of personal experience of beauty could not appear just by being wished for, it was a nurtured attention and a way of seeing. Here, in my late twenties, I feel like I am holding the hand of my younger self. We are looking and pointing out to each other the same shapes and lines captured in the small, intimate and precious objects that have always captivated and taught us of what described our notion of beauty and rest; it is a universal language we share.

Haptic Memory and the Self:

Even before birth, we begin to develop an understanding of the world through our senses. These given modes of perception teach us to identify and then classify all that we encounter. Similar to a large map that charts known locations and distances, we are actively engaged in building our own sensory history that is shaped by new experiences. Ashley Montagu (1986) explores this act of sensory orienteering when she writes on the behavior of our haptic memory:

The term haptic is used to describe that mentally extended sense of touch which comes about through the total experience of living and acting in space. Our perception of the visual world blends what we have felt in past associations with what we have seen or the scene before us. The haptic is an acquired sense in that it applies to seen objects that have been touched and acted upon. (p. 14-17)

This education through felt experience creates both universal and individual relationships to objects. Regardless of differences of culture, gender, race, or geographic location, there will always remain a collective pool of shared experiences. Similarities across our natural landscapes and our need for basic tools of survival: food, water, shelter and companionship, bring us into contact with the same objects and images. This then cultivates similar associations that we employ when we come across something new or unusual.

Using the example of a small milkweed pod, it is hard to pinpoint the exact moment when we learned either the name of the plant or the function of the pod, but we remember the shape, we feel the weight of it in our palm and can recall breaking the hard exterior shell to release the seeds still attached to their feathery, winged counterparts within. The wonder and beauty in that moment of

discovery remains paired with the object, creating a correspondence and link. Here, our senses help narrate our experience.

In addition, when we record basic formal characteristics about an object, we create familiarities and generalizations that we continue to draw from. Whether it is the basic shape, weight or texture of a form, our conscious and unconscious mind is able to make connections between even the most disparate of objects. A stone, a shell, an egg and a seed, when pared down to the most simplified version of itself, can be formally classified as a circle. Taken a step further, this circle can be symbolic of an emotional experience tied to that object, and therefore, it can become a metaphor for harmony and rest.

What I find most interesting about haptic memory is how our own personal natures and predispositions towards what interests us can affect this body of stored knowledge. In relation to my own work, I am most concerned with those fleeting but beautiful experiences with objects that exist in our natural environment. As I've already confessed, I remain captivated by experiences of beauty and most specifically those involving a delicate sensitivity, quietness and fragility. By nature, I am very similar to both the objects and experiences I love and the forms and drawings I create. In essence, this work is an extension of who I am. Therefore, I feel that in examining my use of shapes, forms and lines, there is a connection to my history with particular moments, objects and environments that exposed me to beauty, love and relationships that are responsive and reciprocal. While also archetypal in their nature, these simplified and universal symbols allow viewers to bring their own associations to the interactions between

objects and materials. This work studies how a simplified language of shapes and marks can intuit small truths about formal and material relationships that are fragile, sensitive and intimate.

A Familiar Form:

This body of work began with spherical, hollow forms that were slumped into 1970's wooden salad bowls. Almost 5 inches in diameter, these objects in their earliest stage were clumsy and dense. Yet, as their presence in the studio grew, more careful and delicate surfaces emerged. This development can be seen in *Affirmations* (figure 1), a gridded wall installation that examines the range of surface expressions possible in this type of ceramic form. With pierced and patterned surfaces, these closed and partially open forms record the history and intimacy behind their making. Their symbolic importance soon manifested in an early body of sculptural drawings. Works like *Witnesses* (figure 2) and *Cora* (figure 3) became the first to use the forms to demarcate areas of importance and allow them to serve as metaphorical representations of safety and security.

As the forms became smaller and more simple in shape and surface they became icons of those objects that instructed me as a child. While these new forms shared the same scale, their surfaces displayed variations or what I like to think of as "gestures." Like the shifting of our emotions or expressions in relation to our day, each form's articulation is unique and speaks to the symbolic beauty held by everyday objects. This is also seen in later pieces such as *Gestures* (figure 4), where inches above the floor, four long expanses of steel serve as a plinth for spherical porcelain forms (figure 5), vessels and objects that rest on top of stacks

of clay pages (figure 6). With a balanced palette limited to white porcelain, the blue grey of a glaze and the grey black of steel and thread, no one area or object seeks dominance over the other. This unity emphasizes the need for a quiet and enveloped study of the forms and their interdependent relationships.

Similar in this vein of contemplation is *Still Life* (figure 7). This piece employs eight silk enclosures that hover inches about the ground. Below each structured enclosure, a composed arrangement of objects and materials rests on large individual sheets of graphite coated steel. These arrangements (figure 8 & 9) present found objects like stones and twigs, ceramic forms and pinched vessels, diverse materials and objects in one environment, encouraging reflection through visual connections and associations between tangible objects.

Furthering this idea of connectivity is *Call and Response* (figure 10), a series of four ceramic drawings with accompanying forms that rest on individual shelves below each drawing. Here, drawn compositions employ the same shapes, lines and arrangements that can be seen in the work's partnered three-dimensional compositions (figure 11 & 12). Throughout the process of this work, there has been a constant correspondence between the haptic and subconscious shapes and lines that emerge in the drawings and those natural objects that captivated my childhood. Whether explored on a page with paint and graphite or composed with objects in an environment, the exchange between these two arenas in my work has been constant and fluid. The close proximity of the drawings to the objects in *Call and Response* show how similar shapes, intricate details and marks echo and complement each other.

Further exploring this complementary relationship and affinity for specific lines and shapes is *Pages* (figure 13 & 14). In this piece, individual sheets of thin porcelain are stamped with a rectangular wooden block. This rectangle is a framing device that serves as the boundary for the incised, drawn and glazed compositions active within. With more than thirty pages stacked on two shelves, this piece explores a delicate and fragile language of marks that are both expressive and symbolically tied to those early childhood experiences.

Still Life, Call and Response and *Pages* show a clear pairing between two and three-dimensional elements and help to build context for the other works, informing how one continues to inspire the other in a cyclical and repeated fashion. The goal remains clear: explore how the vocabulary and elements employed in the work, line, shape and material create relationships that elicit repose.

Oval and circular shapes have remained a dominant symbol throughout the work, as illustrated in *Studies in Repose* (figure 15), a series of twelve ceramic drawings. Whether these shapes have been recorded into wet clay paint, carved or lightly drawn onto a surface, the consistent use of the circles and ovals serve both formal and metaphorical purposes. On their most basic level, these shapes, like their ceramic counterparts, also recall small natural objects. Pulling from the discussion of haptic memory, these shapes represent the essence of those original objects and the experiences of wonderment I have associated with them. Therefore, the repeated drawing of these shapes symbolize a mode of centering that supports a sense of unity and stillness through the use of line and shape.

The drawing of a circle creates a continuous and uninterrupted line. The viewer's eye can trail its outline and if one allows oneself, can remain in its meditative motion. This idea of concentration and being "present" is crucial to my making. It is this slowing of a moment through meditation that has introduced a diverse field of marks and patterning into all areas of this work. Each drawing in *Studies in Repose* bears traces of small repeated bands and clouds of circles, ovals and organic rectangles. Seen in this detail of *Studies in Repose* (figure 16), hundreds of tiny circles migrate across the surface of the drawing. Tight and dense, their visual contrast against the white, minimal background attests to a required intimacy with the viewer. This type of contrast is also seen in the use of small, porcelain dipped steel pins that pierce the ceramic surface and paper. Their raised presence in each drawing helps emphasize a sense of movement through focal areas in the composition (figure 17). These ceramic drawings are lost if they are viewed at a distance. The scale of the overall marks and compositions in all of these works serve to usher a closer viewing.

"Look, look, look and then see" is how I want to begin each relationship in this body of work. I think it is a reality for most people that their lives move too quickly and we tend to lose the quiet wonderment we had when we were younger. In forgetting this we stop indulging ourselves in what we love and what feeds us. I find renewal in the beauty that envelops objects and experiences that hold a fragility, delicacy and a sense of quiet. It is through a chosen body of materials that I hope to cultivate these qualities and relationships.

III. MATERIALS

I am an individual who developed an understanding of myself and the world through a companionship with objects. While these objects took on their usual presence as toys or small natural objects, I also remember being strangely entranced by the worn marks in the wooden banister of my childhood home, the small bubbles in the old panes of glass in my bedroom windows and the fissure breaks in our concrete stairs. These specific experiences and tangible associations over time helped me begin to recognize that materials held beauty and a history. While these small anomalies in objects and materials were ordinary and easily overlooked, my need to recognize them and make them special has always remained important to me.

This history fostered the continued exploration of objects and marks in my work. My beginnings in clay and drawing taught me the effects of pressure, care and attention when applied to surface and form. Ceramics and drawing became paramount because of the intimacy and emotional resonance I felt they carried and demanded from maker and participant. The materials I have chosen to employ within this body of work—clay, graphite, paper, silk and steel—carry their own specific inherent formal and emotive qualities. I have chosen these materials because I am drawn to the way their simplicity and strength are easily countered by their potential for vulnerability and fragility. I love that this work allows me to embrace as well as challenge these qualities. The composing and arranging of the materials and the roles they adopt emphasize specific emotive

qualities. Cultivating quiet intimate interactions and a sense of repose is what informs my interest in the interactions between materials.

Unity

In the relationships and partnerships between materials in this work, I want to challenge myself and the viewer to truly see beauty in the mundane. This is achieved through a strict tonal palette across materials. The translucent porcelain, clay slip, graphite, steel and silk are normally left in their natural, raw state. A large portion of this work explores the juxtaposition of these disparate materials and how their conversations seek a harmonious repose. It is the dualities between the hard and soft, the strong and brittle, and the light and dark in object and material that encourages a careful and attentive study. Whether I am carefully arranging small ceramic forms or building up patterning, line, or pigment in a drawing, my attention is always directed to the relationships created and how each object and material contributes to an intimate balance.

Clay can simply be defined as the most rudimentary of recording devices. My earliest mentor in clay, Pam Korte, loved to say, “Clay is Freudian, it remembers what you did to it in its infancy.” This notion of clay being responsive and requiring a certain type of nurturing throughout the process, was instantly appealing to me. Again, I could find companionship through materials that held a memory of touch and a history that I could add to and participate in.

My understanding of “history” with materials is both an interest in their functional use by humankind since their inception and their ability to record external forces exerted by man or environment. In my own work, I enjoy entering

a quiet, meditative state when rolling thin slabs and methodically incising a pierced surface into the clay. The thin walled forms I carefully handle and individualize, through mark and surface, become personified through their handmade history. The pressure of my touch creates surfaces that reflect direct experiences in making. Small and often palm sized, the ceramic objects I create express a quiet gentleness through their minimal scale, weight and delicate marked patterning. While the process is repetitive, each object is a record of a moment. In the larger sense, these objects are representative of my own history that has guided an affinity and specific language of form, line, shape and surface. In essence, each is a microcosm of my being and a touchstone that I continually revisit.

This can be seen in the arranged environment of *Gestures*, where all the forms are similar in color, scale and shape, yet no two are alike. The process of making these individualized forms is meditative and takes a careful, nurturing hand. Inspired by the natural objects of my childhood, the individuality and process of making these ceramic forms allows them to take on anthropomorphic qualities. In *Gestures*, these characteristics are encouraged by both the inclusion of thread, steel pins, drawn line and painted slip. While the use of a translucent blue-grey glaze is minimal, it highlights intricate textural areas and, by serving as an anomaly, it provides a visual rest in the repeated lineup.

The eight pure white silk enclosures, suspended by thin steel rope in the series *Still Life*, suggest both a fragility and a reverence for each composition they protect. Relationships can be seen in the most disparate of participants where

small graphite circles rest next to a large porcelain pocket (figure 18). Here scale, contrast and proximity influence community between elements. Looped on the head of a steel pin, thin threads lined in beeswax loosely bind and unite hollow, spherical porcelain forms. Stones and twigs are dipped in porcelain slip, creating a symbolic and fragile skin that protects and distorts their age. Sharing a similar scale and surface, the interactions between ceramic forms and participating elements like paper, wire and thread in each enclosure of *Still Life* encourage the viewer to decipher the nature of the relationships. These delicate and fragile interactions within each composed tableau emphasize a beauty and repose found in small intimacies between materials and objects.

Contrast

Through my use and manipulation of materials, I present juxtapositions that challenge traditional function. Clay can often have the stereotype of being dark and heavy. Yet *Gestures* and *Still Life* present clay as a material that is almost weightless, translucent and extremely fragile. The thin clay pages in *Gestures* denote individual sheets of paper. By representing paper through clay, I am examining both materials' historic participation in record keeping. The laborious smoothing and gentle drying of the clay pages result in a final form that is soft and delicate. Extremely light and soft, this work emphasizes the ability of the clay to harden and more permanently hold and stage an experience on its surface.

While the predominant use of clay in *Gestures* exhibits more perennial relationships, *Still Life* creates a more temporal experience because the materials

and objects in each arrangement change during each installation. Sheets and strips of paper become modular participants in each composition. Paper, string, twigs and fabric are less durable or lasting. In the hierarchy of this work, clay is the more permanent and most important, as it is representative of those objects that gave me early experiences in repose. The temporality of these works is linked to how these tableaus change according to the moment when they are arranged or the environment in which they're shown.

A continued juxtaposition between the hard and soft and the strong and brittle can be seen throughout this work. In *Return* (figure 19) eight incised porcelain slabs are recessed into a suspended steel frame. This is an expressive landscape in clay. It is marked by steel pins in both their annealed and unannealed stages (figure 20). While *Return* and *Gestures* employ steel as a man-made material that supports and grounds the work, both also show the vulnerability and deterioration of steel by heat. The re-firing of steel pins to temperatures dangerously close to their melting point leaves behind an object that I integrate into forms and compositions. Steel pins provide contrast and signal areas of importance which can be seen throughout this body of work. Visible evidence of this kind of deterioration is seen in steel pins as well as broken and altered clay forms and the brittle, unfired surface of slip on clay, paper and wire. Materials left as raw and untempered speak of fragility and innocence. This work pays homage to these inherent and often vulnerable qualities, cultivating a sense of concern and awareness. Seeing and noticing fragility and delicacy can breed compassion and a reciprocal empathy.

A series of ten ceramic drawings, *Studies in Repose* and similar drawings in this body of work also exhibit a non-traditional use of materials. In these drawings, I mix my own “paint” with equal portions of calcium carbonate and kaolin. These ceramic chemicals are bound with an acrylic base. While all traditional paint contains these ingredients, I encourage this mixture to act more like a thick clay slip, impressionable and semi-permeable. I see a connection between working with leather-hard or greenware clay and the paint I manipulate on a page. Once the paint has dried, I bend the paper to break and expose its brittle nature. The entire composition is then stained with black metallic oxide, a colorant typically only used in the ceramic field on clay that has been bisque fired. An example of this can be seen in a detail from *Studies of Repose* (figure 21). Pressure from my hand through drawing tools or brushes carries the same language of a nurtured history through the addition of material, pigment and sanding between marks and washes. Graphite, color pencil and paint fade and re-emerge through dense layering, creating a haze where significant symbols are brought forward and call for contemplation. Again, this rudimentary act of recording is fresh, immediate and unrepeatable. The drawings are an intimate record of the experience within the moment and the material. *Studies in Repose* also displays interactions between formal elements within an internal framework. The purity of the external border that surrounds these compositions is used as both an area for visual rest and as a mechanism to direct attention to the interactions among lines, shapes and colors. These interior environments allow for the study of a smaller world of more simplified relationships.

Survey (figure 22 & 23) employs a juxtaposition between the organic and the geometric. Small silk pouches house individual ceramic forms which are organized in a gridded network along the expanse of a rectangular table. Like specimens set out for study and analysis, this work exhibits two levels of material boundaries through silk and white washed wood. The faint mapped lines of a river and its tributaries drawn in graphite seem to lightly hover on the surface of the table as if quietly reminding these small forms of their origin. In all the arrangements within this body of work, materials exist to complement each other and raise small truths about how the simple and mundane can speak to a sense of beauty. While differences between materials and their roles in the work are visible, their interactions narrate and seek to foster harmony and equanimity among forms and environments.

Still Life, *Studies in Repose* and *Survey* are examples of works that use materials and geometric layouts to form boundaries. These boundaries are synonymous with environments, in that they isolate, incubate and protect the interactions that exist within their borders. Within *Still Life*, the three-dimensional silk structures are thin and permeable but exist to create a sanctuary that elevates and supports the objects within. Sheets of paper and soft brick establish secondary material boundaries within each enclosure. The addition of ceramic and found objects also introduces organic shapes and lines that, when juxtaposed with the geometric, creates formal balance that establishes a sense a harmonious unity.

Contemporary porcelain sculptor Paula Winokur, illustrates a similar approach to materials, presentation and subject. Her works explore themes of travel, geological formations and mankind's relationship with the world. Her sole use of porcelain presents a palette that is simple and stoic. Within *White Butte* (figure 24), isolated rock formations rise from Winokur's sensitive handling of porcelain. The installation of the work on a white platform set against a black wall evokes a spiritual reverence similar to what I pursue in my work. However, Winokur's work is topographical in nature. The gridded landscape of *White Butte* emphasizes the buttes as a point of emphasis and beauty in the environment. With the presentation of the work brought to the floor, the viewer can be interpreted as the commanding force within a landscape so miniature in scale. Winokur is questioning how we view our own relationship to our environment. Do we seek to build accord or dominance? This work holds both a fragility and strength and an innocent vulnerability that I hope to achieve through my own environments and compositions. Like Winokur, I also want to present work that encourages an inquisitive and mindful participation from viewers. While her work does not typically employ small personified forms, I resonate with her raw use of materials, presentation format and, above all, her commitment to revealing the beautiful intimacies of our natural world.

While artists may share similar materials and processes, it is their individual sensibilities and histories which direct their making. It has been through the process of making and playfully arranging in the studio that I have

learned how to cultivate specific qualities and a resonance in my own work, which will be explored in the following chapter.

IV. STUDIO PRACTICE

My studio practice is driven by a wonderment in making articulate objects and marks. My practice is broken into periods of making, intuitive play, a dash of daydreaming and a dose of culminating analysis. Therefore, my studio time finds me easily moving between hours of rolling thin slabs of porcelain to sitting on the floor, composing relationships within environments and my collection of objects. Through this ease of transition in my process, I feel there is a greater sense of open communication between the stages in making, the materials and the meaning behind the work.

Careful attention, a delicate fragility and an intimacy between material and handling has remained central to my approach as a maker. Maintaining a balance of these qualities has always directed my choices regarding specific materials and ways of working. The majority of the materials I employ, as explored in the previous chapter, share inherent qualities that classify them as fragile. Possibly the most vulnerable are the forms made with translucent porcelain, which tend to fracture easily when not carefully cradled. While there is struggle and conflict with such sensitive materials, the patience and need for nurturing feed both the process and desired delicate qualities in the work.

Recording:

When fired, clay holds the ability to make marks and forms permanent. The touch of the hand or tool as it applies pressure and force is creating a record of a moment and an experience with the material. This fact is compelling to me. Whether I am working in clay or on paper, I am aware that I am recording the

moment, as well as my past experiences. The relationship of these two has informed the making of these objects and marks. For this reason, much of my work uses repeated forms and patterning. This style of recording can be seen in *Studies in Repose* and a large majority of the ceramic circular forms present in the thesis works. Like a silent mantra, this process of individual piercing and drawing becomes a rhythmic motion. With each mark and impression made into the clay or page, I feel that I am creating a visual record of the sensitive care and concern I want the work to possess.

In the early stages of the ceramic forms, I took such pleasure in creating different variations of their overall shape, weight, scale and surface. I remain fascinated that no two of these objects are exactly the same. I delight in knowing that, similar to the small natural objects that could quiet me as a child, the individuality of my forms could also attract different viewers for different reasons. Excited and spurred by this notion, I soon found all the surfaces of my studio covered in these small objects. Concentrating large clusters under tables as if they were hiding from view or seeming to happily sunbathe on a window sill, these forms were waiting for me to initiate their interactions. It was then that I began to see their anthropomorphic qualities emerge, and I couldn't resist exploring the possibilities in their relationships. In other words, I was ready to play.

Play and Imagination:

As an only child, objects like toys and natural found objects provided time for play and creative problem solving. So often my play involved the collecting of

objects and the enjoyment of placing them in space: creating a tiny world. My mother even jokes over the time it would take for me to pick out a toy, a stone, or flower when I was young. Now, after the making and research of this work, I don't think it was indecision that caused these types of delays, but the need for me to see a perfect set of qualities align in an object. Now, that I am able to create my own objects, the use of arranged and composed environments allows for a learning and deciphering of my language of repose.

Learning to communicate through this language was complex and involved a sensitive interaction between elements in relation to the larger whole. Yet, similar to a drawn composition, it was within the harmonious balance of formal qualities that a sense of repose and tranquility could be sparked. Often migrating from the table, to floor and to my studio wall, this intuitive play captured notions of stillness, fragility and delicacy through composed arrangements that explore the reciprocal relationships between objects and materials. It is the interactions in *Still Life* and *Gestures* that best portray compositions that unite seemingly incongruous and everyday objects. Stones, twigs, pinched bowls, pins and thread have been individually placed and their effects on the larger whole studied in both of these works. In *Still Life*, the pairing of the found natural forms next to their more simplified inspired ceramic counterparts affirms the importance of the original objects from my childhood and how they evolved in function and meaning. Fostering dichotomous relationships between figure and ground is seen in the use of individual stacks of clay pages in *Gestures*. While the pages rest at differing heights, they both elevate

and isolate each form and vessel. Yet, their participation in this repeated array encourages individual contemplation of each section.

In an attempt to break beyond my typical use of silk, steel and paper to frame relationships within compositions, *Continuance* (figure 25) illustrates interactions of line and form on a larger scale. Occupying a single twelve foot wall, individually stacked strips of thin, narrow porcelain rest on wide concrete nails (figure 26) forming two parallel lines. Located on the left side of the composition is a collection of small, lung-shaped ceramic forms, slumped greenware strips of porcelain and a single, softly curved piece of steel wire (figure 27). In this work, I am employing the delicate lines and fragile forms that I typically use in my ceramic drawings and in the arrangements of *Still Life*. The space that surrounds the porcelain and steel elements in *Continuance* is open, unrestrained and austere. The use of horizontals is calm and tranquil, while the simple grouping of palm-sized forms creates a small pocket of visual rhythm through a repetition of objects and light. *Continuance* examines the relationships between line and shape as participants in creating a sense of harmony that extends without boundaries.

Natural objects fill my studio. Rocks, pods, roots and small loved pots rest on my long white windowsill. I easily admit that I've always dedicated time for imagination and daydreaming in the studio. The meaning behind my making is in creating a sense of repose through natural objects and materials. My imaginative flights return me to those memories and objects that inspire what my heart classifies as restful beauty. This excavation both in past moments and in the

present tense of making is a partnership, and I want to remain responsive. I mirror this delicacy and softness both in my studio presence and my approach with clay and paper. So much of the work attests to this mindful centering and creative questioning through materials.

Survey:

This body of work explores personal repose through our universal link to our natural world and its precious objects. While this work is tied significantly to intuitive play, making and composing in space, the structure of how the work is presented is founded in basic design principles. We are all exposed to these principles through the differing tools of mass media, and we also draw great influence from the unity and visual harmony evident in the natural world that surrounds us. This pairing speaks to the role our haptic memory plays in how we perceive and analyze the objects we encounter. With my own experiences and history, I feel that I have always been most attracted to the elements of line and shape. My tendency to treat them as expressive and even anthropomorphic is evident. With line and shape acting as the objects in the work, I use unity, balance, scale and emphasis to explore their communicative relationships within contained environments.

These relationships are purposeful and made in search of harmony. The constant act of arranging these still life compositions in space and on page is both intuitive and founded in formal design principles. Like stream of consciousness writing, the incising, drawing and composing of these works is loose and immediate. By removing myself from this moment, I am able to then analyze

what the work is communicating and how material and form can strengthen a sense of repose. I know a work is complete when all participating elements and materials create a sense of wholeness and congruence. It is the peace of knowing everything is where it should be.

The goal of this work has never been for it to assert itself through boldness or aggression, but foremost through a delicacy, a quiet stillness and intimacy. These works are an expression of subtle and lyrical shifts between materials, forms and surfaces, and I intend for the delivery to be one that spurs an inquisitive and contemplative mood. Likewise, space and environment equally contribute to the ephemeral and meditative qualities of this work.

V. SPACE AND ENVIRONMENT

Crawling along the creek beds of my childhood, I remember how my experience discovering objects led to a significant and enriched understanding of place. In two respects, I felt the immensity of my surroundings but also a comfort in knowing the objects and artifacts that defined “my” landscape. This encouraged a careful study of the small intricacies and beauty I felt was held in ordinary objects like stones and twigs. While I was not raised in any religious institution, my mother taught me to view nature as a cathedral. Lessons on the notion of god and love were to be found in this world, through the interactions of humanity and the environments in which we live. The creek beds and soft earth of my backyard offered a place to slowly build a simple understanding of spiritual connectivity through small objects and a developing reverence for the intimate repose they offered when experienced.

As a result of this experience, I consistently employ materials and specific presentation strategies as a way to build this language of repose through the qualities of sanctuary, temporality, suspension and whiteness. The meaning of the work is found through experience and interaction.

Sanctuary and Temporality:

In repose we find a slowing of our world. We discover a place that allows us to separate from the weight of the day. Similar to the spiritual refuge some may find in a church or in nature, sanctuary is universal in its ability to create an atmosphere of safety and security. Our visits to this realm are transitory, and

experiences with this type of comfort are often fleeting. In my work, I strive to create a sanctuary both for the objects I create and the viewers I hope to serve.

These two qualities are most evident within *Still Life* and *Pockets* (figure 28). In *Still Life*, I am employing the notion of sanctuary in individual enclosures made of silk habotai that incubate a collection of ceramic and found materials. Acting as one of the most temporal of my works, *Still Life* serves to introduce my visual history of collecting and arranging. Silk forms the veiled boundary of the internal environment, yet it also acts like a permeable membrane that encourages a devoted viewing. Reduced to a simple rectangular shape, the enclosures in *Still Life* evoke the image of a room or basic house structure. With the skin of the silk pierced with pins and thread connecting to objects in the interior, the work remains dependent and sheltered by the environment. Each enclosure welcomes an interaction with light and air, allowing them to be completely affected by their external environment and easily disturbed by the smallest of movements. Like a moth resting on an upturned palm, this work offers the illusion of being briefly captured and temporarily frozen in time.

Paying homage to the stones and twigs that would fill my pockets as a child and even as an adult, *Pockets* is a suspended installation created with silk, porcelain and found objects. In this piece, individual silk pockets envelop the forms that occupy them, creating a small, restful sanctuary (figure 29). In the construction of the silk pockets, the fragile utilitarian bands of porcelain are paired with the raw sewn edge of the silk. This relationship between the hard and soft speaks to a soft gentleness I want to invite. When viewed together, these

ceramic and silk pockets create a large network that is representative of my harmonious moments of felt experience with objects in the natural world.

Studies in Repose also employs the notion of sanctuary through masking off a centered and internal frame. By restricting the boundaries of the composition, the relationship between material and mark is controlled and focused. This formal choice allows the negative space that surrounds the drawing to become neutral and calming. Reserving this inner frame for the composition also highlights the sensitivity and fragility of the materials interacting within. The merging of kaolin and calcium carbonate suspended by an acrylic base and a black metallic oxide wash creates a cracked and aged ground. With this semi-impermanent base, the patterning and layering of shapes and additional pigments is done with an attentive and meditative hand. Similar to the metaphorical use of silk in *Still Life* which suggests temporality, the soft layering and density of material builds a sense of depth and history. Like old plaster walls that have been continuously repainted and re-patched, thus exposing time and wear from individuals or other forces, the drawings seek to intuit and celebrate experience, however fleeting.

Suspension:

Unlike more traditional means of presenting artwork, suspended works can suggest an impermanence and fragility. Conveying a sense of weightlessness, our interaction with suspended works directs our attention away from the wall or floor and into the air that fills a space or environment. Creating an ephemeral

tension, we as viewers ask our bodies to find a balance according to our proximity and physical interaction with the work.

The element of suspension, as seen in *Still Life, Return* and *Pockets*, forms a reoccurring component throughout this body of work. The plastic-coated steel that connects and suspends these works is thin and appears fragile yet in actuality is able to withstand great weight and tension. Suspension creates a sense of uncertainty and calls for a tentative or careful approach to the work. In employing this steel, I allow each enclosure in *Still Life* to hover slightly above the ground, creating an atmosphere that encourages a temporal awareness and experience of the work.

Within *Return*, a drawn and mapped porcelain landscape displays my affinity with personal geography as a way to return to those early experiences with objects in surroundings of my childhood. The use of suspension in *Return* references the strong emotive ties we hold to the places and environments we have known. Often we elevate these locations in our mind because they offer sanctuary or teach us of ourselves. I want *Return* and similar suspended works to convey both a contemplative and confident presence where they affect and are affected by the space that surrounds them. Employing the mechanism of suspension, I am able to emphasize and immobilize elements as a way to study this language and relationship between form and environment.

Whiteness:

The use of a white palette and aesthetic within a body of work can create a greater sense of purity, order and a movement away from the chaos of excess.

Reductive and minimal, whiteness can induce calm and inner peace. Just as we can close our eyes to more fully feel the notes and rhythm in a song, a strict palette provides the essentials of what is important and necessary to a work.

Within this thesis body of work, I am committed to cultivating relationships with mundane objects and materials. I found that through my use of white in the purity of porcelain, silk and clay based-paint, I could more clearly suggest the stillness associated with repose. Loud and bright colors shock the senses, while white and neutrals call for a more quiet and sensitive approach to viewing. A minimal use of line and color request that we slow down and look for the smallest of formal differences in the calm of an undisturbed setting. My research seeks to employ an aesthetic that limits excess and emphasizes the importance of sensitive interactions between line, object and material to evoke contemplation.

Similar to *Still Life, Gestures* revisits a language dominated by minimal color and individualized interactions. On top of each stack of thin porcelain pages is a composition that examines a relational intimacy. These multiple and varying interactions employ a repetition of similar forms and lines, yet their gestures are singular and unique. It is important to me that viewers are mindful to these differences and similarities, and I feel my use of a reduced palette allows me to emphasize this in the work.

While a white palette can help create unity and emphasize the need for an attentive eye, light and translucency can inspire qualities of warmth, welcome and protection. *Continuance* expresses the sensitivity and potential found in the

use of a pure palette and seemingly luminescent materials. In the lighting and presentation of this body of work, I've often thought back to the pools of sunlight that would cover the floors, walls and beds of each of the homes I've lived in. I still love sitting in this warm light and then closing my eyes to rest. In this experience we feel special, loved and protected. This enveloping attention and warmth is what I want to project upon each work, both in the making and the formal presentation. The semi-permanence of light through porcelain (figure 30), silk and paper emphasizes this sense of intimacy. Light becomes both a sculptural and metaphorical tool that furthers interpretations of delicacy and impermanence.

Through the environments I create and the relationships I nurture, I humbly strive to establish an intimacy between viewer and object that encourages an effective rest. The worlds I create are small enclosed studies where the mundane and simple can inspire new notions of beauty. By encouraging this in the viewers, they will become more aware of a connectivity between materials and objects and how, in the act of slowing themselves, they are more susceptible to discovering their own notion of beauty.

VI. REPOSE

In general, we need objects for our physical development and to keep us focused and anchored in the world. Without the grounding force of objects, we would be adrift in a void without measure or weight. Objects provide us with a tangible source of comfort, something to hold on to in a shifting world.

(Ramljak, 2004, 193)

By nature we are sensate beings that understand our world through experience and our history, predisposing us to seek out, notice and feel certain things. Whether it is an action like a smile or hug from a loved one, or the wonder of finding a precious item hidden from view, these moments can provide a sense of nourishment. I see these as a part of our journey in the evolution of personal truths. It is through our awareness of our unique sensitivities—knowing what leaves us full, inspired and hungry for more—that we are guided into active participation and a responsive awareness of the world around us.

It was my early experiences of wonder and quietude in nature that taught me of a mode of beauty that valued fragility, intimacy and stillness. These qualities characterize a beauty found in the natural world. I was and remain amazed that such soul can emanate from a simple and unadorned form. These experiences of wonder and repose in the presence of such humble beauty created an optimist out of me. This love and history resulted in the careful making of ceramic forms and drawings echoing a shared affinity toward shapes, lines and surfaces. Calling on my haptic memory and aesthetic moments of felt experience in the natural world, the works have grown into sculptural compositions that value a quiet and mindful interaction. This work is founded in the potential for

objects and materials to exhibit qualities of intimacy, fragility and stillness through intentional design and environments.

French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1969) writes, “Poets will help us to discover within ourselves such joy in looking that sometimes, in the presence of a perfectly familiar object, we experience an expansion of our intimate space” (p. 199). I believe that we can become the poets of our own experience. We can learn to feed ourselves emotionally and spiritually through moments of mindful quietness, reflection and resonance. My work explores the poetics of the mundane and is an offering and a witness to a belief in the nourishment of this repose.

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ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1. *Affirmations*, 2009



Figure 2. *Witnesses*, 2009



Figure 3. *Cora*, 2009



Figure 4. *Gestures*, 2010
Photo - Joe Johnson



Figure 5. *Gestures*, Detail, 2010
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Figure 6. *Gestures*, Detail, 2010
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Figure 7. *Still Life*, 2011
Photo - Joe Johnson

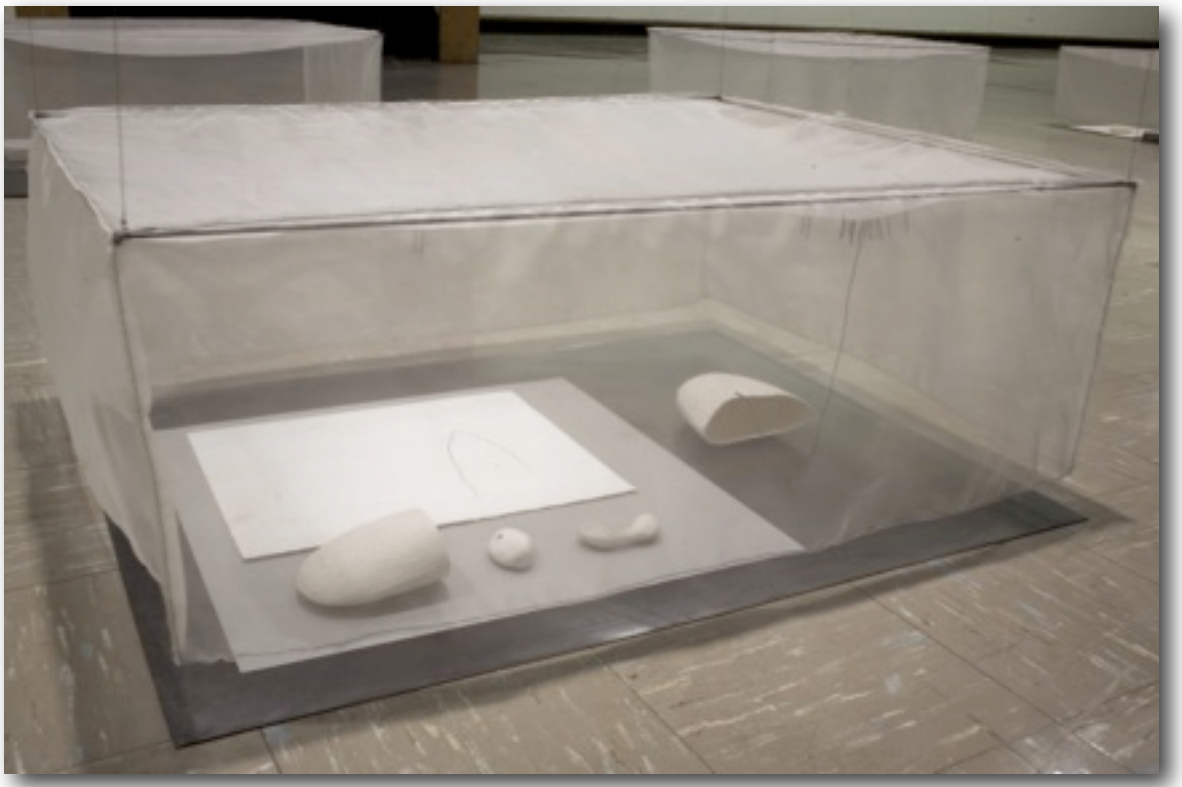


Figure 8. *Still Life*, Detail, 2011
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Figure 9. *Still Life*, Detail, 2011
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Figure 10. *Call and Response*, 2011
Photo - Joe Johnson



Figure 11. *Call and Response, Detail*, 2011
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Figure 12. *Call and Response*, Detail, 2011
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Figure 13. *Pages*, 2010



Figure 14. *Pages*, Detail, 2010



Figure 15. *Studies in Repose*, 2011
Photo - Joe Johnson



Figure 16. *Studies in Repose*, Detail, 2011
Photo - Joe Johnson



Figure 17. *Studies in Repose*, Detail, 2011
Photo - Joe Johnson



Figure 18. *Still Life, Detail*, 2011
Photo - Joe Johnson



Figure 19. *Return*, 2010
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Figure 20. *Return*, Detail, 2010
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Figure 21. *Studies in Repose* Detail, 2011
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Figure 22. *Survey*, 2009



Figure 23. *Survey*, Detail, 2009



Figure 24. Paula Winokur. *White Butte*, 2004
Porcelain, stains, glaze and ceramic pencil.
26" x 90" x 126" Used with permission.

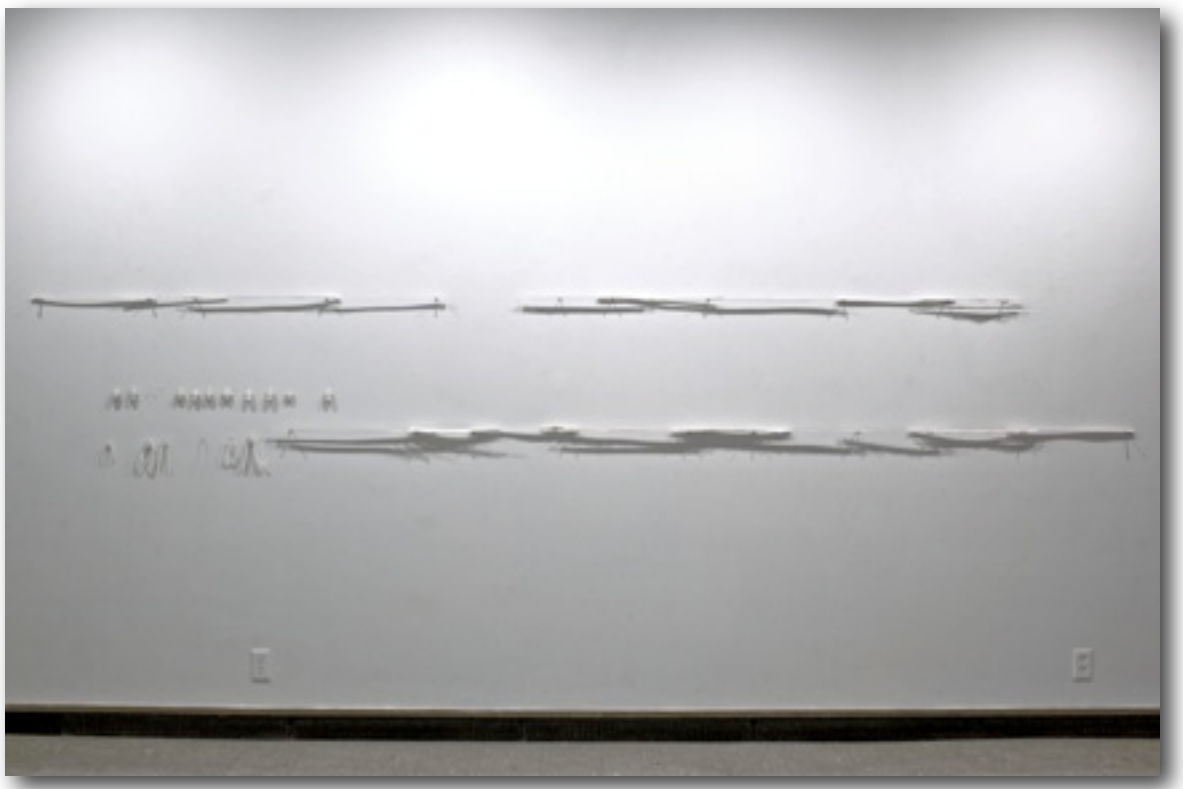


Figure 25. *Continuance*, 2011
Photo - Joe Johnson

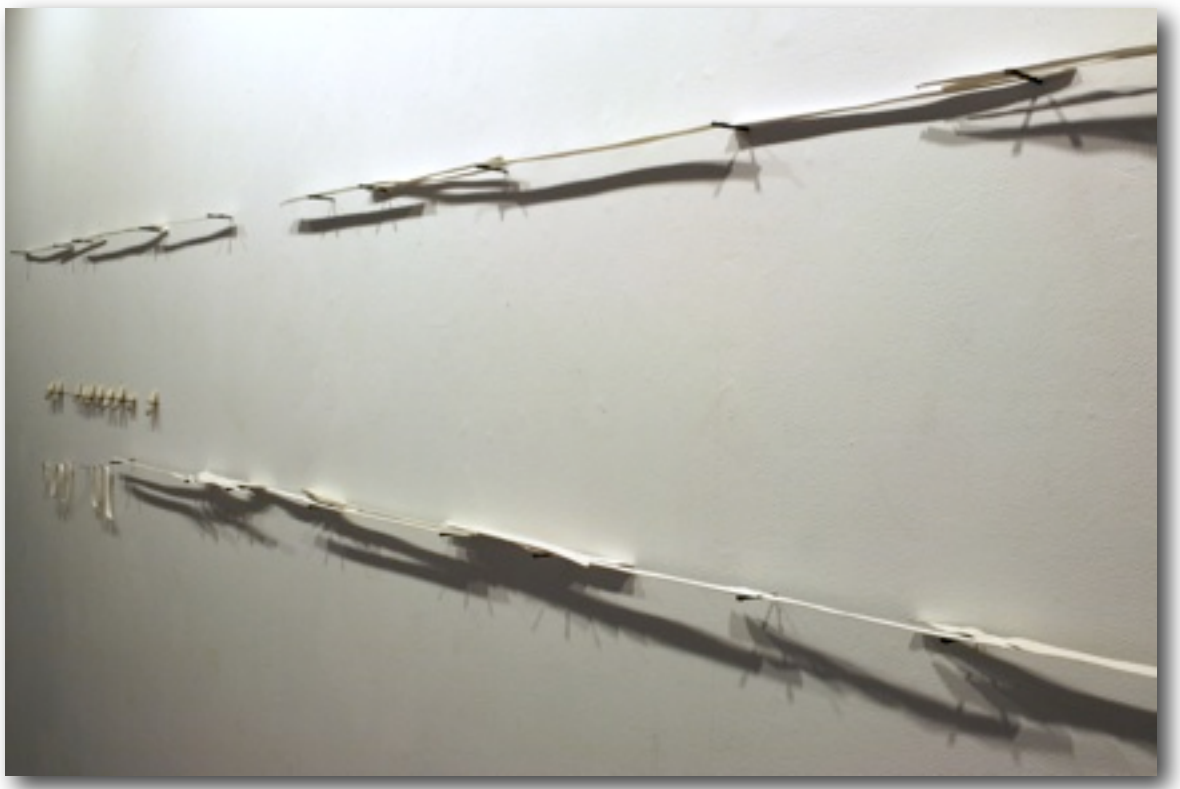


Figure 26. *Continuance*, Detail, 2011
Photo - Joe Johnson



Figure 27. *Continuance*, Detail, 2011
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Figure 28. *Pockets*, 2010



Figure 29. *Pockets, Detail*, 2010



Figure 30. Translucent porcelain

EXHIBITION IMAGES



Exhibition View
Photo - Joe Johnson



Exhibition View
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Exhibition View
Photo - Joe Johnson



Exhibition View
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Exhibition View
Photo - Joe Johnson



Exhibition View
Photo - Joe Johnson



Exhibition View
Photo - Dan Gemkow



Exhibition View
Photo - Joe Johnson



Exhibition View
Photo - Joe Johnson

VITA

Natalie Hellmann grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio, where being an only child happily meant romping through creeks, playing under backyard pines and drawing with handmade ink from pokeberries. With free-spirited parents who revered nature and beauty in all its forms, her earliest education was in a wonderment of the small and typically unseen. This upbringing nurtured an early companionship with small natural forms and drawing as a means to understand the world around her. This companionship brought her to art as a means to continue exploring relationships and materials. Through the medium of sculptural ceramics and drawing, her current work seeks to elicit a sense of repose through cultivating fragile and intimate affinities between objects and materials.

Natalie began her formal art education in ceramics, yet only within the last three years has she devoted her research to the themes and experiences that gave her such wonder as a child. The heart of her work, finds her immersed in rolling thinly crafted porcelain slabs and skating graphite across paper. Making as a means towards revealing small truths and beauty is what nurtures and renews her. Natalie holds a BFA and BA from the College of Mount St. Joseph in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Believing the arts are an inseparable part of our lives, Natalie looks towards a future where she can partner a love for making artwork and teaching. She recognizes that art teaches us to discover and trust ourselves and she hopes to inspire this in others. Natalie lives and works in Columbia, Missouri.