

“A Man Ain’t Nothin But A Man”

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In Partial Fulfillment

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Master of Fine Arts

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By

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The Undersigned, Appointed by the Dean of the Graduate School,

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Presented by Eric D. Carlson, a Candidate for the Degree of MFA

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# I

## **Introduction**

Physicality is one of the most powerful ways in which I express my innermost feelings with others, constantly making the body articulate that which I cannot express freely in words. This way of showing emotion I find to be most common in men, burdening the body to free the mind; sheer emotion represented by the human form.

In reflecting personally and historically, mythological tales and folklore such as the legend of John Henry and the many sagas of Greek mythological figures, have acted as a kind of measuring guide or moral compass for masculine traits. Aspects of our cultural masculinity are reflected in these stories. They serve in some cases as a manual for young men to look towards for guidance.

The roles that men have played through history have always intrigued me; stories of men who were singular figures of greatness, who actually existed well beyond myth and legend. Some of these men were alive and their prowess was so great they became more than human, shown through their feats that were often impossible for normal men to achieve.

These stories and struggles are part of our culture and perhaps the history and genetics of my own family. We each have our own family stories that have been passed down from generation to generation, changing and adjusting as each narrator puts his or her own personal twist on the original. In researching these stories, I had found and have developed similar narrative threads in my own work and also that a vast majority of these mythical stories deal with masculine identity.

My work seeks to show the importance of masculinity in our culture, something that I feel is being suppressed. To be masculine is now viewed as a bad thing or at least not politically correct. I want my work to reclaim the positive aspects of masculinity in order to have my viewers empathize with masculine issues and traits. Not doing so will put society at risk of being overwhelmed with vast numbers of young men longing to find their masculine identities. I would argue that lack of healthy masculine expression yields a kind of hyper-masculinity. By definition, hyper-masculinity is the exaggeration of male stereotypical behavior, such as an emphasis on abnormal strength, overt aggression and maladjusted virility. Within my work I seek to show the importance of healthy masculinity, through tying masculine experiences together, to record their positive strengths, weaknesses, history and personal form.

The physicality of my chosen material, ceramics, gives me a unique opportunity to directly record physical responses to the world. In combination with other materials such as: metal, wood, fiber, or found objects, the action of making becomes a link to my subject matter, where physical form becomes the by-product of internal emotion. The objects I create carry the enduring physical remnants of struggle and tension, just as our own bodies do. They are worn, cracked and damaged but still exude strength and the capacity to overcome adversity.

As an artist my processes have grown out of a connection with my blue collar past. Through these processes, I hope to honor the ideals of workmanship and craftsmanship that have become relegated to a second-class status. I gained respect for these processes through personal experience with a majority of my

male role models. Workmanship and craftsmanship was their sole means of communication to the outside world.

Many of my male role models have shown me what it means to be a man through more of a physical nature than a verbal one. The, “you have to get your hands dirty first approach,” was important to understand the workings of whatever it is that you are doing, learning from your mistakes. Important aspects of our culture are based upon men from working class backgrounds, who provided and cared for others by giving of their own bodies. These men were laborers or craftsman who worked with their hands on a daily basis and took pride in a good days work, often using their bodies to help others who did not have the physical ability to help themselves. They worked till their bodies gave out; no longer able to take the abuse that it had gone through in its lifetime. In my experiences, this is what the man of the family does. I have learned this form of masculinity by watching a great many of my male role models travel down this road time and time again.

The question of what it means to be a man is something that I have pondered for a long time. This question arose soon after my grandfather’s death; he was the main male role model in my life. My mother and father separated while I was very young. After that, I would only see my father for limited amounts of time and my grandfather took his place as my main male role model. It was my grandfather who taught me how to use tools and work with my hands, always pushing me to be as creative as possible. He was the one who defended me when my mother thought that I was acting too rambunctious by just stating, “ Boys will be boys!” However, he would never let me get to far out of line and demanded

that I always show respect to others, especially my mother. He would tell me that one day I'd be the man of the family. I never quite understood what he was talking about at the time, though after his death that statement was all I ever heard from my uncles, "You're the man of the family now."

For as long as I can remember, I have been told that I would have to provide for and protect my family and friends. These early roles have become conditions that extended out into all relationships in my life. I've always felt that this was quite a burden to be placed on a small boy. This burden was placed upon me by my male role models who were more concerned about my masculinity than anything else, always spouting off, "Boy's don't cry when they get hurt!" "Boy's don't sew!" Apparently my uncles were worried that my mother could not raise a man on her own.

In truth, some men raised by single mothers have exaggerated forms of masculinity. A term has even been coined for this, hyper-masculine, which by definition means an exaggeration of stereotypically male beliefs and behaviors through an emphasis on maladjusted virility, abnormal strength and overt aggression. ....Me! Our culture has also given these men another name, "MAMAS' BOY!" which if some of these men labeled mamas' boys are that of the hyper-masculine sort, it can make for a very volatile mix. In Stephen Ducat's book *The Wimp Factor*, he states

*"there is often a powerful imperative, both from within and outside of the family, for the boy to stop identifying with the mother, to prematurely separate from her, and to repudiate any aspect of himself that might be construed as feminine. Thus, his male gender identity goes from being greedily inclusive to being anxiously exclusive."* (Ducat, pg. 31.)



In defining the terms of masculinity and hyper-masculinity, I found myself researching males throughout history. In doing so I discovered that many stories from historical accounts, as well as from mythology and folklore, are essential in aiding the understanding of masculinity and its many nuances.

My interest in Greek mythology and American folklore is linked to my own experience in that single women raised many of these great heroes. These tales seem to be intended as a moral compass or measuring guide for young males to find masculine traits when they lose or never really have a patriarch or father figure of their own.

Throughout history you can see this story play out time and time again. Young men are pulled away from their mothers from fear that they will become too feminine. This is why I have always found the myth/story of Achilles so interesting, Achilles is portrayed as a hyper-masculine hero, exaggerated in his qualities, beyond real. While, another aspect of Achilles' story is one of a "Mamas Boy," protected, and reared solely by women.

In the past, gender roles were defined as young boys took part in the physical chores around the homestead and/or village. In our time these gender roles are often defined through play. In the act of playing, boys are expected to play one way and girls another. Young boys are supposed to play ruff and tumble, where young girls are expected to play nice and courteous. Toys play a role in the gender differentiation as boys play with action figures and girls play with dolls, boys get guns and girls get kitchen sets. Early roles and gender differentiation are created within these contexts. Ironically, the only difference between action figures and dolls is the dress. Action figures and dolls act in gender specification,

training young boys to think that they need to be the protectors and not caregivers. This gender specific type of play is trying to pull young boys further away from their mothers, to define themselves as males within a cultural context.

My thesis work combines the many strengths, weaknesses, histories and ironies of masculinity for what they are, and in so doing becomes a testament to those who show emotion through physicality, eschewing verbal communication. Through connection with these narratives I would like the viewer to empathize with masculine issues, which we often dismiss, and its connection between emotion and human form. In the face of our difficulties we all confront the burden of our struggles, yet we endure.

## II

### John Henry: “A Man Ain’t Nothing But a Man”

The heart of a man is said to be many things, his strength and his weakness, both physically and emotionally. The term, “you got to have heart,” is something I heard all the time growing up. It is a statement filled with pride and bravery. Yet, it is also a challenge to the male psyche whose role is often defined by stature or prowess. In my own life this tension has been resolved by the understanding that any physical challenge could be overcome as long as one had the heart to do it. These issues of stature and prowess are endemic in our masculine culture, making their way into a being supported by our story telling. One such story is the story of John Henry, the great steel driving man of American folklore.

John Henry’s life was predetermined at birth, “His arms were as thick as stovepipes” (Osborne, pg: 89). He was a born laborer, and his childhood disappeared in a wisp. A life of working in steel on the railroad, his physical stature and ability, as well as his good heart was what made him a legend. He would help others and was steadfast by giving of himself physically. This myth/story speaks directly to my experience and background as well as to issues still relevant in our culture. The relevance of these issues exists as labor intensive or “blue-collar” jobs are looked down upon by many people in our culture. We all seem to forget too easily the workers whose broken bodies built our country. I

may not be able to help others with monetary things but I can give to people with the use of my body. This kind of work is a long-standing tradition in my family. Coming from a long line of people that provided for others through their physicality is something of which I'm extremely proud.

In the folktale, John's true challenge comes when modern technology starts to emerge or intrude upon the workingman's livelihood. What many see as modern convenience, meant to help and advance our lives, John saw as a dismissal of his life, livelihood and culture. Perhaps more importantly this story illustrates the workingman's dignity. John Henry defended the workingman's "heart," simply by using his own body. John Henry defeated his nemesis, a steam driven drill, and protected the dignity of his fellow workers, at the cost of his own life.

"HE WORKED SO HARD HIS RIBS CRACKED, HE WORKED SO HARD HIS HEART BROKE" (Osborne, pg: 90).

John Henry had a heart attack. He worked his body to death. It wasn't his "heart" that gave out; it was his physical body that gave in. This is something I grew up seeing; watching family members work themselves till their bodies failed.

In making a piece about the plight of the workingman (Plate # 1), I chose to focus on what is usually invisible to us, the interior of the body, specifically the heart. Loaded as a symbol, the heart tells many stories. So many people die from heart attacks every day. The relevance to my own family is that this is a very common affliction, specifically among the men, all of whom are or were physical laborers during their life. Some passed away from heart attacks while others were

just weakened by them. In making John's heart, I wanted it to look as though I had removed it prior to his fall, to reveal what to me was the most important thing about John both physically as well as metaphorically. I created the heart to look worked and aged but not broken, the arteries are cut cleanly as though they have been surgically snipped. The interiors of the arteries are coated in gold leaf, describing this man of great merit, "he had a heart of gold." This phrase easily fits the myth/story of John Henry as he was portrayed. John had gold running through every inch of his massive frame.



(Plate #1)

The pedestal upon which the heart sits has many different details, all of which further interpret the narrative of John Henry. The pedestal is simple in form but still conveys a very complex message in relation to the heart. The pedestal is made from a cut down railroad tie, railroad spikes and hickory sledgehammer handles. The tie is the resting place for the heart, showing its own wear and age, pockmarked with its own history. The tie with its distinct smell of creosote, relates to the heart, trying to preserve that moment, the moment before John Henry fell and his heart was still strong. The heart is placed on the center of the railroad tie between two railroad spikes that hold it in place. However, the spikes do not pierce the heart. The spikes are meant to further frame the importance of John Henry's heart as it relates to his folktale, pointing out that it wasn't how hard he worked, his body just gave in.

The legs on this pedestal are hickory sledge handles that were used for traditional railroad hammer handles. Most of us at one time have picked up a hammer, shovel, pick, sledge and so on. So we have a familiarity with their traditional uses. Hickory is known for its strength and toughness, as was John. Not only do these handles refer to John Henry, they also connect to the working class people in our culture. The people who built our country with their backs had to be tough and rugged. These handles may seem thin in comparison to the mass of the railroad tie and the heart that they support, but they do not yield to the weight. John was a massive man and these handles would have looked like toothpicks in comparison to him, but they held the weight of his thirty-pound hammers as well as the enormous amount of power that John had to swing them. The handles also have scars from the use and abuse that they took over time, just

as anyone does who works with their hands for all of their lives. On the base of the handles are gold leaf handprints. These handprints are placed where one would hold onto a sledgehammer to swing it and get its full driving force. The gold, referring to the heart, visually carries one back to the top of the piece, giving viewers a hint that the actions of the hands are just as important and are an extension of the action of the heart.

*“A Man Ain’t Nothing But a Man”* is meant to be a testament to the workingman in our culture. John Henry is a metaphor for every man who has died working to support his family, friends and way of living. In our current society we frown upon manual labor and label it as beneath us. We should not forget what would happen to us without those who carry our scars, who carry our burdens, but most of all, who carry us.

### **Historical Model of the Real Man Before the Myth**

Which came first the myth or the man? Within any folktale or myth there is usually a factual basis for its origin, a story based upon real people and events. Many of these tales have come from an oral tradition of story telling rather than from the written word; historically, the vast majority of people could not read or write. These tales were told through word of mouth repeatedly again and again. As with any story, little changes occur with each person who tells the tale. This is how the tale of John Henry was started and lives on.

John Henry was a real man; He was 5 feet 1 1/4 inch’s tall, hailed from New Jersey, and was 19 years old at the time of his supposed duel with the steam

drill. According to Scott Reynolds Nelson author of *Steel Drivin' Man*, John Henry was a Union soldier who ended up in Virginia working on the docks as a porter loading and unloading the ships at the end of the civil war. At this time the south was undergoing a great change. Many of the newly freed slaves left the plantations and went to the cities to find jobs and a better way of life. What many of them found was the same oppression, just in a different form. Many of the southern states had developed "Black Laws or Codes", especially in the state of Virginia. Small misdemeanor crimes for whites were often long hard prison sentences for blacks. This is where the real story of John Henry starts; this is also how his real identity can be traced.

The only John Henry on record working on the railroads at that time, and in the area where his folktale was founded, was a convict. He was convicted of theft and given 10 years, which at that time meant life. Most prisoners' life expectancy was very short due to the harsh living conditions as well as their highly dangerous and stressful working environments they endured as prison laborers. The government used convict labor for income; by loaning their convicts to the railroad companies for a dollar a day per person. The jobs they were doing were extremely physical and dangerous. Many were sent to dig the tunnels through the Appalachian Mountains for the railroad companies. The mountains were made of shale and slate, which are extremely dense and hard rocks to break through. In case of an escape or accident the prisoner's scars were recorded to help identify them. John Henry had no visible scars so he was given one slash on each forearm upon entering prison so he could be identified and



kept on an official record. John Henry's job was a steel driver or hammer swinger.

A crew of workers was made up of two drivers and a shaker. The shaker was the man holding the chisel like drill in place moving it back and forth in the hole to help drill the hole deeper each time the driver hit it. The shakers actually controlled the driver's swinging with a cadence type of song. As he would sing faster, they would hammer faster, and so on. The holes these men had drilled were filled with nitroglycerin or dynamite, then a charge was set and ignited/ blasting the tunnels larger and deeper, making digging faster but much more dangerous.

In using convicts the railroad never had to worry about the workers quitting due to the dangers in this harsh environment. They often even threatened many of the other miners by saying they would hire convicts if they refused to work. A vast majority of these other workers were Irish immigrants and the newly freed blacks, who were already on the low end of the working mans world, taking jobs that no one else would ever want. It is with my own Irish ancestry that I feel a deeper connection to the history of the laborers on the railroads. No matter how dirty or difficult the job, the Irish still took pride in a good days work. Blowing up the tunnels would cause a huge plume of dust to flow throughout the tunnel causing many of the men to die from consumption of the lungs. This I found to be extremely interesting because "consumption of the lungs" is actually what we now know as silicosis, which by definition is "a lung disease caused by prolonged inhalation of dust containing silica, and marked by the development of fibrous tissue in the lungs resulting in chronic shortness of

breath.”(Webster’s, pg. 1247.) Silicosis is also a common fear of most ceramic artists.

At this point in time, two types of steam drills had been invented. Both were rather poor in their function, breaking down on a regular basis, but they were still used. Many of these steam drills were used alongside the steel drivers on a regular basis. These drills caused a lot of dust, which in turn killed a lot of men. So in fact, there could have very well been a race between the steam drill and John Henrys’ crew, and his crew could very well have beaten the steam drill due its constant malfunctioning. The fact of the matter is that he did die during this time from silicosis not a heart attack, and it was most likely due to having had to work with those steam drills. When John Henry died his body was shipped back to Virginia Penitentiary and buried in the sand by the white house, the old prison house on the penitentiary grounds, just as it was said to have been in many of stories and songs about him.

So how did John Henry grow from this man of 5 feet 1 1/4 inches tall to the giant of a man in our modern folktale about him and his mighty feat? As I mentioned before, people tell stories and sing songs for entertainment and inspiration as well as to teach others, especially among those who are illiterate. John Henry’s original songs were used as a warning and reminder of the physical dangers at hand during tunneling. Later, his tale was no longer relegated to just the railroad, it became a call to action for miners, cotton mill workers and to many other laborers, all of whom seemed to add a little more of themselves to his story. But, it wasn’t until the trackliners from the railroad gangs got a hold of his story that he became the hero we know today.

The vast majority of trackliners were young black males. For this job, you had to be young and in shape, but most of all, strong. Trackliners were the men on the railroad gangs who lifted and placed the tracks in place, hammering the spikes into the ties to hold the tracks down. This is back breaking work so who wouldn't want to have heroes they could relate to. This is one place where the larger than life male role models of American folklore take shape. Many of the skilled laborers had heroes such as John Henry at this time; the likes of Pecos Bill for the cowboys, Paul Bunyan for the lumberjacks, Davy Crockett for the frontiersmen, Sally Ann Thunder Ann Whirlwind for frontierswomen and Johnny Appleseed for the expansion of the new frontier to name only a few. These men and women grew greater and greater each time their stories were told. The people who told these stories and did this type of work are the people I relate to. By looking at their stories I started to look into my own family, allowing me to find my personal history, who I am and where I come from. These stories start to show us who we are and where we come from. Each of us has are own tales to tell.

For me, the historical significance of the tale of John Henry is that many of my family members have done physical labor all of their lives and it has taken a toll on all of them. The body can be made strong through great amounts of physical exertion but it can also start to break down if physically abused. Our bodies carry our personal history everywhere we go; they record everything that we do to them physically as well as mentally. That is what my sculptures are meant to do, record and show a history of the body and the events it has gone through. Each part of the body carries its own history, a history that we know and

can recognize in ourselves as well as others. Within our bodies lie the true history  
our genetics.

### III

#### **Personal Genetic Heritage**

In researching the historic role models of American folklore and Greek myth, I have been reminded of my own history and heritage. Each of us has our own folklore and family myths. I find these stories to be extremely important factors in guiding us, or helping us find our most human qualities. By human qualities I mean compassion, honor, and pride. Also within these stories are our darker human qualities as well, such as greed, jealousy and gluttony.

Everywhere we go we carry our personal stories with us. In my own family, the stories change and evolve with each telling, just as those American folktales and Greek myths. There are many of these stories within my own family. Many of our stories are not told through just oral tradition, but also through our physical being or make-up. Our physical characteristics or bodies are what in part ties us to our families, clans, or relations. To know who we truly are, body and mind, I feel first we need to know from whom and where we come.

While being groomed to be the man of family, I was also being groomed to become one of the family historians. I find that these two things go hand in hand. If you do not know the history of who you are and where you come from, you simply cannot learn from your ancestor's triumphs, but most importantly you cannot learn from their failures or mistakes. A majority of these stories are to be used as learning tools for life experience; while others remind you of your history. This teaches us, that whatever you choose to do in a second or in a lifetime can and will affect everyone around you.

There is one such story from my maternal great grandparents. They had lost their tickets for their original boat ride to get to this country from England. Had they not, they may have never made it. Their tickets were for the Titanic, and we all know how that story ended. Also, in another unlikely turn of events, my paternal grandfather was delayed in leaving Sweden to come with his older brother on his voyage to America. This older brother in turn did die on the Titanic. So it's not always a bad thing to get in trouble or just simply lose your tickets. If they hadn't, I wouldn't be here. The lesson learned from within these stories is, that from loss, gains still can be made. From these stories, I have gone as far as getting one of my family crests (Plate # 2) tattooed on to my upper arm and shoulder to always remind me of my ancestors.



(Plate # 2)

This tattoo is from my Irish/Celtic heritage specifically from my great grandmothers maiden name and I wear it as a badge of honor. In turn it led me to a folktale from her side of the family. I say folktale because none of my living relatives knows if this story is true or not. The story is of my great great grandmother who had lost her lower leg to a bone infection. Many years after losing her lower leg she had developed a constant pain where her leg used to be. We now have a term for this affliction, “phantom limb syndrome,” where people develop pains in locations of their bodies where limbs have been removed or lost. According to the story, she told her sons to go to the spot in the yard where they had buried it and dig the lower leg up, and, to place it in a new box and rebury it. Upon digging the leg up they had found that the box in which it had been buried was badly damaged and the leg was mangled. So they did as their mother had asked and placed the leg in a new box, setting the bones into their proper form, and reburied it. She was said to never have the pain again.

Another family story is of my great Uncle Red who supposedly had hands twice the size of a normal man’s. Red was a carpenter who stood around six foot four or five inches, and was as crazy and tough a man as anyone has ever seen. One story tells how he once punched a man so hard that the man flew backwards across a bar floor and went head-first through a jukebox. Just one punch! Tales such as these give our families’ unique qualities, a richness from within our own personal history. These people are made from the same genes that make you, which gives them an even more physical presence in what makes you as a person.

Upon hearing the stories about Red, I just kept envisioning this huge hand gripping a large piece of lumber. Envisioning the hand in much the same way a

small child might while looking at an adult's hand, a hand that could engulf your own. As a child, hands always amazed me. You can tell a lot about a person by just their hands alone. For *Red* (Plate # 3) I kept envisioning this huge, meaty, worn hand, a hand that looked like it had worked hard all of its life, a hand that was just as imposing as the man himself. Red's hand is made in much more of a childish manor. I wanted it to retain some of that wonderment we have towards people when we are young.

His hand is in action gripping this large piece of lumber, as if it is pulling him up. The hand is scared but exudes strength, with incised areas exploring its innermost workings. This hand tells a story of its own.



(Plate # 3)



It is through this connection with my male role models such as my Uncle Red and family narrative that I am trying to find the balance that positive masculinity provides. If I take the messages in the stories about my great Uncle Red in the wrong context they can push me in the direction of the hyper-masculine male. It is through his physical retorts or actions in these stories that I find I need to keep my wits about me and not always let my emotions control me. Thinking before one reacts too emotionally, is sometimes necessary for balancing oneself.

Knowing those stories is simply not enough in telling you who you are. One needs to know their family's genetic history as well. While one inherits their family's strengths they also inherit all of their genetic weaknesses. Doctors now have us fill out a form that asks about our family's medical histories, in order to ascertain certain genetic ailments that one may be predisposed to, such as heart problems, diabetes, cancer, and many other diseases, disorders, or weaknesses of the body. Within my own work I also operate in this way, dissecting the human form, breaking it down into its most simple segments, showing that each and every part of our body is important and carries a unique story unto itself. For example, our skin is the most accessible to us, we see it and feel it everyday. Our skin shows the world our history, through scars and tattoos. It is our skin that protects us from the numerous external forces that can harm us. The same can be said for our body's other complex systems, such as our internal organs, muscular system, nervous system, and most importantly our skeletal system. Each and every bone in our body has a specific function and records every movement our body makes. When we die our bones are often all that's left, and from them we

can tell many things about the person from whom they are from. We can find out how old the person was, what their social status was, what caused their death, and more often than not we can tell what that person did for a living. Our bones show if we were well nourished and lived a well-to-do life. If the person were sick the bones would show depletion in calcium or mineral build-up making them weak. If this person was a fighter or a laborer, the bones might show excess stress or even breaks or fractures. Through these bones I find my own families history. They show me from whom, from what and from where I have come.

## IV

### *Blue Collar*

As an artist my processes have grown out of a connection with my blue collar past. Through this, I honor the ideals of workmanship and craftsmanship that have become relegated to second-class status. I find that these processes, materials, and ways of working with your hands show us the importance of physicality as empowerment and most importantly as expression.

The process and materials with which I choose to work are tied to the content of my work. Without clay there would be no record of early history or myth. From the first clay sculpture of a prehistoric bison, to the Greek amphora's with the epic stories that are placed upon them, clay's ability to contain narrative has always intrigued me. Like the bones of our body, these objects and artifacts have stood the test of time, allowing us to gain insight into our past.

The way in which many of the male role models in my life have shown me what it means to be a man is by that of a physical nature. In other words you have to get your hands dirty first to ever make something of yourself. Aspects of our culture are supported by working class men. These men provide and care for others by giving of their own bodies. This is truly where my roots lie, within the context of the craftsmen and laborers.

It was not an uncommon occurrence for me to go and watch my grandfather in his workshop. Many of my uncles did the same thing showing me the proper ways to use tools, telling me that as long as you know how to and are

not afraid of hard work one can always provide for their families. Sometimes, they took this hard work ethic to such a great extent, that it took a heavy toll on their bodies. Every one of my uncles has had back surgery at one time or another due to the extreme amounts of pressure that they have placed on their bodies. My grandfather blew out both of his knees from years and years of abuse as a mason. This has left me with a deep feeling of gratitude towards them. To me, their stories need to be told, because they fit into that same mold of men such as John Henry. These things are what a man of the family is supposed to do. At least this is what I believe, what I was taught.

Within my own work, I can find no other material that can convey this way of thinking more successfully than clay. Clay, directly records physical responses to the world; combined with other materials such as wood, fiber, metal or found objects, I can recreate countless stories. I have found that these materials can carry physical remnants of tension and struggle just as our own bodies do. Most importantly they can overcome the adversity of time, just as myth and folklore have. I would like my work to tell the tales of times gone past and the importance of working with one's hands just as those Greek amphora's have to me. As a well-trained artist, I am part of academia, while simultaneously choosing areas to work within that are more associated with a craftsman. Through this, I try to occupy the space of the blue-collar workers within my own family, while also trying to maintain a balance. With the two spaces, one allows me freedom of thought while the other gives me the ground upon which I can support my family, and is the foundation of my families' narrative and history.

## V

### **Man of The Family**

“Man of the family” is a phrase that I have heard repeatedly throughout my life, as have countless other men while growing from adolescence into adulthood. The term “man” is something I have been contending with for a long time. What does it mean to be a man, especially in a time within our culture where I feel the masculine identity is being suppressed? Our society is now running the risk of developing a large number of young men who without positive forms of masculine identity become hyper-masculine, making them in turn place more emphasis on exaggerated male stereotypical behaviors such as abnormal strength, overt aggression, and maladjusted virility. The story of John Henry was twisted to fit within this stereotype through his feats of overwhelming strength from his later stories made up by the trackliners on the railroad gangs. For myself, this move towards negative masculinity is a road which I had found myself traveling down. Within my work I seek to show the importance of positive or healthy masculinity through tying masculine experiences together, to record and balance their strengths, weaknesses, history, and personal form.

Throughout my life I have gravitated to many male role models, from the men in my family, to the men a child reads about in myth and folklore. Not all male role models have to be male; my mother and aunts have played large roles in helping me find the right path as well. My grandfather and my mother were and still are the most important teachers in my life. Upon my grandfather’s death, my uncles took over where he had left off and placed the new burden upon

me. The burden of becoming a man of the family at the age of eleven was something I toiled over for a long time and still do to this day. I now had to become a provider and protector for my family and friends.

To become the provider and protector within their eyes I had to become more masculine. So they sought to extinguish the traits men supposedly should not have, such as crying, or any other trait that they might have deemed to be to feminine. If I got hurt, they'd just say, "Brush it off," or "Boys don't cry." They would say this world is a hard place and you need to learn to deal with it. The term they used the most often to get under my skin was of course everyone's favorite, "Mama's Boy". This term lead me to think of the story of Achilles.

Achilles was the greatest and most well known of the Greek warriors who fought in the Trojan War. Legend states that Thetis, mother of the great Greek warrior Achilles, knew her son would be born mortal as told by Apollo. So Thetis dipped Achilles into the river Styx while he was still an infant to make him invulnerable/ immortal. In the process of dipping him, Thetis held her son by his heel; this was the only spot on Achilles that was left mortal.

Achilles exploits during the Trojan War were great. He was said to have killed hundreds of Trojan warriors by himself alone. During a battle, Achilles was struck in his heel by a poisoned arrow from Paris, a prince of Troy. The arrow Paris shot was said to have been guided by the God of prophecy Apollo, who told Thetis of her sons' inevitable fait. The resulting image of masculinity includes one fatal flaw. How fitting it is that Achilles mother was the one who tried to protect her son. Today, an act such as that could warrant a man to no longer be looked at

as a great warrior but a Mama's Boy! This term is used to emasculate young men everywhere.

Until recently, this title has bothered me for much of my life. In rereading the myth of Achilles, the greatest mythical warrior of all time, and finding that he was a true mamas' boy, I now can embrace this aspect of my own story. There is no reason a man raised by his mother cannot be tough, while still being compassionate at the same time.



(Plate # 4)

Now enlightened, I had to make a piece about Achilles. I chose to make the foot of Achilles for one sole reason, Achilles' heel, defined as "a weakness that seems small but makes somebody fatally vulnerable."(Webster's, pg. 11.) The heel, from which his mother dipped him to protect him, is now a term that refers to mortal weakness.

In “Mama’s Boy”(Plate #4), the foot of Achilles is resting upon a bed of upright arrows, which are imbedded into a large block of wood. This pedestal of arrows acts as a funerary rack upon which many of the great Greek heroes were burned after their deaths. The visual weight of the foot upon the arrows implies the weight and damages that the term Mama’s Boy can have on many men in our culture. “Achilles’ heel” and “Mama’s Boy” are used in the same way, the only difference being “Achilles’ heel” can be used on a broad spectrum of people, both male and female, where Mama’s Boy is meant to be a weakness in men and men alone. Would Achilles have been upset at having been called a Mama’s Boy; I think not. He loved and respected his mother Thetis greatly. Achilles’ most likely would have challenged whomever called him that on the spot, not for trying to demean him, but for speaking badly about his mother.

Just as my sculptural foot is larger than a mortal man’s, the Greeks often portrayed many of their heroes as larger than life; no mortal man could have done such great things. Achilles was a warrior, so his foot needed show these characteristics. This foot needed to look as though it had been through many battles, showing its scars, almost broken but at the same time very strong. Incisions have been made in two areas on the foot to further explore Achilles’ story. One of the incisions has been made on the broad plain of the foot, searching through the ligaments and tendons to see if there is anything that differs from our own. The key incision is made around the Achilles tendon. This incision points out that the tendon remains intact or undamaged. Achilles was poisoned not broken. That is why he fell. If the tendon were only cut, Achilles



would have been left immobile or weakened, not dead. Whether it was his mothers' love or the poison on the arrow, his fate was predestined.

The arrows upon which Achilles' foot lies convey his true outcome. During this time in history the arrow was one of the most feared weapons of all. Not because of the distance it could cover, or the physical damage it could inflict, but for the things in might carry. Arrows during this time-period were poisoned. All it took was a single scratch to spell out your inevitable doom. This is why the foot just rests upon the arrowheads. All they need to do is pierce the flesh slightly and they inflict great damage.

Words have this power as well, words can cut like razors if used rightly, bringing the strongest to their knees. These arrows are a physical representation for the words, "Mamas Boy." The term can be emasculating to the point of physical pain or one can embrace it. In embracing it, that perceived weakness becomes a strength. This is key for a positive masculine identity in teaching men how to balance they're emotional being. This piece is meant to reflect the tenuous balance that many young men face in our society between positive and negative masculinity. Placing too much pressure on one spot will break the flesh allowing the poison in. Finding out how to balance your strengths and weaknesses you will only become stronger; by allowing in small doses of those poisons one can build up an immunity.

## **Conclusion**

To be a man of the family is something that I have toiled over for many years. In writing this paper and making my work I have found that masculinity has many complex layers. It was within these layers that I had found myself torn between the boundaries of positive masculinity and hyper-masculinity. In finding the ability to show emotion through a physical means within my sculptures, I allowed myself to find a more identifiable form of communication to others. The words that are often hard for me to express seem to resonate with the work. Clay, my chosen material shows expression more than any other material I have ever worked with. Clay tells the history of whom ever has worked with it. Working with this material allowed me to connect to my own history and helped me find a way to talk about it both physically and verbally. It helped me find the stories and people who helped form me into the man that I am and will continue to grow into.

My current body of work seeks to occupy these issues and stories. By creating works that show this construction of a man, showing that it takes many people to make up a single person, with every voice being important male and female. Each part of our body carries a different story. These body parts are in turn stories of the people who have helped define my self-image, highlighting all of the strengths, weaknesses, histories and showing the importance of a positive masculine identity.

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Plates



“A Man Ain’t Nothin But A Man”



“RED”

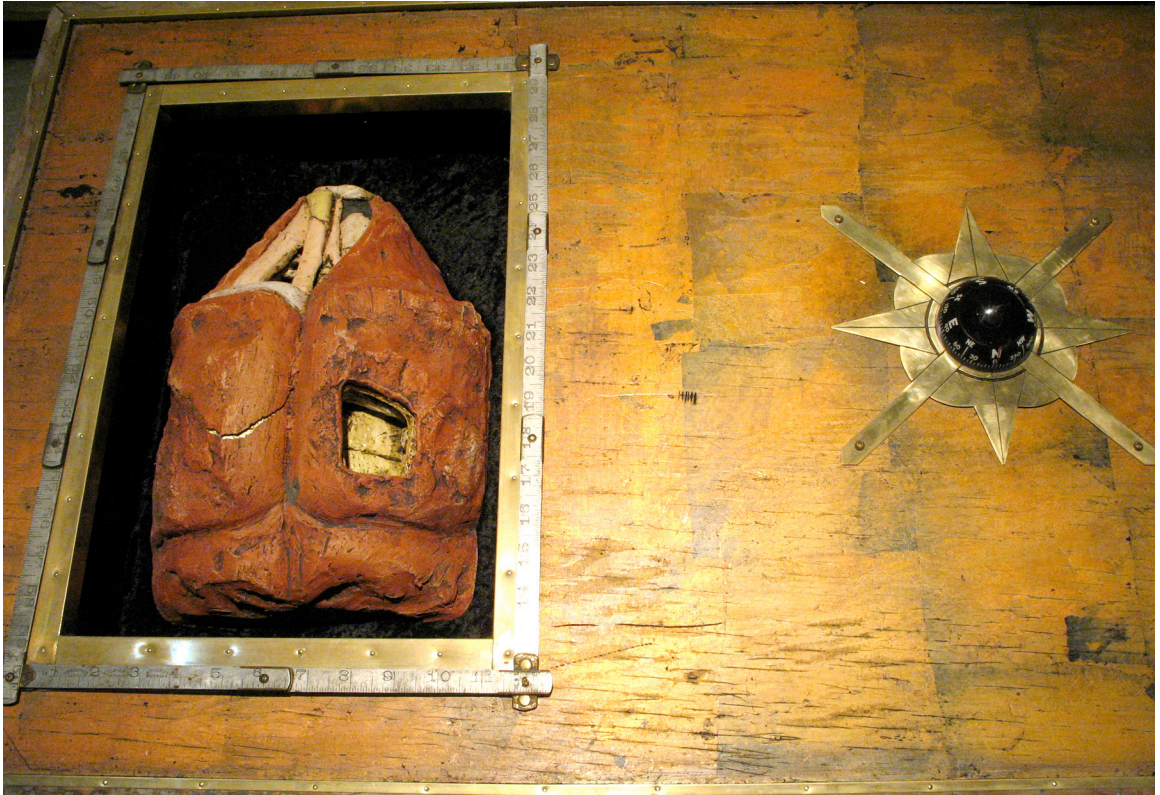


“Mama’s Boy”





“I Never Knew His Voice”



“Never Lost”





“Mr. Brown”



“Swede”





“Level Ground”



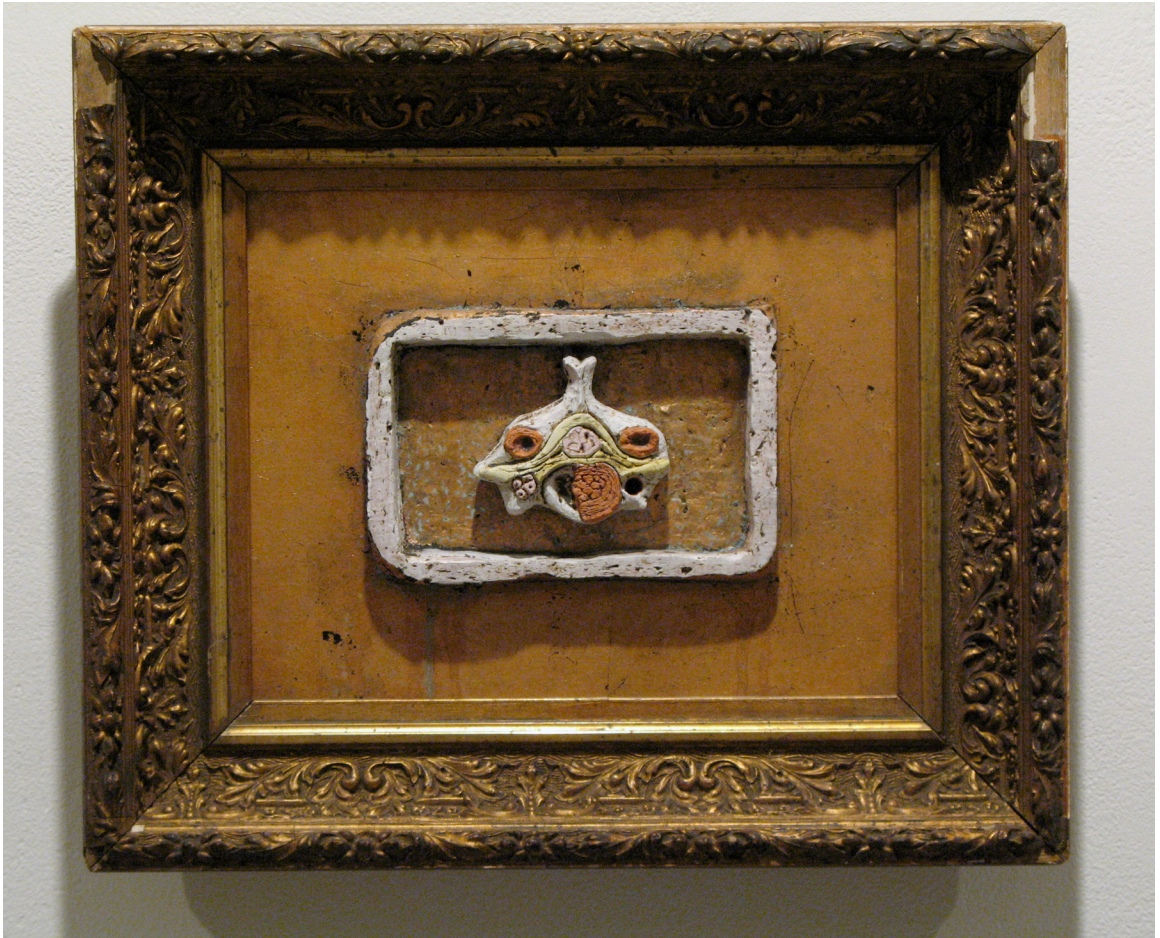
“Level Ground Detail”





“Human Dictionary”





“Support”



“Words”





“Twice A Day”