AN ABSURD BEAUTY

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Master of Fine Arts

by

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it is worthy of acceptance.

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…But because truly being here is so much; because everything here apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all. Once for each thing. Just once; no more. And we too, just once, completely, even if only once:
to have been at one with the earth, seems beyond undoing… (Rilke, 1989)

Vaso Furtévo

to all that is brief and fragile
superficial, unstable
to all that lacks foundation
argument or principles
to all that is light
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to all that is light in weight
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An Absurd Beauty

I present the essence of temporal beauty in my ceramic assemblages. Human beings are ephemeral; our relationships are ever changing and our environments are transitory yet we continually deny this basic principle of our existence. This is an absurd beauty that encompasses the human condition. Absurdity lies in things that seemingly lack reason, things that may seem, at times, quite ridiculous. Often, we do not have answers and this causes tension; we quickly dismiss this as irrational. I use this oft-dismissed tension and emphasize it in my sculptural confections.

Generally defined, beauty is a quality of someone or something that pleases the senses. However, I believe this common acceptance misses the mark. My research is based on expanding this narrow notion of beauty and revealing that beauty may actually be found in unforeseen places.

These unforeseen places can be found in the tensions between materials that at times occupy a space of hard and soft, between strength and fragility. I push my work to an acute level of fragility using translucent porcelain, terra cotta, sugar, wax and fat. The combination of these fragile and temporary materials pushed to a level of delicacy attains a feeling of the transience. I illuminate the transitory nature of existence, which we each embody, in my ceramic sculptures. When building, I use thinly crafted porcelain slabs, which when fired, become translucent. The thinness of the clay is a metaphor for the inevitable shattering of our own bodies. In an instant, our bodies become like that of delicate thin-fired clay, breakable and
irreversibly transformed. I am showing - through the indirect and deviously flexible nature of the forms - that process and change are constant and we do affect and alter our relationships. This is an aspect of our lives that we tend to ignore. I want the work to find the space between things: the waiflike membrane that divides the soft and hard qualities, which we all possess. When this space of vulnerability is exposed, we grow.

Tangible, beautiful events pass, even if we are not aware. The questions, the engagement in pondering and the desire for knowledge are what I am exposing:

That source of pleasure to the eyes
Youth owns, wit snatches, money buys,
Envy affects to scorn, but lies:
One fatal flaw it has. It dies. (Elkins, 2004)

This passage declares the flaw of beauty is that it dies. We should not view the passing of beauty as a flaw but as a quality of life that is consequently valuable. Beauty passes and moves beyond our grasp; so its impermanence is the reason for its value. The space that I am interested in locating is exemplified in a story of a child who has lost her first pet.

When a friend of mine was a little girl, she and her twin brother owned pet gerbils. These pets have a very short life span. To help the children with their loss, their parents arranged funeral processions for each of the gerbils upon their deaths. The days following the burial of each gerbil were filled with digging children who labored in the hot New Mexico sun to retrieve their bodies. The children played with the dead animals for hours during those days. The children had not yet grasped the inevitable fact of impermanence or the grotesque activities that made up their
adoring play. Yet there is awareness in their naiveté, which was lost when they learned of the social and institutional taboos associated with handling dead animals. The children were only naïve to cultural norms, yet sensitivity for life and relationships arises from their story. I find this story to be a vivid example of the absurd beauty, which faces us all, young and old. Children tend to be drawn unknowingly to these moments as they experience many new and wonderful things. Adults find a necessity for coping mechanisms, a sort of band-aid. It is okay to be affected and associate with feelings that may at times seem ridiculous. In fact, these times of absurdity and irrationality draw one to the space between the intellect and the instinctual. We often dismiss these incomprehensible moments far too quickly. Yet, this space alters notions of our relationships to the social environment, to other human beings and to ourselves. As an artist, I focus contemplation and awareness on these fleeting moments; while seemingly ridiculous and obscure at times, they fulfill and strengthen our understanding of this world.

I work with numerous materials varying from porcelain to sugar and partially hydrogenated vegetable oil to create sweet, subtle concoctions. I'm interested in these materials functioning outside of their normal context. For instance, I am not baking with the sugar or Crisco; rather I am more interested in the simple materiality they offer. My choice to use these materials is driven by the form and through the context they carry. I use sugar boiled to hard-crack temperatures (310° F) because it is formally alluring, and, ever so sexy. However, the sugar in this form is in flux, it is literally moving because it is 99% sugar and 1% water and other materials. A very “solid liquid”, this sugar is not permanent; it exists in a state of
change.

In essence, I am using sugar as a metaphor as well as a material: slowly transforming and altering its shape sugar forms a facade.

“The sugar's effect on the body is short lived and wears off within an hour… (Insulin) is there long after the sugar wears off. This causes a mood swing. This time the mood is one of depression. Physically the body experiences lethargy. This usually causes the individual to use sugar to feel better” (Whitney, Cataldo, & Rolfes, 1991).

Sugar has the ability to make one feel good for a short time yet it can make a person feel worse than they had before the indulgence. It’s a cover-up, a short-lived, false-positive feeling. Sometimes we use things like sugar to cover-up our true feelings. Difficult situations should be thought about and dealt with. Through thoughtfulness, communication and understanding that change is constant, beauty can be found within a moment of awkwardness or even extreme pain.

My work celebrates this form of beauty within unexpected painfully fragile forms as in *Tip Toe* (Figure 1). I want *Tip Toe* to feel as though it is a lone remnant
from a former relationship. This hollow lattice-structured porcelain is an incredibly fragile vessel. The mysterious thing that it was previously holding is only referenced in volume, the mass is no longer present. The form simply alludes to something that once existed or a change that has occurred. All of the alluring sugary substance has seeped down and out of the main form leaving only the pure white shell.

The platform holding the white object has an unusual color; it is a color caught between pretty and repulsive. The soft pink is associated with youth and innocence while the darker tones give it a sense of age, maturity and it becomes semi-fleshy. The play between these opposing forces places the object in an unknown placement in our perception. I’m interested in this push between pretty and repulsive a space where we begin to feel a bit uneasy. This soft pink box is an unknown, seemingly solid support structure for the frail, fleeting white form. The piece is a moment of transition that is caught between birth and loss, a change that is uncertain. While working, I am interested in the push and pull between soft and hard, that which is understood yet beyond grasp, and, in pushing permanence within the impermanent.

Translucent, fragile, hollow forms are held by a pillowy mass, a succulent drip. This is an ethereal moment; stillness preserved. This moment is transitory, yet temporarily frozen. The candy will continue a sluggish drip and organic wax will transform. These ephemera continue to change along with our perceptions and experiences. Discharged from a cold enigmatic translucent bulbous shell, a drip of sugar seduces and entices. The sensitive shell is weeping the pleasurable sugary, yet mysterious substance. Wax covering soft white fat is something familiar; it gains
attention, yet we are not sure of its function. This causes us to question its placement and importance. This questioning draws us to closer investigation.

Closeness is gained. The shell is a fragile holding object, although it is familiar, it cannot be placed. This abstraction adds mystery to the intimate situation, a mystery that lies within the uncontainable qualities of life. A personal relationship, as gained through the intimacy my work elicits, sparks the investigation of a connection. A connection is sought so that one may better understand this world in which we reside. The work sits inviting us, yet it will seep into a place that is unknown.

Though perhaps always beyond reach, the unknown may make one feel frustrated and anxious. This does not negate the need for investigation or care. The things that we cannot categorize potentially need more attention and invite the viewer to participate in a dialogue of understanding.

When everything and everyone is continually changing, how can anyone participate in any kind of dialogue? Understanding this sometimes-overwhelming human condition seems like trying to grasp a slippery fish. At times we feel as though we have accomplished some level of knowing, yet very quickly this changes with each loss we endure and with the many changing elements that make up our lives. In order to grow, we must give attention and care to the many changing moments that make up our lives.

Nothing is so strong as gentleness, and nothing so gentle as real strength. – Francis De Sales
I am interested in a fleeting moment that lies between an eggshell and an ash; the feeling of lightness as if one could breath and the form would collapse, shift and be lost. Very thin translucent porcelain imparts a sense of lightness and airiness. This airiness or lattice-like structure lends an awareness of the gentleness needed for handling such fragile work. I am not only interested in a physical touch when I mention handling this work. More importantly, I am interested in a mental handling. Gentle Anxiety (Figure 2) refers to the specific feeling I am interested in sharing through this piece. A tactile feeling experienced through the sense of sight; it becomes an unnerving sensitivity. Gentle anxiety is a lightness and heaviness in the same moment; it is an awkward sensation.

The work of Eva Hesse has a similar tension in form and a gentle sensitivity. Specifically, Hesse’s piece Repetition Nineteen III, 1968 embodies strength in fragility. Made from fiberglass and polyester resin, the work is translucent. This translucency, along with its thin edges, gives this work a delicate presence. Undulations throughout the forms give them life and variety. The personified forms
dance awkwardly with each other as if dealing with the trials of life. The horror of fleeing Nazi Germany, its effects on her family and losing her parents at a young age explodes from her work in heartache. As Hesse states, “I think art is a total thing. A total person giving a contribution. It is an essence, a soul. … In my inner soul, art and life are inseparable.” (http://www.answers.com/topic/eva-hesse, October 4, 2006)

The temporality of life is exemplified more through Hesse’s work and demise. Her work embodies an absurd beauty in two ways. Her work breaks down with time as a function of the materials she uses and will not be available for future viewing. Absurd beauty also lies in the materials, although knowledge of it may only be gained through a deeper investigation of the artist. Hesse used highly toxic resins that caused her to develop a brain tumor. At a young age, while becoming recognized as an important artist, she was dying as a result of her work. When engaged with Hesse’s work one cannot help but think about the result of her undertakings.

In contrast, the work of Wolfgang Laib is grounded in strength and stability. Laib breaks down the walls that separate us from the natural world, walls we tend to forget. In his work, the boundaries between life and work cannot be seen. Laib spends months meticulously and methodically collecting pollen: a spiritual process of repetition. The natural materials that constitute the forms are ephemeral and temporal; it is light and asks the viewer to view cautiously. This juxtaposition adds an interesting twist to his work. Initially, we are struck with something known through formalism; a square color field. Yet, when the reality of material comes to light it alters our relationship with our expectations of material and objects. This is
not simply a large object that is self-contained; rather it is a poetic message about an individual’s spiritual relationship to nature. Influenced by India’s ritual and ceremonial acts, Laib’s work and life are inseparable. Laib was educated in medicine and was not formally trained as an artist. He found that medicine addressed human needs improperly so he turned to art. I am informed by the intimacy of Laib’s process. His process reveals a concentrated intensity he shares with his changing environment.

Similar to Laib, intimacy is a close relationship embraced through my process and offered to the viewer. It is important for my work to hold one’s attention so they may ponder a fragile beauty. There are many visual elements I use to slow a viewer and bring them into close proximity with my work. Some of the things I continually use include distinct edges, attention to miniscule details, small scale and curious textures. Most commonly, I engage a sense of layering in my work: building up and striping away. This creates surfaces and forms that occupy a space that is between a sense of youth and age.

In *Double Docks* (Figure 3) all of these layers of information are realized. The two boxes have a very tenuous relationship, seen in the tiny metal details that hold them apart. The top box passes something unknown yet seemingly soft to the bottom box. Both boxes reflect the curve of the other as though they could fit together intimately in this temporal state.
As the viewer finds trusts in this intimate experience, they may follow curiosity and investigate the little details. I offer these details in textures and little impressions. Sometimes the space is not realized or understood in the first interaction with the work. Only with time can the viewer experience the variety of facets of a form, which become a reward for patience and fortitude. The edges are not straight or dynamic but are undulated, jagged, and curvilinear. When an eye follows a straight line, it is a quick endeavor, while I am asking the eye to slow, to follow me unhurried. My work asks for patience for a full experience.

The scale asks the viewer to make an effort for closer investigation. Sitting as an invitation for one to ponder, this work does not have an intimidating presence, as it might, if it were larger in scale. Intimate work may be experienced with the same sensitivity as when one holds something with wonder.

When I think of holding something with wonder I am reminded of my grandfather. When I was young, my grandparents would visit our home. I couldn’t
wait to grab my grandpa’s big, solid, generous hand. My grandpa had the most
wonderful unique hands, like no others I have felt. As a child they were hands of
understanding, care and healing. Sometimes, even as a grown adult, I long for those
feelings. Just being in his presence elicited feelings of great power and knowledge.

After holding my grandpa’s hand, we would walk. My grandpa showed me
the details. He would hold an object very close; we would talk about the color,
fragrance, and feel.

When I was young I didn’t realize that my grandfather saw things
differently. I knew that he couldn’t drive or read but otherwise saw better than
anyone I knew. He saw better than most people because he could not see. Grandpa
was half blind, which meant that he could only see outlines and varying shapes.
Small details had to be felt, smelled, tasted and heard. Often grandpa would hold
something very closely which gave the object a feeling of affection and heightened
worth. He was drawing it in to experience the details that are often overlooked.
This intimate moment was so special to me even at a very young age. I am so glad
that I had the insight to honor the worth of those moments I had with my
grandfather.

As my grandparents became older and frailer, I would drive to their house
knowing I would not always have the opportunity to spend time with them. I
wanted to capture as many stories in my memory as I could before it was too late.

The stories they shared were wonderful, mostly for the absurd details, which
surrounded their telling and encapsulated them in my memory. For example, I
remember the salad my grandfather would make while telling me a story that I had
heard many times before. He would hold his head very close to the cutting board and knife while cutting. No one else could ever make such amazing textures in a salad. Why do I remember the environment of the telling of that story in detail, down to the form of a salad, but I cannot remember the story? I believe I retained the important details of the moments I shared with my grandpa. The stories that he experienced did not have a huge impact on me, it was the experience that I was having at those moments shared with my grandpa that are more precious to me. It is important for me to share these seemingly small moments in my work.

The small details that make up our lives are easily overlooked. Outside the studio where I work, there are three Ginkgo trees. I spent a lot of time pondering those trees. I would visit them when I needed a little color outside the gray concrete and white walls of my studio. For a very short time in the year, the tree’s leaves are golden. This sliver of time and the transition relate to my ideas of life. Human life occurs for such a short time, and should other things occupy us, we will miss the beautiful details. The minimal colors in my work, just as in the changing Gingko leaves, are a reminder of this sliver of time we occupy.

The beauty and transitory nature of the Gingko leaf has played a distinct role in my work. Rather than depict a Gingko tree or the leaves, I choose to demonstrate the essence or feeling the trees have graced me with, to transform the outside natural world to the abstract objects that I make. When something like a Gingko tree has an affect on me, I reflect on the moment of affection. At that time, I may not know the reason for the attraction to any given thing. But with time and continued reflection I begin to articulate more clearly why something has piqued my interest.
It usually begins with a moment of wonder, which is not necessarily a positive wonder. On the contrary, sometimes the most fruitful influences arise from awkward dissonance within a relationship I have with another human being, object or an environment. These are moments that make me feel uncomfortable or uneasy. But then I think about why I feel this discomfort from something that is not actually carrying these feelings but instead are being projected from myself. These moments of thoughtfulness and care, when I stop to question these uncomfortable temporal relationships, are when I gain a better understanding of the part I play in this world.

When there is an understanding of this temporal existence, there is much to be considered. In my work, I offer patient labor as an example of how to cope with these overwhelming attributes of life. As a metaphor of how we should relate to other human beings, I intensely care for my work. Care is present throughout my work. After delicacy is pushed to the penultimate and it seems the work can barely stand, I’ll push another layer of care into it.

An African philosophy known as Ubuntu illustrates the importance of care. As this philosophy is understood throughout African households it is difficult to locate the origins. Used to bring unity amongst the post-apartheid South African people by the South African National Assembly, Ubuntu is explained in the following passage:

"The principle of caring for each other’s well-being will be promoted, and a spirit of mutual support fostered. Each individual’s humanity is ideally expressed through his or her relationship with others and theirs in turn through recognition of the individual’s humanity. Ubuntu means that people are people through other people. It also acknowledges both the rights and the responsibilities of every citizen in promoting individual and societal well-being." (www.buzzle.com/editorials/7-22-2006-103206.asp, September 30, 2006.)
Ubuntu is a way of placing and giving purpose to the individual within society. The idea that our care and attention for each other has an affect, not only on the other individual, but also on ourselves, is quite apparent. We gain insight on humanity and ourselves through others.

The idea that one element, one individual, may have an affect on others is certainly something I explore in my work. Often, there is more than one element relating to another, completing the other, and giving meaning through its relationship. We begin to understand a relationship within the environment where each individual has importance. There’s an interaction that would be incomplete or lacking without the parts that make up the whole.

“We are social beings not constituted for such physiological and emotional isolation. For those that attempt it, there are enormous costs. A great deal of literature in health and psychology shows that the cost of isolation is physical and psychological breakdown. Under such conditions we simply deteriorate.” (Johnson, S. Marano, H. E., 1994)

In my work I am interested in sharing this breakdown during isolation. (see Figure 4) Lightness is presented clearly in form and color, yet the object’s relationship to space causes heaviness. The feeling of melancholia weighs heavy when this object sits isolated. The intense fragility of the work hangs anxiously as if one sat high on the limb of a great redwood. A quiet approach is necessary; the balance my work demands can only exist in quiet reflection. For some of the work, I want the pieces to feel as though they exist gently and were quietly placed. A cautious and gentle contact elicits a personal awareness of proximity to such work but also an awareness of the artist’s sensitivity and care.
In *MPM* (figure 4), I push the sense of isolation hoping to gain an empathetic response. Sad, frail and alone, this piece encompasses the feeling of the individual who thinks they can live alone. I’m interested in the empathy we may feel for others in this situation. I believe empathy is crucial for the simple fact that there are times when we all feel as though we are utterly alone in this world. Empathy is feeling another’s pain without having fully experienced it oneself. We can have empathetic feelings if we retain some of that middle space between what we know and what we cannot fully understand.

During my first experience teaching, I was challenged by a situation I didn’t understand immediately. Rather than dismiss this situation, I patiently and thoughtfully worked through it. It would be a huge understatement to simply say my young student was disengaged; she wore a protective layer of thorns miles and miles thick. She had clearly been sitting quietly, not disturbing a thing at the back of classroom as if she had been there for years. Socially inept and immovably
stubborn, this woman was an outsider. When I questioned her about her work, she told me she didn’t know why she was making certain decisions, which of course is completely normal for a beginning art course. When I asked her how she felt about these things, her lashing response was quick; she didn’t care.

This single comment affected me deeply, possibly because I was in my first semester of formal teaching, or maybe because I cared so deeply. Regardless, this young woman eventually gained my empathy. At first I became angry, probably because of my ego or because she quickly dismissed me. After much contemplation of that particular moment, I realized that none of this was about me. Clearly it was about the young woman and how she was coping within her own experience of life.

This is when she gained my empathy and I was reminded of a simple rule that I learned many years earlier; treat others as you would like to be treated (Aristotle’s Golden Rule). I do not know where this woman’s pain came from but it does not matter. Do I really need to know her story to show her compassion and care? I do not think so; the only thing that matters is how I treat her and how I show her care, gentleness and compassion. She began to participate and ultimately she grew.

When isolation occurs there is a sort of dissonance when trying to relate to the individual that creates walls. I find it very important to look beyond these awkward moments and relate from our interior. We have all experienced pain in one form or another. Sometimes we forget, and when we don’t understand, we often dismiss. It is much easier to say that a person is a miserable and terrible human being than to actually ponder them as an individual. Maybe it would make more
sense if we accepted there are things that just cannot be fully understood and maybe isolation or difficult behavior is just how this person is bearing all their pain and trouble. It takes much more strength to look beyond negative personality traits and deeper into another human being than to simply see them at face value. When we overcome our own fears and approach others with gentleness and care, a deeper understanding will be achieved.

The interactions that make up the relationships we participate in are always changing. Human beings have the potential for growth and we affect one another. This is very important because each of us experiences complicated issues that cannot be understood completely by anyone else. We can accept that we are all going through often complicated and difficult situations. Absurdly beautiful moments are happening all the time. I believe the moments that we don’t understand, and may even at times make us feel uncomfortable, are where growth occurs and as such, have a different kind of beauty. Acceptance of this ephemeral condition in which our experience exists in a temporal state allows us to see the many details that deepen the understanding of our lives.

I bring this sensitivity of awareness and questioning to my studio. I have been living and working in Columbia, Missouri for the last three years, all to grow as an artist and as a human being. I was very interested in giving myself the gift of three years to focus on my work as well as myself. In order to do so, I moved myself from my home, family and friends, which distanced everything known from my grasp.
My father once told me that with any new endeavor, I should not be scared or worried; ultimately one really cannot prepare. I probably rolled my eyes at the time but he was right. He told me one very important phrase to remember; he said, “Mandi, you take yourself with you wherever you go, you always have that.” Those were fine words that I have held close through the many moments of frustration and pain that have surfaced through this experience. I really have experienced the last three years as a student, listening to the many teachers that have presented themselves in an array of forms. I spent the first 23 years of my life within a half hour of the home I grew up in. I experienced heartbreak and loneliness prior to moving to Missouri but I never had to do it as such an independent and isolated individual. Through doing so, I often found beauty in the unforeseen moments: the sad moments that made me appreciate and realize the potential of love. I’m sharing through this thesis exhibition the only work that I could ever have made through the experience of these last three years, and also the experience of my entire life.

In creating the work for my thesis show there has been no separation between life and work. This world amazes, confuses and confounds me; I find enough understanding while in my studio digesting my emotions with the unknown to be confronted with the beauty that lies in those moments. The work that I make must look the way that it does. Sometimes I feel as though I am merely the conductor rather than the artist.

When I started working in my graduate studio, I furnished my studio unaware of how the furnishings would function. A large wooden shelving structure with one shelf at eye level became an integral part of my investigations and research.
The shelf has been sitting in my studio, for the past three years, growing and accumulating various items. I decided it would be my play area. The things that confuse, the things I am attracted to and the little ponderings I have come to confront have made their way onto the shelf. I love this shelf. It has offered endless ideas. These little, yet heavily weighted thoughts on beauty, are what I’m interested in sharing and communicating through my work. This shelf is a direct and concrete link to my time as a student. I often came across a “special” or “squishy” item and excitedly carried it to my studio to place it alongside the many others. Sometimes I even brought things in to watch them change and observe my feelings to these changes.

My goal is to imbue objects with the sense of change I find beautiful. I’m sick of being fed an iconographical form of beauty. I see a surface beauty that is not deeply experienced is often accepted. To truly inhabit the middle space where beauty exists, one must endure the many forms and facets of an experience. I believe art is communication and I want my art to communicate patience for the many spaces of understanding that we often neglect. My work is an offering of what I believe true beauty to be.
Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions. (Rilke, 1954)
References


MPM
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Delirium Relic
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