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Derivative currents

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DERIVATIVE CURRENTS

by

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An investigation, through ceramic sculpture, of how the combination of our familial and cultural group dynamics influence our inherent patterns of behavior and the emotions associated with how we view our sense of self and individuality.
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INTRODUCTION

For many years I've been exploring the concept of self, our ways of understanding who we are and what we are about. Beliefs about the self seem pivotal to all our undertakings. More specifically, I feel our sense of self in relation to group dynamics has always played an important role in the way we interact as a society and as individuals. In my ceramic work, using variations of stacked porcelain layers as a metaphor for how our own psychology is built up, I am interested in representing the combination of our familial and cultural group dynamics and their influences on our inherent patterns of behavior and how we view our own individuality.

DISCUSSION OF CONTENT

When thinking about our own individuality, we use certain terms for making our personalities intelligible—terms of emotion, motivation, thought values, and opinions. All are important to the control of our actions and all are influenced by group dynamics.

Although our individual familial group dynamics are very personalized and will affect each of us on varied levels, they bring up questions about how we are similar to our ancestors, and how we are different. Our family elders, our most immediate teachers of life and relationships, whether they are eccentric or mainstream, supportive or trying, present or absent, define in large part who we are. They bring up questions about what is
important in life, what to value, and what to hold sacred. Certain current cultural changes, such as increases in mobile technologies, add to that discussion, but reach us on more of a universal level.

According to Kenneth Gergen, our current cultural group dynamics have produced a condition called the “saturation of self.”\(^1\) Gergen describes this condition as a result of technology and explains how new technologies have made it possible for so many different types of interaction to occur all in the same time frame. The technology and multiple forms of contact, in Gergen’s view, leave us with a “multiplicity of incoherent and disconnected relationships.”\(^2\) New forms of communication, their influences and the possible effects they may have on one’s self becomes increasingly significant as our world comes to value their convenience more and more. But to what extent are our beliefs and our actions, inherited in part by familial dynamics, altered, when influenced by cultural changes and these new abilities in communication?

On a personal level, these two different group dynamics have both greatly affected the way I view my individuality and the way I view my place in the world. At times, these two influences of familial and cultural group dynamics have often been contradicting in my life. On one hand, I share with my parents and grandparents’ extremely similar personality traits and beliefs about responsibility to family and the enrichment of the relationships with extended family, and on the other hand, our current culture has made it acceptable and easy for me to travel, see the world, claim my independence, and live across the country, but be home in a day. This dichotomy has created a real sense of confusion in my life and these contradicting dynamics have often produced in me an overwhelming feeling of absence as I realize how detached and distant
parts of my life have become and how soon my future life could continue in the same way. Researchers conclude that, "healthy development requires finding an optimal between connectedness and separateness, belonging and individuation, accommodation and autonomy." In recognizing this and the significant role group dynamics has played in my life, it has become important to me to produce work that creates a dialogue concerning the combination of cultural and familial dynamics and their effect on us as developing individuals.

Discussion of Process and Materials

My work focuses on the many emotions we experience when trying to come to terms with how these two dynamics, familial and cultural, affect our sense of self and individuality. I am concerned with showing the progression of these emotions. Therefore, visually, my pieces become an act of development, transformation, or interaction. With an interest in biological anatomy, looking at how closely our physical realm mimics our emotional realm, I have discovered that by using a process of obsessively layering repeated elements, I can emulate the way our own psychology is built up of many layered individual experiences and discrete contributing factors that may be influenced by these group dynamics at any time. This visual metaphor is related to David Hume’s concept of The Bundle Theory on ontology, which asserts, as described by Dave Droar,

Objects are a bundle of their properties. The object itself therefore cannot exist separately from its properties; the object is its collected properties. Hume asserts that the
individual is a product of their thoughts, experiences, etc. However when he attempts to introspect the nature of the self that owns and feels these experiences he comes up empty handed. Not a little reluctantly he thus concludes that there is no 'I' or owner of these experiences, just a set of experiences related by "resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and Cause or Effect."* 

This concept of the influence of group dynamics on the sense of self along with construction becomes the basis to the understanding of each piece.

For example, in the piece titled *Relapse*, I convey these ideas visually using thin porcelain layers. Each porcelain layer represents an influence or pattern of behavior inherited from previous generations and familial dynamics. The stop in the flow of the piece signifies when an individual, due to outside cultural influences, may recognize the effect of familial group dynamics on his or her own behaviors, and change is encouraged. Maybe the pattern of behavior inherited is misunderstood and should be changed or stopped, but, as we know, our learned behaviors are hard to discontinue at times, even though an individual may recognize its affects. This may cause a person to still continue the pattern, while trying harder to make a change. Hence, *Relapse*, as in relapse of behavior.

In another piece titled *Alone, as One*, there are two independent structures, consisting of porcelain layers stacked one on top of the other (each standing approximately 6 feet in height). Some of the layers from one structure interact with some of the layers from the other structure. In this piece, each separate structure’s numerous layers represent an individuals’ personal psychological make up. The points of interaction between the two structures are where and how each individual affects the other as a group.
In a third piece, *Consequence*, small layers are strung along numerous threads between two points. The threads and the layers hold great importance to the concept of the piece, in that they represent the memories of people we string along and take with us. Our experiences continue to accumulate as our increasingly mobile culture consequently makes most of our past, meaningful, important relationships now only feel like bits and pieces of our current lives. We try to hold onto the fragments of meaning these past relationships gave to our lives, cherishing the intimacy. We move along, one phase to the next, each layer a remembrance, as we literally try to hold onto them by a thread.

Another piece that not only deals with what we take with us but also with what we may pass on is, *What to Give?*. *What to Give?* is about recognizing the influences or patterns of behavior we have inherited from others and how this affects what or how we wish to communicate in future interactions. The porcelain layers inside the vessel form are representative of certain adopted traits we have internalized. Layers that are pushing through the vessel that continue to flow downward and away are indicative of the traits or patterns of behavior that we would like to share or pass on to others. What we recognize internally about ourselves may be different than what we want others to take away from us in the end, so there is always the question of what to give. This piece is about the conscious choices we try to make when considering how we affect others.

*Speculative Strain* addresses the pressures we feel when dealing with the expectations placed upon us by ourselves, family, and society. Like the porcelain layers constricted between two steel plates that are tightened down upon with wing-nuts, our psyche feels mental pressure to act, perform, produce to certain standards or ideals that are positioned upon us by ourselves or by others. Different thicknesses or lengths of the
Discussion of Formal and Aesthetic Influences and Approaches

I believe all the emotions we experience are beautiful in themselves; therefore I also feel the representations of them should be. For this reason, I also look for visual stimulation in the beauty of the natural environment that surrounds me and in the important works of past artists that have come before me.

Beauty in nature consists of order and chaos, repetition and randomness, and the perfect and the imperfect, all coexisting with each other. Forms that exist that have this balance generate in me a sense of peacefulness and reflection as they seem to visually represent the equilibrium we try to maintain emotionally. I incorporate abstracted versions of these forms in my work in hopes that my pieces will feel of nature, producing similar qualities of contemplation. Each piece contains elements that are arbitrary yet organized, ideal yet flawed, to try to capture these perspectives.

Other sources of inspiration come from looking at how other artists approach art making. When looking at other representations of human emotion, historically, the early work of Louise Bourgeois, works by Eva Hesse, Agnes Martin, and Lucie Rie have had a great impact on me. Louise Bourgeois’ forms are filled with emotional charge and are subtly evocative. Eva Hesse, also working from intense emotion, created rich biomorphic forms that are as attractive as they are intriguing. The work of Agnes Martin is simple and repetitive, which creates a sense of self reflection and meditation. Lucie Ries’
simple, clean, and elegant forms grace our lives with beauty, which I feel is extremely important.

Contemporary works created by Lawson Oyekan, Richard DeVore, Margaret Boozer, and Tara Donovan also excite me. These artists have a clear, clean, simple aesthetic and brilliantly convey complex ideas through simple forms. More specifically, I admire Oyekan’s ability to manipulate bare clay into stunning minimal forms that capture a lightness of being; Margaret Boozer and Tara Donovan’s relationship with process is equally amazing. They make painstaking execution turn into magnificent work that transcends its efforts. All these artists in one way or another have challenged me to think about my ideas and how I can push the boundaries of the creative process to produce work that is visually powerful and thought provoking.

Conclusion

Through art, we can make an audience pause and consider for a moment the world in which they live. Our world is constantly changing and, as Gergen writes,

‘‘Under post modern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality.’’

With our realities of self in constant question as we age, one thing we do know for certain is that, “Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future, and time future contained in time past.” There is no escaping our past when considering our
present, and, in turn, the way we live our present will make sure we never escape what is ahead in the future. All are intertwined. Who, what, where we are now is a direct influence of who, what, where we were before, and all has bearing on what will come next. It is important to acknowledge the way we live, who we are and how we are affected by different dynamics. We derive many habits and ways of living from both familial and cultural dynamics. How we internalize these patterns of behavior in ourselves will determine what gets funneled like a current to future generations.

2 Gergen, 7
3 Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, The Expanded Family Life Cycle (Massachusetts: Allyn and Bacon, 1989) 9
5 Gergen, 7
Appendices
Relapse
11 in x 7 ft x 8 in
porcelain, wood, sand

Relapse, detail
Alone, As One
6 ft x 2 1/2 ft x 1 ft
porcelain, steel
Alone, As One, detail

Consequence, detail
8ft x 7 ½ ft x 7 in
porcelain, waxed linen thread
What to Give
2 \( \frac{1}{2} \) ft x 6 in x 5 in
porcelain, stoneware
Speculative Strain
5 ft x 2 1/2 ft x 4 in
porcelain, steel
Speculative Strain, detail
Bibliography


