COALESCENT: A COLLECTION OF DEFINING LIFE EXPERIENCES

Stephanie A. Dishno

University of Montana, Missoula

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd

Part of the Art and Materials Conservation Commons, Art Practice Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the Sculpture Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/etd/11549
2020

COALESCENT: A COLLECTION OF DEFINING LIFE EXPERIENCES

Stephanie Alane Dishno
COALESCENT: A COLLECTION OF DEFINING LIFE EXPERIENCES

By STEPHANIE ALANE DISHNO

Bachelor of Arts, Minor in Art History Herron School of Art, Indianapolis, IN, 2012

Thesis

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Ceramics School of Visual and Media Arts, Missoula, MT, May 2020

Approved by:

Scott Whittenburg, Dean of The Graduate School Graduate School

Trey Hill, Associate Professor School of Art - Ceramics

Cathryn Mallory, Professor School of Art - Sculpture

Jennifer Combe, Associate Professor School of Art, Art Education

Sara Hayden, Professor, Department of Communication Studies
Coalescent: A Collection of Defining Life Experiences, reflects on my experiences and curiosities of important life events that a person may use to construct their narrative identity. In this paper, I discuss my reflections, influences, and materials used to create my thesis exhibition, Coalescent. I describe my work as a collection of life experiences that are used to construct a narrative identity.
Acknowledgments

My entire experience during my MFA has been truly influential and an amazing time of growth as a person and an artist. I cannot thank the faculty and fellow students enough for helping to create such an amazing community and experience at the university.

I especially want to thank my thesis committee, Trey Hill, Sara Hayden, Cathryn Mallory, and Jennifer Combe for their dedication and guidance through this journey!

I also would like to thank my family and friends outside of the university for their love and encouragement during this time, it really meant the world to me.

Finally, I want to thank Stephen Arwine for all of his support and the countless hours and late nights helping me in the studio.
# Table of Contents

Abstract........................................................................................................ iii
Acknowledgment........................................................................................... iv
Image List....................................................................................................... vi
Artist Statement............................................................................................ 1
Narrative Identity............................................................................................ 2
Black and White Divide, Inner and Outer Worlds............................................. 3
Liminality......................................................................................................... 5
Ties to Catholicism and Roman Art................................................................. 7
Nude vs. Naked and Clothing........................................................................... 9
Feminism........................................................................................................... 11
Motherhood and Identity.................................................................................. 13
Ageing and Death............................................................................................ 15
Contemporary Influences................................................................................ 17
Material........................................................................................................... 21
Surface Treatments.......................................................................................... 22
Scale............................................................................................................... 24
Conclusion....................................................................................................... 25
Bibliography.................................................................................................... 26
Image List

Fig. 1: (p. 3) Stephanie Dishno, *Coalescent*, Gallery View, 2020.

Fig. 2: (p.4) Stephanie Dishno, *Liminal Traverse*, ceramic, paint, resin, and wood, 50" x 30" x 35", 2019.

Fig. 3: (p. 6) Unknown, *Head of Goddess*, marble, early 1st century AD.

Fig. 4. (p. 6) Michelangelo, *Biblical David*, marble, 17’ x 6.5’, 1504.

Fig. 5: (p. 7) Stephanie Dishno, *Liminal Traverse*, ceramic, paint, resin, and wood, 50" x 30" x 35", 2019. and Unknown, *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon*, marble, 80.25", 1st-2nd AD.

Fig. 6: (p. 8) Peter Lely, *Portrait of a Young Woman and Child, as Venus and Cupid*, oil on canvas, 48.7" x 156.8", 1618-1680.

Fig. 7: (p. 10) Stephanie Dishno, *A Memoir*, ceramic and gold leaf, 40" x 15" x 26", 2019.

Fig. 8: (p. 13) Stephanie Dishno, *Telos*, ceramic, paint, resin, and lead, 60" x 72" x 44", 2020.

Fig. 9: (p. 13) Stephanie Dishno, To-Be, 78" x 30" x 26", ceramic, paint, and resin, 2020.

Fig. 10: (p. 14) Stephanie Dishno, *Interwoven*, ceramic, paint, resin, and lead, 47" x 17" x 71", 2020.
Fig. 11: (p. 15) Stephanie Dishno, *Heartsink*, ceramic, gold leaf, and paint, 50” x 20” x 28”, 2020.

Fig. 12: (p.16) Lisa Yuskavage, *Given and Nel’zahs*, oil on linen, 11.125’ x 15.5’, 2010.

Fig. 13: (p. 17) Robin F. Williams, *Salad Lover*, acrylic and oil on canvas, 90” x 60”, 2016.

Fig. 14: (p.18) Christina West, *Screen*, mixed media, installation, 2018.

Fig. 15: (p. 20) Stephanie Dishno, *To-Be*, ceramic, paint, and resin, detail, 2020.

Fig. 16: (p. 21) Stephanie Dishno, *A Memoir*, ceramic and gold leaf, detail, 2019.
"With every passing day, we add a page to our personal story, an illustrative script that casts our character shaped by an implacable external environment and fashioned by our supple state of inwardness."
— Kilroy J. Oldster, Dead Toad Scrolls

ARTIST STATEMENT

My work is about life experiences that come together to create a personal narrative that portrays a journey through life and constructs a sense of identity. Each figure embodies a quintessential moment that feels exclusively intimate, but is often universally experienced. Individually, each figure reads like a snapshot in time, much like a chapter in a book. Together the figures create a story from my perspective and curiosities as a woman in today's society.

I activate the surrounding space with color which creates a visual divide. The divide is a metaphor for where our inner and outer worlds coincide. Our personal narratives are portrayed within the white, and the universal narrative is represented in the black. This creates an intimate dichotomy that is interwoven between the viewers and the sculptures.
Narrative Identity

During my time in graduate school, I have reflected on how I used to imagine events, and how that process has evolved over the years. It has become less about what could be and more about what has been. My reflections have become a process to provide meaning and purpose to life experiences. The experiences represented in my thesis exhibition, Coalescent, are reflections on events or ideas that have been the most relevant during my time in graduate school.

In the article Narrative Identity: From The Inside Out, Sommer, Baumeister and Stillmans' ideas on identity suggest that, "A person makes sense of their selfhood in relation to their world and vice-versa,". "as humans we have a need for meaning to contribute purpose, self-worth, efficacy and value. A life story may be thought of as a way in which life is organised so that it makes sense for a person. It is the vessel in which experiences are sequenced, organised and interpreted by creating a structure of meaningful connections and patterns,".¹ In the article the authors go on to quote Spector Mersel's concept on Narrative Identity that, "Identities through stories is a process carried out within a complex web of influences, bringing together individual, society, and culture; inner and outer worlds; free choice and limiting factors; past, present, and future".²

In Coalescent, I explore how we use personal experiences to create a narrative that constructs an individual's identity. While each person's cultural context influences how they experience life, I am curious about the common threads that tie personal narratives together. Quintessential moments are unique to each person, but the core event is the common thread and is often universally experienced.

¹ Newitt, Lee, Dr. Piers Worth, Dr. Matthew Smith, Narrative Identity: From the Inside Out, (Counselling Psychology Quarterly, vol. 32, 2019), 8.
² Newitt, Worth, Smith, Narrative Identity: from the inside Out, 9.
Black and White Divide, Inner and Outer Worlds

I want to represent the separation between universal human experiences and how we as individuals, experience and create meaning from those quintessential moments. The white space in the gallery is a representation of the meaning each person creates from the universal human experience. This meaning is used to construct a narrative identity. The black space of the gallery represents the universal human experiences. Through the white space in the gallery the viewer is invited to reflect on what the represented experiences mean to them and are allowed a glimpse of what these experiences mean to me.

A visual divide is created in the gallery space through color and lighting. By painting the walls black up to 21”, the same color of the gallery floor, I create the illusion of elevating the floor. This divide, along with the dramatic lighting, creates the perception, for the viewer, of entering another realm and gives the figures a floating effect. Where the white and black meet, acts as a
midpoint for the viewer to enter the work with their own personal narratives. How the black elevates the floor can be seen in figure 1.
Liminality

Each figure in Coalescent feels as though it is rendered as a snapshot in time, which implies the figures are caught at a midpoint. Judith Westerveld, in her writing Liminality in Contemporary Art, defines the liminal as, "derived from the Latin word *limen*, meaning threshold, and closely associated with the word *limes*, meaning limit. Unlike a limit, a threshold is not an endpoint but a midpoint, that allows fluid crossing of wavering between two worlds."³ Considering liminality in this way directly correlates to the exaggeration of the inner and outer world, which is represented in the gallery. Pieces like Telos, Heartsink, and Liminal Traverse interact with that line and exist within both worlds.

*Telos* addresses the liminality of major transitions, such as pregnancy, where the figure is caught between a past and future identity. She is interacting with the threshold by dipping her toe into the black space of the gallery. Telos is in conversation with the piece *To-Be* directly across the gallery. The space between *To-Be*, a young woman staring out at her possibilities, and *Telos* allows the viewer to enter the conversation and reflection of what could be and what was.

In *Interwoven*, an older female bust is tied to her past through a braid creating a physical connection to the bust of a younger female. This creates a reflection from the present to the past and symbolizes the passing of time. In *Heartsink*, a distressed figure is caught in between the threshold. The bust of the figure exists within the white space of the gallery and her hands lay on the low platform.

in the black, suggesting the fall into reality. In *A Memoir*, a cracked figure has her hand to her head as though she has reached a threshold.

With the piece *Liminal Traverse* (figure 2), a female figure is standing on a staircase which stops at the elevated black space of the gallery, referencing a descent into reality, or an ascent of a possible daydream. The figure reads as a younger woman, potentially a coming of age. The addition of the staircase not only grounds the figure to a narrative in the home, but quite literally places the figure in the liminal movement represented by the staircase.
Ties to Catholicism and Roman Art

I was raised in a conservative Catholic home and attended a Catholic school. Growing up, many of my concepts of self-worth and womanhood were constructed from the teachings of the church. My work reflects on my early influences which contrasts my current critique on the expectations of women.

Some of the first art that I can remember being exposed to is the art that exists in ornate Catholic churches. Iconic images of Christ, and the Virgin Mary, no longer hold the same profound meanings to me as they did when I was younger, but I am still drawn to the rich history and nostalgic quality of the imagery.

My work references the historical canon of Roman art. In the piece Liminal Traverse the figure directly references roman statues with its hand gestures and contrapposto stance, this reference can be seen between Liminal Traverse and the sculpture Marble statue of a wounded Amazon in figure 5. The reference to facial features (figure 4) and the composition of Roman
busts (figure 3) can be seen throughout my sculptures in *Coalescent*. These attributes tie my work not only to my catholic upbringing, but also ground my work in a larger historical context.

Figure 5: Stephanie Dishno, *Liminal Traverse*, ceramic, paint, resin, and wood, 50” x 30” x 35”, 2019. and Unknown, *Marble Statue of a Wounded Amazon*, marble, 80.25”, 1st-2nd AD.
Nude vs. Naked and Clothing

John Berger, in his book *Ways of Seeing*, discusses the painting of Nell Gwynne by Lely, which is a portrait of a king's mistress. "Nakedness is not, however, an expression of her own feelings; it is a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands. (The owner of both the woman and painting.)" He went on to explain, "To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen by others and yet not recognized for oneself. Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display."\(^4\)

---

This concept of nude vs. naked is something I considered with every figure I created for *Coalescent*. Unlike the painting of Nell Gwynne, seen in fig. 6, which Berger explains, "shows her passively looking at the spectator staring at her,"⁵, I create my sculptures as naked to provide autonomy from the male gaze. While the male gaze has seeped its way into many aspects of Western culture, I believe the female form can be represented in a way that disregards the male gaze.

I do this through the representation, scale, and gaze of the figures. The larger than life scale of the figure gives each figure an imposing presence, accompanied by a gaze that defies the traditional submissive gaze that nude female figures were represented with throughout art history. This creates a sense of autonomy from the male gaze within each piece. There are two prominent gazes used in the figures. One is an introspective gaze, symbolizing an inward perspective. The other is a direct outward gaze, with the figures confronting the viewer with urgency.

The addition of clothing to my figures has two purposes. The first purpose is to create a heightened sense of intimacy and sexuality while also adding a sense of vulnerability. The second purpose for the addition of clothing is to ground the figures into a specific narrative. We typically only walk around in our underwear in the comfort of our own homes, somewhere we feel safe and comfortable. As with *Liminal Traverse*, the figure is standing on a staircase, the addition of just underwear and t-shirt suggests to the viewer that this staircase is in the privacy of a home.

---

Feminism is not something I actively consider when I am planning or creating my figures. While my work does address female sexuality, societal expectations for women, and the disregard of the male gaze; so much of my work is autobiographical that it feels like a reflection of life events or curiosities.

In an interview with Rani Bergman and painter Robin F. Williams, Williams explains her relation to feminism in her own art. "I'd never seen a 10-foot-tall woman masturbating into a bowl of salad, so I painted her, because I wanted to see how it felt to stand in front of that painting. You could call that a feminist impulse. You could also call that curiosity." There's no doubt that feminism is a big current that runs through her work, but Williams feels that the label can often be limiting. "I'm an artist who happens to be a woman and also a feminist.

I quoted this interview between Bergman and Williams because this idea of the "feminist impulse" is something that resonates within my own art practice. I am not consciously creating work that relates to the feminist movement when I create a 500lb pregnant woman, but once the piece is done I can see the influence reflected in the work. Many times, I may not see it until the work is done and I have the time to sit and reflect on the sculpture.

Figure 7: Stephanie Dishno, A Memoir, ceramic and gold leaf, 40" x 15" x 26", 2019.

With the pieces *To-Be* and *Telos* where I reference personal influences and thoughts, my feminist impulse can be seen as commenting on the disregard of the male gaze, female identity, sexuality, and the social construction of the mother. With the piece *A Memoir* seen in fig.7, the bust has a hand to her head as though she is exhausted or could faint. Gold leafing is used to accentuate the cracking throughout the piece to reference overuse. With this piece's nod to roman sculpture and the timeless aesthetic quality, it can be seen as a critique on the misuse of the female form throughout art history.
Motherhood

As a woman who has decided to wait and potentially never have children, while choosing to make other aspects of my life a priority, the older I get the more I am confronted with pressures. I often hear comments such as, "you will regret it when it's too late," and "who will care for you when you get old?". I usually brush these negative comments off, but I am sometimes left with a nagging voice in the back of my head, questioning the choices I have made.

As I get older, I sometimes find myself feeling guilty about my personal decisions. How much of this pressure is stemming from cultural expectations that promote the thought that the highest form of fulfillment for a woman is to become a mother? In *Purposefully Childless Good Women* Sara Hayden explains, "women who are purposefully childless frequently are defined as selfish." The article goes on to explain,

> "Women who are childless by choice thus face a bind. Through their reproductive choices, they open up the potential to craft identities rooted in their individual talents and actions. In doing so, however, they simultaneously abdicate a key attribute of femininity, making it difficult to claim the mantle "good woman","  

Adrienne Rich writes in, *Of Woman Born*, "that the mother's life is exchanged for the child; Her autonomy as a separate being seems fated to conflict with the infant she will bear. The self-denying, self-annihilating role of the good mother, will spell the death of the woman who once had hopes, expectations, fantasies for herself,". When I reflect on my decisions to not have children, I often feel like I am sacrificing something monumental, no matter what decision I make.

---


intentional and shows a comfortable but vulnerable woman gazing across the gallery. This references my uncertainties and disconnect with motherhood as a possibility and identity.

Telos (fig. 8), which means the end goal, or the Aristotelian view of a final cause, is a monumental pregnant figure, seated with introspective, downcast eyes. She has one toe, slightly dipping into the black space of the gallery. This figure references my own associations and internal conflicts with motherhood.

Directly across the gallery, the piece To-Be (fig. 9) is in conversation with Telos. This placement was
Age and Death

During my time in graduate school, the experience of loss has been recurring. As a result, my work has become a necessary and therapeutic way for me to process my grief.

At the end of my first year, my cousin unexpectedly died. After I received the news, I was in disbelief, as though I could not process this loss. I cannot remember what triggered it, but I can remember the sudden feeling of my heart dropping followed by a sudden wave of grief.

During my second year, I had the painful but intimate and influential experience of going home to help my mother care for a dear friend as she passed away. This experience of being the sole caregivers for a loved one while she passed, created a tie between my mother and I that we had not experienced before.

Figure 10: Stephanie Dishno, *Interwoven*, ceramic, paint, resin, and lead, 47” x 17” x 71”, 2020.
In the piece *Interwoven* (fig.10), two figures, one older figure with a downcast gaze reflecting back on a past younger self with an outward gaze, are connected through a shared braid. This piece directly relates to my experience of losing a friend, the person I knew from the stories she shared about her life, and stories that were told through her possessions after she died.

*Interwoven* holds a personal reflection about time, and those we love, but holds different meanings to each viewer. One response I heard many times was the reference to family ties. While spending time with this piece in the gallery I noticed the feeling of a passing breath. The older figure inhales, while the younger figure exhales.

On Thanksgiving of my third year in graduate school, I received news that a friend and mentor was killed in a paragliding accident. After a brief moment of disbelief, I was again hit with the feeling that my heart had slammed into my gut. In the piece *Heartsink*, I reference my experience of processing the news of the death of a cousin and friend.

In *Heartsink* (fig. 11) the figure exists in the "inner world" and looks out in disbelief and sadness. Below the figure, in the black "outer world" of the gallery, two disconnected hands lay on a low black platform. This piece is a metaphor for the feeling associated with receiving heartbreaking news. The disbelief before you feel as though you are slammed into reality.

![Figure 11: Stephanie Dishno, Heartsink, ceramic, gold leaf, and paint, 50" x 20" x 28", 2020.](image)
Contemporary Art Influences

There has been a long list of artists I have been influenced by throughout my time in graduate school. A few of the women artists who I have been influenced by the most have been a great source of encouragement in subject matter and inspiration.

Lisa Yuskavage

Lisa Yuskavage is fearless in her representation of female sexuality. At first, her work was hard for me to approach but, the work had a sweetness to it that I kept coming back to. Her use of vibrant colors and dreamy imagery is captivating, but I found Yuskavage's hyper-sexualized, girlish figures off-putting. I appreciate the dichotomy that exists in her work. although it seems almost sticky and dirty, it is fearless. Her work has been empowering and inspiring throughout my artistic endeavors.

![Figure 12: Lisa Yuskavage, Given and Nel'zahs, oil on linen, 11.125’ x 15.5’, 2010.](image)

Yuskavage's work presents female sexuality at a gaudy extreme that doesn't allow the work to be objectified. My figures may not be represented to an extreme like Yuskavage’s, but
they are depicted in a way that embraces sensuality without being objectified through the Male Gaze.
Robin F. Williams

As mentioned earlier, Robin F. Williams’s ideas of “feminist impulse” within her art is a concept that resonates within my own work. Another aspect of William’s paintings that I see in my own work is her use of scale which creates a presence to the figures which demand the viewer’s attention. Like Lisa Yuskavage, whose use of color is soft in contrast to her strong subject matter, Williams too uses alluring color palettes. Williams represents women that defy the conventional while critiquing the use of the female body in western culture.

Figure 13: Robin F. Williams, Salad Lover, acrylic and oil on canvas, 90” x 60”, 2016.
Christina West

Christina West is a figurative sculptor who uses realism with distorted scale, environments, and color to create impactful installations. I am most drawn to her space in which she uses color and perspective in altered space to create what she calls "psychologically charged environments" for figures to exist in. West also uses scale to her advantage by either working with ¾ life-size or larger than life to impact the viewer. Like West, I also use the scale of my figures to impact the viewer and color to alter space.

---

Material

I have always been drawn to clay for its plasticity, as it offers a forgiving and tactile experience. This material quality lends itself to a methodical and contemplative process that I have not found in other materials. Clay as a material is forgiving, it allows me to play and explore its possibilities which helps soothe a sense of uneasiness that can challenge my practice.

In his essay, *Sex: Eroticism in Ceramics*, Paul Mathieu states, "Clay comes from the earth; it is alive and fertile. Clay is like flesh, and most mythologies use clay as origin in creation myths."¹⁰ Whether it is pottery’s relation to the body, such as in aspects of a vessel described as the lip, body, or foot of a vessel; to ancient fertility dolls and sex pots, ceramics has a historical connection to the human body. This relation to the human body is a connection I make within my sculptures.

Surface

I use two surface treatments in *Coalescent*. For the first surface, I use layers of acrylic and house paint to build a base color that resembles skin tones. I exaggerate certain features such as the eyes and lips. Next, I use a wash of milk paint colored with red iron oxide. This wash emphasizes any tool marks throughout the work. Lastly, I use resin that is colored with red iron oxide, and mason stains that resemble the paint colors previously used on the figure. This keeps the palette simple and creates an effect that references the movement of time and life over the figures.

It is important to have the materials used in the surface treatments to relate back to the ceramic material or the human body as much as possible. Which is why I specifically choose to use milk paint, red iron oxide and mason stains to emphasize the metaphorical ties between clay and the human body.

Figure 15: Stephanie Dishno, *To-Be*, ceramic, paint, and resin, detail, 2020.
For the second surface treatment, a thin layer of wax is applied over the terracotta clay body which was slightly reduced in the firing. The reduction causes a dark gray blushing effect on the busts. Then, I use gold leafing to accentuate the cracks in the busts. In *A Memoir* a green wax is applied first which adds an antiquing effect.

The two surface treatments are vastly different but balance each other in the gallery. Leaving *Heatsink* and *A Memoir* with a raw surface creates a timeless effect. This creates a contrast to the resin surface that makes the work feel more contemporary. The raw clay also adds a richness and accessibility to the figures, where the resin creates a kind of barrier between the clay and the viewer.

![Figure 16](image-url)

*Figure 16: Stephanie Dishno, *A Memoir*, ceramic and gold leaf, detail, 2019.*
Scale

The work in Coalescent is the largest work I have made to date. Working at a larger than life scale provides an ease that I had not experienced while working on a smaller scale. This increase in size has been important, as it creates a technical challenge that helps to drive a sense of experimentation and progression within my studio practice.

Not only does working on such a large scale enhance the technical aspects of building, but it also demands problem-solving along every step of the way. Whether it is figuring out how to cut the work apart to move in and out of the kiln, to incorporating unexpected cracks into the content, surface treatments, to welding stands and hangers to hold the weight, every step feels like a feat of its own.

The larger than life scale also provides a presence to the work that allows the figures to confront the viewer with their narratives. Because of their scale, the figures not only have a strong impact visually, but the scale also references the importance of the narrative experiences. Susan Stewart poetically describes scale in On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection scale as, "Miniature as contained, the gigantic as container."\(^{11}\) Similarly, in Foul Perfection: Essays on Criticism Mike Kelly explains, "Small figurative objects invite the viewer to project onto them", while "larger figures maintain their physical presence and viewers empathizes in a human way."\(^{12}\) The scale in my work is used in both of these ways. The figures hold their own stories and presence with a viewer.

---

\(^{11}\) Stewart, Susan, On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir and the Collection, (Duke University Press, 1993), 71.

\(^{12}\) Kelley, Mike, and John Welchman, Foul Perfection Essays and Criticism, (MIT Press, 2003), 75.
Conclusion

My thesis exhibition *Coalescent* reflects experiences and curiosities throughout my time in graduate school. While my work is autobiographical and explores artistic and personal influences the exhibition invites the reflections of others. Through a larger than life scale, color, and dramatic lighting *Coalescent* invites the viewer into another realm to explore the common threads linking uniquely experienced quintessential moments.
Bibliography


