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## Exploring Growth, Integration, & Play Working in Clay: Finding Pathways to Healing and Hope

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**EXPLORING GROWTH, INTEGRATION, & PLAY WORKING IN CLAY:  
FINDING PATHWAYS TO HEALING AND HOPE**

Dana A. Bridges



EXPLORING GROWTH, INTEGRATION & PLAY WORKING IN CLAY:  
FINDING PATHWAYS TO HEALING AND HOPE

Dana A. Bridges

Springfield Art Museum, Springfield, Missouri  
May 5<sup>th</sup>-28<sup>th</sup>, 2023



**EXPLORING GROWTH, INTREGRATION, & PLAY WORKING IN CLAY: FINDING PATHWAYS TO HEALING AND HOPE**

*To my husband, Phil Bridges, who sacrificed and supported me tremendously through these years of additional schooling to pursue my master's degree. Without him I would never have been able to leave my first career, as an art teacher, to begin my own artistic journey. And to my children, Cole and Lucy, who think I am the best ceramic artist in the world. They are, and will always be, my greatest creations.*



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## **EXPLORING GROWTH, INTREGRATION, & PLAY WORKING IN CLAY: FINDING PATHWAYS TO HEALING AND HOPE**

Art and Design Department

Missouri State University, May 2023

Master of Fine Arts

Dana A. Bridges

### **ABSTRACT**

I find therapeutic qualities in all the aspects of my studio practice and haptic experience: from the grounding sensory experience of clay, the quiet meditative motions of creating and constructing, acceptance or repair of mistakes, and the integration of failures which may occur. Specifically, I channel my experience to explore the themes of growth, integration, and play. By exploring these themes in the quiet and safety of my clay-studio, I engage in the opportunity to investigate these themes on a formal, practical, and personal level. I create the forms by hand or on the potter's wheel. After constructing the forms, I employ various methods of deconstructing, reconstructing, integrating, and repairing them if breakage occurs. On a practical level, I explore these themes through mixing various ceramic materials to create desired properties and workability in my clay. Or I may be inspired by an imperfection, failure, or mistake during or after the creation of a ceramic-object. On a personal level, being in my studio engages my senses and encourages me to slow down, be mindful, and reflect on recent events or interactions in my life. Through the processes and experiences inside the studio with an intrapersonal orientation—I intend to find pathways towards healing and hope for interpersonal connection and community outside the studio.

**KEYWORDS:** ceramics, community, conflict, growth, healing, hope, interpersonal, intrapersonal, studio practice

**EXPLORING GROWTH, INTREGRATION, & PLAY WORKING IN CLAY: FINDING PATHWAYS TO HEALING AND HOPE**

By

Dana A. Bridges

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Submitted to the Graduate College  
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In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this thesis indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this thesis are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its Graduate College, or its employees.

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*Speckled Toad from Peanut Butter Hill, 2019, Buff stoneware and sand.*



## INTRODUCTION

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*Sapling Grove Park, 2019, Digital photograph.*



From early encounters with clay as a child, to my continued development and exploration as an artist in my studio, I find therapeutic experiences, spaces, and themes through creating and responding to ceramic objects. In my practice as a ceramic artist, I recreate experiences in clay, repeat processes, and create similar spiral-forms (through preparing, forming, slicing, opening, stacking, integrating, firing, reclaiming, and repairing), because it helps me practice ways of being and doing that are “good” for me in material and mental capacities. Through working in and responding to the qualities of clay, I find pathways towards intrapersonal healing through representing interpersonal conflict and my hope towards a resolution. I channel my research in clay—and my search for healing and hope—through exploring themes of growth, integration, and play on a formal, practical, and personal level.



Artists are commonly asked why they chose and continue to choose their medium. My answers center around early encounters with clay, continued access to materials and tools, and finding necessary conditions for growth and development. However, my first response (from the heart) is that “I love everything about clay.” Or perhaps, “I can’t imagine working with anything else.” From my first encounters to my continuing studio practice, clay impresses me. I am drawn to the therapeutic and relational qualities of clay that are grounding and sensory.

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Opposite: *Stacking Fail*, 2021, Dark studio stoneware.





I was artistically minded as a child, prone to daydreaming, and often got lost in observing and sketching my surroundings. I loved coloring, drawing, working with construction paper and paste, and painting. Anything my art teacher had for us—I was all in! But nothing made an impression on me like my experiences in clay. I became interested and began to experience autonomy and agency working with the medium. As I repeat versions of my early experiences in my own studio, I continue to find necessity and satisfaction. Additionally, the artistic problems I find through ceramics continue to compel and motivate me towards finding solutions. When I cannot find a solution on my own, an enthusiastic community of ceramic artists are a click away on Facebook or Instagram to cheer and guide me along. Support is not lacking. Taken together, these things enable my activities in ceramics through providing the necessary conditions for emergence, development, and growth.



*Terracotta Warrior detail*, 2019, Terracotta and yellow slip.

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Opposite: *Terracotta Warrior*, 2019, Terracotta and yellow slip.





I was first drawn to clay when I was five years old. I saw a potter at a local theme park create a bowl on the potter's wheel. I was mesmerized by the smoothly spinning wheel and the quiet response of the clay in the potter's hands. My curiosity with clay endured, though the unfired clay-bowl the potter gave to me that day did not. I did not grow up having very much, since my mom was a single parent. I loved art but didn't have access to many art materials or tools at home. I loved going to art class in school, and I especially loved clay-day. While playing with clay in art class, I came to love the smell of the clay and the plasticity of it, how it remembered every push and squeeze. It didn't take me long to find out that the slate-colored, flaky, layered dirt in the creek next to my school was clay. I was enchanted by the fact there was clay—for free—which I could use at any time. One day, after school, I decided to "make some clay" of my own. I walked the familiar creek bed nestled between the gray walls high above my head until I came to a spot that seemed just right: a dry spot to sit, enough clay to collect, and some hollows in the rock bed for grinding. I kicked at the layered walls until I was able to gather enough clay to hold in two hands. I used the water-worn hollows in the rock bed and a large rock to break the clay down and grind it until I could form it into a sticky ball. I made a pinch pot and left it to dry. Again, the little pot I had created did not last, though the impression of the experience lasted. The processing and preparation of clay, as well as accepting the impermanence of clay and ceramic objects, continues to be a meaningful part of my process. I am still mesmerized by the response of the clay when I shape it on the potter's wheel. I continue to respond to those sensory, tactile, and relational qualities in clay. And I find agency and safety in my clay studio surrounded by everything I need.

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Opposite: Top Left: *Turkey Tails*, 2019, Digital photograph.

Top Right: *Leaf*, 2019, Digital photograph.

Bottom Left: *Roots*, 2019, Digital photograph.

Bottom Right: *Clay Layers*, 2019, Digital photograph.

Page 8: *White Terracotta Warrior*, 2019, Terracotta and white slip.

Page 9: *White Terracotta Warrior detail*, 2019, Terracotta and white slip.

Page 10: *Large Terracotta Warrior*, 2019, Terracotta and glaze.

















My love of clay echoes back to those first experiences. The haptic qualities of the material itself (its materiality), the processes of preparing clay for creative use, and the nurturing environment of my studio are recreations of those formative memories and first encounters. Everything about clay grounds me: the woody and earthy smell, the rhythms of preparing, forming, and drying, the smell of a kiln in reduction, and waiting to see my pots after their last transformation of being glaze-fired in the kiln. The repetition of the multiple firings needed for the transformation of clay and observing the stages clay goes through to become solid and stable will never grow old.



*Multiplying*, 2021, Porcelain and black sand.





Right: *Mug from Reclaimed and Reformed Series, Instagram, November 13, 2021.*

Left: *New Batch of 12 Side of the Sea Mugs, Instagram, May 11, 2021.*

The imperfections, mistakes, and accidents that can occur in creating and transforming clay into ceramic objects also grounds me. There is much that can go wrong in the long and stressful process drying and firing wares. In the first (greenware) stage, when clay goes from being plastic and workable to becoming rigid-bone or completely air-dry, the clay can become stressed if dried unevenly or too fast. This stress is usually revealed in the final firing. When pots become soft enough in the heat of the kiln, stressed rims of nice circular vessels relax into a variety of oval shapes. Cracks can also develop due poor craftsmanship and improper technique. In the second (bisqueware) stage, the clay wares are put through the first firing in the kiln, which chemically drives off all moisture and begins transforming the clay materials into a solid network. In this stage rough handling, or even a light tap of wares bumping

against one another, can lead to chipping and cracks which appear later. The final (glazeware) stage occurs after the piece is coated in a silica-clay-slurry and fired a final time. The clay is transformed into a solid-rock structure and melts the dried layer of slurry so it chemically bonds to the clay body. At this stage glaze can run down the sides causing ceramics to stick to the kiln shelves. Glazes can develop a fine network of cracks inside or develop tiny holes in the surface of the glaze called pinholes making wares unsafe for serving food and beverage. It is a technically enduring process, which I find great satisfaction in repeating.

There is so much that can go wrong, but so much that can go right. Opening a successful glaze kiln is a thrilling experience. When I open the kiln and spy all my finished-new-baby-pots, I want to tear around the studio showing anyone present and run through the halls exclaiming my joy. It is one of the moments I love most about the experience working with clay and I love that I have the agency to create it. I don't have to wait for romance, a special holiday, or anyone else to manufacture that exquisite feeling. I create it myself, and will never tire of it.



*Loaded kiln full of greenware, 2019, Digital photograph.*



I find a feeling of safety and agency within my studio that echoes my experiences creating in my childhood creek and building little fires with the neighborhood kids. When I am hidden in my studio, with my shelves of carefully labeled materials, organized tools, and ceramics stacked high above my head, it reminds me of the feeling I got standing at the bottom of Sapling Grove Creek hidden with the ground-level high above me. I felt safe creating there in my nature-studio observing textures, layers, roots, earth, water, and rocks. It was there, below the grassy path, nestled between the damp, warm clay walls, that I first found agency with clay—the feeling of being surrounded by everything I needed. I get that same feeling in my studio and firing ceramics. It is a safe place out of sight where I have everything needed to experience agency and develop my craft.

When I touch, form, and re-form clay, the experience is personal and therapeutic, but also relational. Clay responds immediately to my actions. The immediate feedback satisfies something in my psyche. Hand building or forming clay on the potter's wheel enables a conversation-like interaction, an immediate adjustment in my approach, and a chance to fix interaction when it goes awry. This then opens opportunities for growth in my artistic skills and echoes a desire for growth in my interpersonal approach.



*Me at the potter's wheel*, 2023, Digital photograph. Image courtesy of Erin Tyler.



Left: *My wheel at Missouri State University, 2019, Digital photograph.*

Right: *Buff stoneware bowl of work in progress, 2019, Digital photograph.*

For me, the immediate response of clay satisfies the desire for fluid communication. I love conversation and connecting with others. I thrive on it. I have discovered through inner work and counseling that connection with others is a big drive of what motivates me. However, communicating effectively is very difficult for me in most relationships, aside from those closest to me. So, when I experience interpersonal conflict, miscommunication, and misunderstanding—or even perceive it—it is uncomfortable, even greatly distressing for me. I feel conflict as intense physical discomfort (or dysphoria) in my body. This strong discomfort activates a desire to resolve whatever the cause is, and return to feeling safe, at peace, and in stasis. Psychologists, such as Joshua Beckett, call this a trauma response.<sup>1</sup> Giving my bodily response a name matters. Knowing what to call it helps me become aware of the possibility to regulate my response. Identifying forces at play in my mind and body helps me to take time and space to delay a reaction until I've thought through how to respond. The relational qualities keep me rooted in exploring clay as my primary material for artistic expression, because the problem of remaining connected and in harmony with others continues to be a challenge. Clay continues to help me process those challenges.

When I perceive conflict with others, I find the urgent need to create and connect even greater. Being in my studio feels like I am being given a great big hug or being held and repeats the feeling of my childhood nature-studio. It feels warm, safe, and quiet. I love the organization of my studio, being surrounded by my collection of objects placed on my inspiration shelf and works I have created with care. When I work in my studio, I can revisit interactions or situations involving interpersonal or intrapersonal conflict. There is no judgement in my studio, no way for me to hurt others, be hurt, or misunderstood. It is my safe place to act and think later, or to express myself without a filter and then observe the truthfulness of what was communicated. In these ways my studio provides a safe distance from actual situations and a place to rest and reflect. I can slow down through utilizing the tools and materials around me to conceptualize the situation and potential paths forward.

Through counseling, I have realized that, in addition to needing relationships within community, I also have a driving need to be perceived as “good”, to do “good”, and make “good”. I am not as driven to be

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<sup>1</sup> I attended a lecture at a clay conference in Cincinnati, Ohio in 2023 where Joshua Beckett spoke about trauma informed practices in teaching throwing on the potter's wheel. What I heard there was such a good reminder of how relational and transformative working with clay can be. He writes for Psychology Today and is a marriage and family therapist based in Los Angeles specializing in Trauma and PTSD, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. Joshua Beckett, “Building Resilience: Relational, Trauma-informed Throwing,” (lecture, NCECA, Cincinnati, Ohio, March 16, 2023).

successful or unique. So, when I think about my future in clay, I do not desire recognition among my peers, seek wealth, or aim to innovate the field of ceramics, as much as I just want to make something “good” out of the heaps of mud at my feet. “Goodness” for me is found when I can exercise agency to solve problems and effect change. I also experience it when I create something beautiful, useful, or meaningful. My goal is to experience “goodness” making in clay, within my studio, and within my community. Furthermore, when I can solve problems and fix mistakes in my studio, it also helps me cope when I cannot control circumstances in my life.

As I have continued my education and journey in clay, ceramics people and the clay community have drawn me further into the medium through their tendency to accept and mentor those newer to clay and enfold them into the network of experienced ceramic artists. I love how using a kiln fired with wood as a fuel source (a.k.a. a Woodkiln) brings a community of passionate potters together. Though it is out of necessity, given how much time and energy it takes to fire a Woodkiln, the experience is like fellowship. Their energy is organic and nurturing, humble and educational, and bubbling with enthusiasm. It is felt when going to a clay conference. Old potters meet new potters where knowledge and trade secrets are freely shared. If I get stuck on a problem, a community of experienced potters are a click away in one of the many online communities and blogs. This community of support continues to help me grow and develop as an artist.

Stemming from that first fascination seeing clay worked as a child, to the self-reliant discovery in the creek bed, to the meditative quiet of my clay-studio, I explore interpersonal, intrapersonal, and communal conflict through manipulating clay. I do not intend my work to be an expression of conflict, but a visualization of the connection and care I hope for. The work I produce is evidence of my search for healing and hope in my life: to grow as an individual through remaining open to others, integrating new life experiences, and responding to conflict, failure, imperfections, or mistakes with acceptance and an attitude of play. I explore these themes on a formal, practical, and personal level.



## FORMAL EXPLORATIONS & CONSTRUCTION

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*Reaching Out work in progress, 2019, Porcelain and black sand.*



The formal qualities of my work are anchored in the construction process, repetitive spiral shapes, and the act of deconstruction and reconstruction. I mostly utilize vessel-referencing forms for their association to the formation of self or aspects of self. For me, this association started in my Midwest-Christian upbringing (God is the potter, “we” are the clay), but developed in college when I learned more about psychology and human development—the id, ego, and super-ego). The vessel-referencing-form is a signifier for the ego—able to contain or control contents. When I slice or tear the form open, I express my desire to let go of my impulse to worry about containing or controlling what others think and circumstances outside of my control. I slice or tear the forms open to express a desire to humble my own ego and to make room for other perspectives and solutions. The forms may include bowls, ovoid-vase-forms, and tumblers of varying widths and heights. The main methods of construction for me are working on the potter’s wheel or hand building. Working on the potter’s wheel is a meditative experience, allowing me time and space to practice mindfulness and agency: to stay present in the moment when things go awry and meditate on what is in my sphere of control, influence, and concern.<sup>2</sup> Hand building is a much slower process with its own rhythms and methods for handling. The expression and response of clay making a pinch pot, rolling out and joining slabs of clay, or rolling and attaching coils are more intimate and organic and at a slower pace than on the wheel.



*Bowls, 2021, Porcelain and Mason Stains.*

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of spheres of control, influence, and concern comes from Stephen R. Covey’s book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The spheres conceptualize where mental time and energy can best be spent regarding interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships: the sphere of managing our own reactions, the sphere of things we can affect through our actions, and the sphere of things we cannot affect but which may still affect us. Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1989, 39-40.





Right: *Reaching Out work in progress I of IV*, 2019, Porcelain and black sand.  
Left: *Reaching Out work in progress II of IV*, 2019, Porcelain and black sand.





*Left: Reaching Out work in progress III of IV, 2019, Porcelain and black sand.  
Right: Reaching Out work in progress IV of IV, 2019, Porcelain and black sand.*



Once a form is created, I then slice, tear, and pull the forms open. This destabilizes the forms and denies their utilitarian function to contain or control. They can no longer hold contents or stand upright on their own. I take care when slicing, tearing, and pulling the forms open. My intention is not to harm the forms, but to gently open them up to new possibilities.

The new shape after opening the form is usually a spiral. For me the spiral shape signifies openness, newness, healing, and growth.<sup>3</sup> I use it everywhere in my functional and sculptural work. To best express what the spiral shape means for me (as a signifier to remain open but centered towards others in healing practice) I'd like to share a personal prayer/poem I have written.

To Remain Open

To remain open is to not judge.

To remain open is to not tell the story of someone else for them.

To remain open is to accept others as intricate individuals of which I catch a short glimpse of from an angle.

To remain open is to be patient for the slow reveal of friendship or relationship.

To remain open is to accept the part of others they are willing to give without demanding more.

To remain open is to regard others with the same measure I wish they would allow me.

To remain open is to be patient and listen.

Help me remain open.

In my sculptures, the swirling continuous edges and lines which break and continue in reciprocal repetition create a dynamic visual energy moving from the interior to the outer arms spinning off the sculpture into the space beyond. These implied lines excite the space within and beyond the sculpture encouraging the viewer to make connections to various objects placed around the sculptures and make observations of spatial relationships. Despite this implied motion, some sculptures are statically built as a solid unit. While others include unattached pieces that can be displayed singularly or nested. This enables the participant to rearrange and play with the orientation of the sculpture and each piece however they wish.

Opposite Image: *Caught in the Eye*, 2019, Porcelain and black aluminum oxide.

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<sup>3</sup> See more on Saussure's signs and signifiers. Beata Stawarska, "The Signifier and the Signified," Oxford University Press eBooks. *Oxford University Press*, February 12, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780190213022.003.0002>.





My sculptures are created for integration and interaction within the home environment. They are not complete until they belong to someone and are brought home to live among someone's personal effects, curated treasures, and collection of literature. The ideal environment for my sculptures is not the museum but the interior of someone's home among the bramble and litter of life; among their curated items of literature and travel souvenirs which tell a story about where they've been, where they want to go, and possibly why. When my sculptures sit in someone's home the continuous lines spin off the sculpture drawing implied lines of movement exciting the space beyond. When my sculptures sit between the collection of artifacts and books nearby they excite the viewer's eye and encourage the viewer to make playful connections with narrative potential.

Once I create an individual spiral sculpture, I sometimes deny the completion of the forms. I deconstruct, reconstruct, and integrate forms to express hope, but also to lean into my playful creativity and love of solving puzzles. I deconstruct the sculptures by slicing them strategically. I then reattach them, so they appear to have a fluid continuity. I combine the deconstructed forms together in various configurations and at various stages of workability until I achieve new functionality. When integrated or combined they often are stronger and more stable through their networks of connections.



*Sculptures on Display for the MFA Student Exhibition at the Springfield Art Museum, May 2022, Digital photograph.*







*Telophase*, 2021, Buff stoneware and sand.



*Mitosis*, 2021, Buff stoneware and sand.

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Page 28: *Meiosis*, 2021, Porcelain and black sand with TNNA sculpture body.









*Trifecta*, 2023, Porcelain and stoneware.



I find myself drawn to this spiral shape and repeating these processes of construction, deconstruction, and integration. I seem to create the same or similar forms which record minor differences. Differences in repetition may seem minor to others but have significance for me. Repeating these forms and various methods are driven by something that happens in the studio or my life. It is often a failure, either personal or technical. In my life I may be disappointed by someone, disillusioned in my experience, or struggling to find hope. In the studio, ceramics consistently break or end up with technical flaws. When I experience disappointment in ceramics, I am motivated to create new work. The repetitive act of creation and visual representation is like creating drops of hope. With the completion of each sculpture, I hope each drop to lead to a welling of healing activity. In exploring growth, integration, and play through the work's formal qualities, I signify growth as an individual through remaining open to others and healing towards integrating new life experiences.



PRACTICAL EXPLORATIONS & MATERIALS

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*Pendant Sculpture I*, 2021, Porcelain and black sand.





As a ceramic artist, I explore my themes in the practical aspects of the medium: i.e. responding to clay materials and ceramic objects and in considering handling and use after objects have left my care. I grow through adjusting my approach in reacting to different clay bodies based on their specific behaviors and properties. I also integrate and play through adding new materials such as vinegar and paper pulp to various clay bodies. This allows me to integrate, layer, and mix clays together with fewer complications over their differences. Additionally, I may be inspired by an imperfection, failure, or mistake during or after the creation, or breakages from handling a ceramic-object. In seeking to grow past the imperfection I integrate the mistake or accept what happened with an attitude of play looking for alternative outcomes. I also consider how I can engage the participant with my objects in these themes when designing my work.

Considerations of material, the making process, and of the completed object center around preventing or coping with breakages, failures, imperfections, or mistakes. Mistakes and failures of clays and glazes can occur at any point in the creation and use of ceramic objects. Usually, ceramic pieces, which end up having imperfections, are thrown out. But, for me, breakages and imperfections become an opportunity to remain open to change, growth, new possibilities, and to take on an attitude of improvisational playfulness.

When working with materials for the prevention of failures or mistakes, I have learned that each clay body—or type of clay—needs different treatment for efficient and productive workability. Through differentiating, I have adjusted my approach in preparing clay for use by adding paper pulp and vinegar. This increases plasticity and allows various clay bodies to layer and mix without incident. I've also experimented with adding aggregate fillers such as blast media, broken down pottery, grog, or sand. I've learned, no matter what type of clay body I am working with, that these additions level the playing field and allow me attach and layer one clay body on top of another with greater ease when making and fewer failures when firing.



*Smashed Ceramics detail*, 2020, Digital photograph.

*Smashed Ceramics in My Studio*, 2020, Digital photograph.

*Various Smashed Ceramics in Missouri State University Courtyard*, 2020, Digital photograph.



Clay bodies can fail. Ceramics include a multitude of different clay types in different colors, with different uses, and which are fired to different temperatures. Clay bodies will fail if they are not fired to the correct temperature, either under-fired or over-fired—or if one type of material is out of proportion. Certain materials in the clay control variables of success. The three main materials in a successful clay body are: clay, filler such as alumina or silica, and flux such as feldspar. Each has a specific job to do. Clay is made of tiny plate-shaped structures that flow easily past one another. Clay is a material that is easily formed, pinched, pulled, or rolled. Alumina, silica, and fillers impart strength to the vessel. It gives the form support helping it maintain shape in the high temperatures of the kiln. Feldspars act as fluxing agents to lower the melting temperature of clay and glazes for achieving food-safe tableware and vessels. If any one of these materials is out of proportion the clay body will fail. For instance, if there is a lot of clay but not enough filler the form will have difficulty maintaining its shape through firings. If there is too much silica in the clay body, it will fall apart easily when being formed like trying to stretch wet sand and not form easily on the wheel. It will not have what potters call plasticity, or the ability to stretch and bend with ease. If there is too much feldspar in the mix, the ceramics will melt in the kiln causing a huge and expensive mess. People who work with clay are not only artists, but alchemists knowing the correct proportions of materials to add to achieve their desired properties in their clay and fired wares. Potter's experiment and control these various materials to create clays and glazes for their working properties.

Diametrical to integration is differentiation. I've established that I integrate forms to express hope of finding greater connection, functionality, stability, and strength through openness to change and growth. I differentiate my approach working in clay with a variety of specific ceramic materials: additions, clays, and glazes, to discover and utilize their unique properties. Differentiating affirms a truth that also brings me hope; that needs vary among individuals, and it is not just good and right, but necessary for me to adjust my approach in working with them.

When creating my work, I am fascinated with how different clay bodies require different treatment. I am similarly astounded by how much control I have over obtaining various properties in my clay through mixing materials together in the Ceramics Lab. When I began this research, I was switching careers from teaching visual art in public schools. As I began working in clay again, a truth—which guided me as an educator—was present in the way I approached my work in the studio. Working in ceramics was like working with my students: as individuals requiring different treatment to work productively.



Left: *Failed Porcelain Sculpture*, 2019, Digital photograph. This was the first sculpture I had made using porcelain after working with white stoneware. Before leaving it overnight, I put damp paper towels on it like I had my other stoneware sculptures. I learned porcelain did not do well with the amount of moisture the paper towels had trapped in. Because, when I returned the next morning, I found the sculpture had collapsed.

Right: *Failed Puzzle Sculpture*, 2019, Digital photograph. I was working on this stacking sculpture which had broken. I didn't want to give up on it, because it felt wrong for me to give up just because a breakage had occurred. I think, "If I can put this back together then I can put my life back together when things fall to pieces."



In philosophical terms: Aristotle's Acorn falls from the same tree, but the soil, light, and space into which it falls determines whether it will fail or thrive, or whether the acorn is able to actualize its potential.<sup>4</sup> The truth of the acorn is a light for me as an educator and artist. In clay, it helps me center my actions and reactions towards clay bodies and construction. I must adjust my approach to the needs and behaviors of the materials I am working with to get them to respond productively to my efforts. Each clay body requires specialized or differentiated treatment to thrive. For instance, a stoneware body is much more malleable and forgiving of mistakes while throwing, drying, and firing than porcelain. Porcelain is known to be a difficult clay to work with, though beautiful, pure, and highly durable when fired. It requires different amounts of water while throwing and different handling when drying. I can control degrees of desired properties by adding various things to the clay to help with workability, drying, melting points, and shrinking in the kiln. For instance, adding paper pulp to porcelain strengthens it significantly and adds plasticity making it easier to throw on the wheel and assists in drying. It also aids in repairing objects with success. Fillers (such as silica, sand, grog, and grit) added to the clay help my sculptures dry out more evenly and prevent cracking during firing. I also adjust how damp I make my paper towels before covering and storing my work for another working session. If I make them too wet, my porcelain sculptures will collapse. Too dry, and the stoneware will harden beyond a workable state.

Right: *Failed Porcelain Sculpture After Repairs*, 2020, Digital Photograph.

Left: *Failed Puzzle Sculpture After Repairs*, 2020, Digital photograph.



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<sup>4</sup> In Aristotle's theory of change, the spectrum of potentiality and actuality is easily understood as an acorn, which has all the potential it needs to become an oak tree locked inside it. However, the conditions into which it falls and remains determine the degree to which the acorn can actualize its potential to become an oak tree. Marc S. Cohen and C. D. C. Reeve, "Aristotle's Metaphysics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2021), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2021/entries/aristotle-metaphysics>.

Fascinated by the results of additions to my clay, I began collecting and testing various rocks I had found on the ground just outside the studio and semi-precious rocks I'd ordered online. I tested them in an oxidized kiln and a reduction kiln. The effects were fascinating, how they revealed, lost, or transformed their properties. In an oxidized kiln environment, usually electric, clay and materials in the glazes are generally more stable and reliably consistent. In a reduction kiln, usually gas, the materials in clay and glazes react to the oxygen deprived yet carbon-rich-environment creating beautiful, deep, and varied effects.



Left: *Sorted Rocks*, 2020, Digital photograph. Right: *Aggregate Tests*, 2020, Digital photograph.



I found many of my additions reacted very differently in the two kiln environments. In the gas kiln, the added materials reacted with greater volatility and were much more varied in their expression. Additions containing iron melted much more in the gas kilns which reacted more with glazes on the form, and sometimes bubbled out to appear like a burnt marshmallow. Glazes and clay bodies also usually have a cooler tinted color when fired in gas. In the electric kiln/oxygen rich environment the additions were much more consistent and stable with a warmer color to them. The difference is noticeable when the same clay and glaze is put side by side after being fired in these separate kiln environments. Seeing the same additions, clay, and glazes react so differently seemed to make-visual and reaffirm the “truth” of the Acorn I felt as an educator: that environment matters. The process also awakens my curiosity to engage in playful experimentation.



Left: *Gas Fired Porcelain with Black Sand and Clear Glaze side view, 2020, Digital photograph.*

Center Top: *Electric Fired Porcelain with Black Sand and Clear Glaze top view, 2020, Digital photograph.*

Center Bottom: *Gas Fired Porcelain with Black Sand and Clear Glaze top view, 2020, Digital photograph.*

Right: *Electric Fired Porcelain with Black Sand and Clear Glaze side view, 2020, Digital photograph.*



*Working Together*, 2021, White studio stoneware and clear glaze.



Ceramics are both durable and precarious objects, prone to breaking yet made of very tough material. Once fired, the clay material mimics stone in hardness but can often be very fragile in its completed form. For instance, the clay of a teacup is shaped into high and thin walls. Though, if fractured, fragments of the object may remain for hundreds of thousands of years and take a millennium to break down. The wholeness state of the object is precarious, especially when considering the daily use of functional ceramic objects like cups, plates, and bowls. Their daily handling puts them in a vulnerable position prone to cracking or breaking and threatens its value as a whole object whether it is decorative or functional.

Similarly, to how I adjust my approach working with clay, I create forms that require the user to adjust their approach to practice improvisation and play. The handles of my mugs are an innovative departure from the normal curved and closed design. There is no traditional handle such as a closed hook or hole to secure your hands in. It is a small parabola-shaped-form referencing a bowl, which I cut open into a spiral and then attached to the side. This new design forces the user to adjust their grip and encounter the mug in a new way. When selling my mugs at a clay fair, an older gentleman asked me how I intended the mug to be held. I smiled and replied, "That's for you to discover." When confronted with this new design I expect to spark curiosity and a desire to interact with it. However, I know some will avoid doing so if they are not open to new possibilities. In this way, my mugs are both confrontational and invitational requiring willingness towards an open experience.



Left: *Working Together unsolved*, 2021, White studio stoneware and clear glaze.

Right: *Working Together solved*, 2021, White studio stoneware and clear glaze.



Top: *Experimental Aggregate/Misfit Mug Series*, 2021, Porcelain and experimental aggregate. Middle Left: *Reclaimed and Reformed Mug*, 2021, Porcelain and mixed aggregate from crushed mugs. Middle Center: *Mug with black sand*, 2019, Porcelain and black sand. Middle Right: *Side of the Sea Mug*, 2021, Mixed stoneware and aggregate. Bottom Left: *Side of the Sea Mug*, 2021, Mixed stoneware and porcelain and aggregate. Bottom Left of Center: *Side of the Tracks Mug*, 2021, Porcelain and mixed stoneware with mixed aggregate. Bottom Right of Center: *Reclaimed and Reformed Mug*, 2021, Porcelain and mixed aggregate from crushed mugs. Bottom Right: *Side of the Sea Mug*, 2021, Mixed stoneware and aggregate.





*Handheld Sculpture I work in progress top view, 2021, Stoneware and grog.*



*Handheld Sculpture I work in progress side view, 2021, Stoneware and grog.*



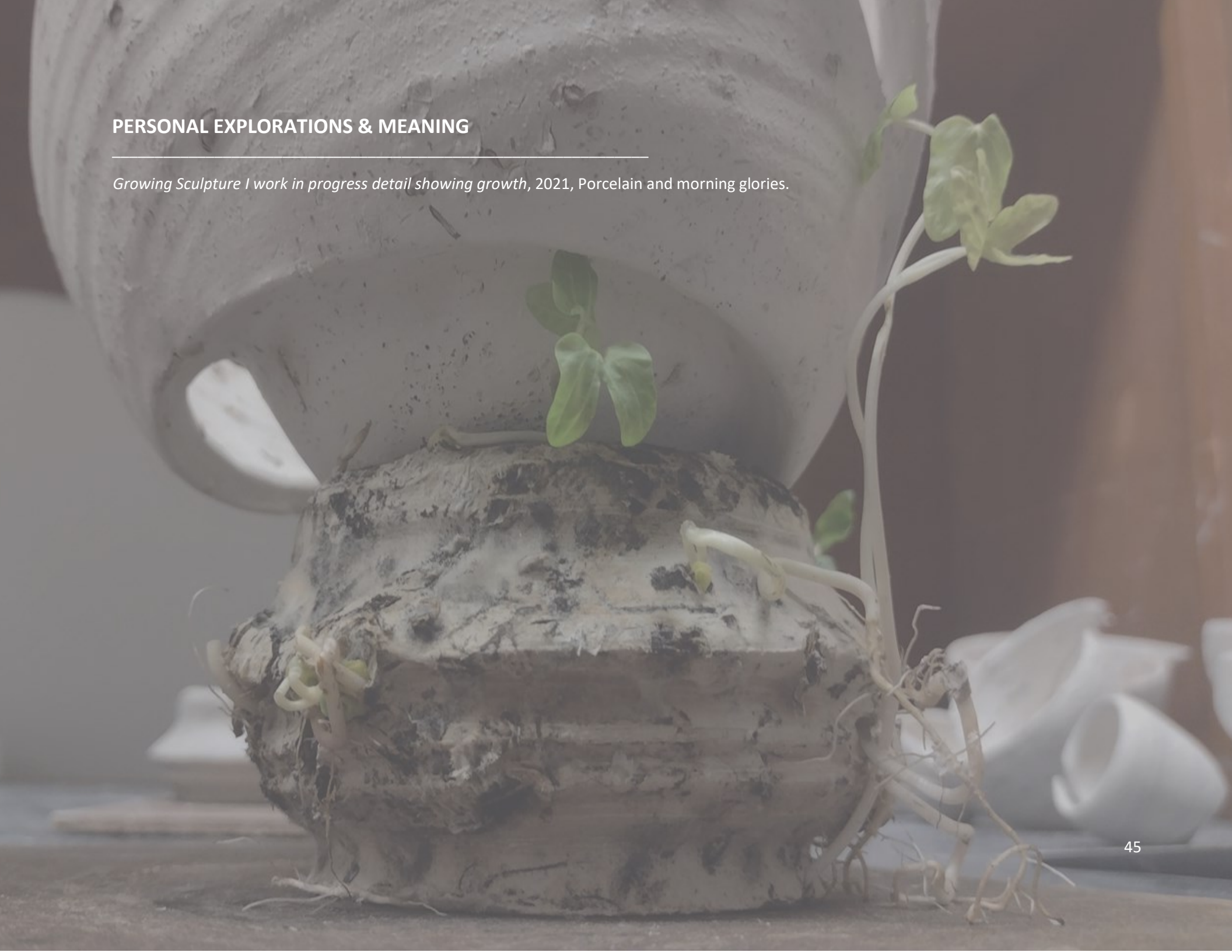


Left: *Ovoid Vase II* work in progress, 2023, Stoneware.  
Center: *Ovoid Vase I* work in progress, 2023, Stoneware.  
Right: *Handheld Sculpture II* work in progress, 2023, Stoneware.

## PERSONAL EXPLORATIONS & MEANING

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*Growing Sculpture I work in progress detail showing growth, 2021, Porcelain and morning glories.*





Many of my works are formed or “thrown” on the potter’s wheel. Thrown works begin with a lump of clay, muscle memory, and careful attention. The first step to throwing any form is centering the clay. Finding the center and balance and aligning the clay particles is imperative to throw the best form. The clay pushes at my body, attempting to throw me off balance. I must be grounded, firm, and focused to get the clay to respond productively. Working on the wheel has personal significance for many potters. But, for me specifically, throwing (or forming) clay on the wheel is an exercise for grounding and centering my emotional responses. I struggle with generalized anxiety. My anxiety is like a lump of clay. It seeks to throw me off balance, pushes and pulls me. I must be mindful and resolute to center and redirect my emotional response towards productivity. Knowing how to center my emotional responses brings me hope that I can enjoy greater happiness and success in life as I work to integrate my experiences, grow as an individual, and remain open to new possibilities—able to play with potential outcomes.

I continue to find room to grow working with clay where the only limit on my expression is my own bravery to push past what I know, to find something new. Once a vessel is formed, I deconstruct them through slicing, tearing, or pulling the forms apart. I do this to push myself into discomfort. When I push myself to sit with what is uncomfortable, observe it without judgement, interact with it, and solve a problem, I grow as an artist and craftsperson. It also provides me an opportunity to reflect on practicing this in my personal life. Once deconstructed, I seek to find a new solution through integrating and reconstructing them. The resulting forms are often stronger and more stable through their networks of connections. The Work becomes more resilient as I hope to in life.

I find even greater agency in accepting and repairing mistakes or integrating failures which may occur. They cause greater discomfort than intentional deconstruction, but they can also be repaired, recycled, or reformed and integrated. Ceramics are also prone to failing through mistakes of the potter: trimming through the bottom of a pot, dropping, or mishandling. When I confront imperfections, mistakes, or failure through the process of creating clay-objects it presents me with an opportunity to remain open to change, growth, and new possibilities. It becomes a challenge to exercise acceptance, patience, and tenacity, and to take on an attitude of improvisational playfulness. I think of a way to repair, reclaim, or reform the work. When I go through this process it helps me reflect and reframe my own disappointments, failures, and fears. Similarly, I hope to mature in accepting and integrating my mistakes and failures in my own life-story. I hope to find resilience in exercising improvised play when things go awry.

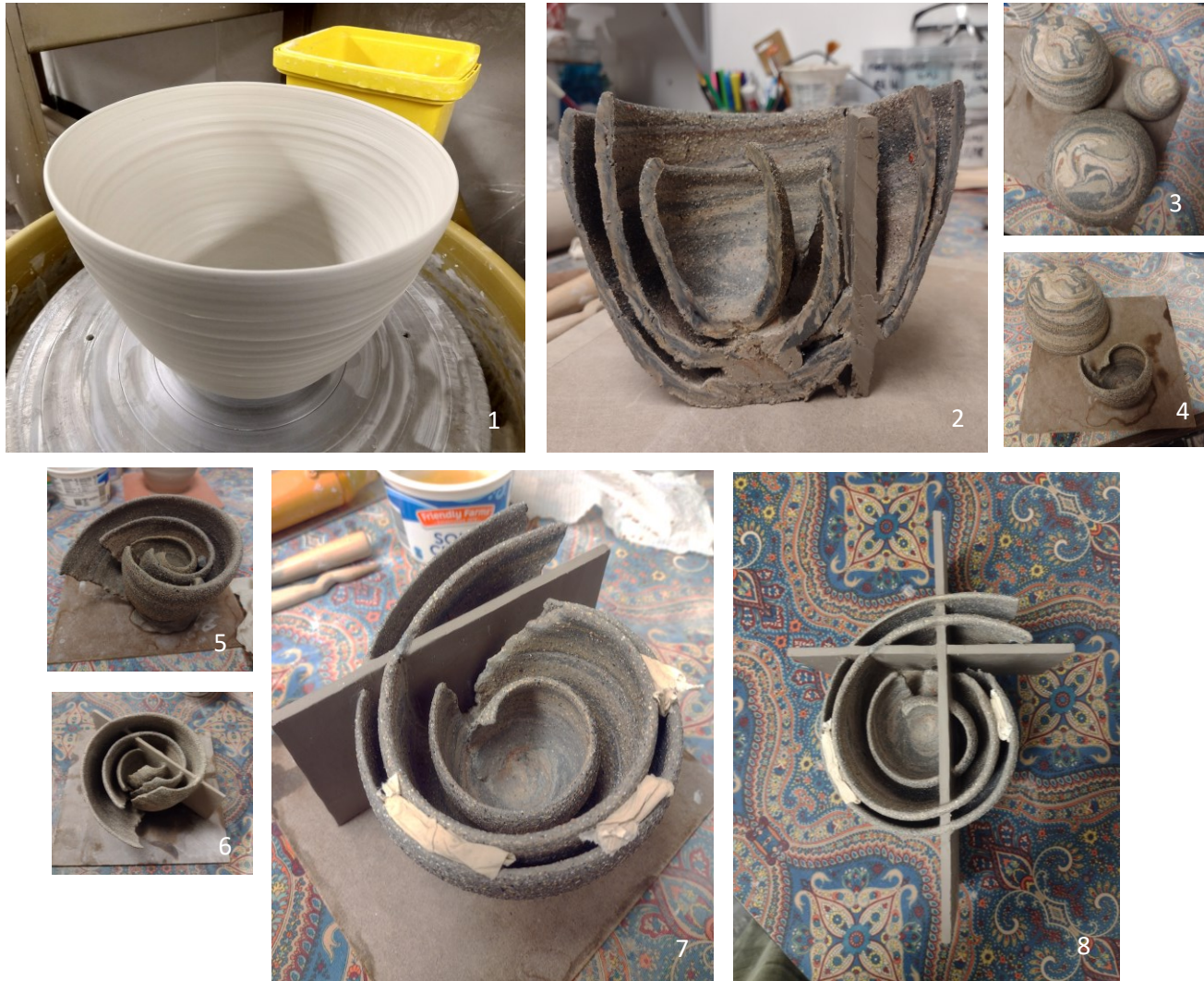


Image 1: *Thrown Porcelain Bowl work in progress, 2019, Porcelain.*  
 Image 2: *Deconstructing Transcending I work in progress V of VI, 2022, Stoneware and aggregate.*  
 Image 3: *Deconstructing Transcending I work in progress I of VI, 2022, Stoneware and aggregate.*  
 Image 4: *Deconstructing Transcending I work in progress II of VI, 2022, Stoneware and aggregate.*  
 Image 5: *Transcending II work in progress, 2022, Stoneware and aggregate.*  
 Image 6: *Transcending I work in progress III of VI, 2022, Stoneware and aggregate.*  
 Image 7: *Transcending I work in progress IV of VI, 2022, Stoneware and aggregate.*  
 Image 8: *Transcending I work in progress VI of VI, 2022, Stoneware and aggregate.*







As I mentioned in formal explorations, when I open my forms, my intention is never to destroy the forms or harm them, only to help open them up to new possibilities. If harm is done to the forms (I drop it or it breaks in my hands), I respond by accepting what has happened and seek to incorporate that into the story. I repair, reclaim, or reform the work. In the spirit of kintsugi, I want to honor the object's history. Kintsugi is the ancient Japanese art of repairing pottery by reattaching broken pieces with resin and filling the cracks with gold veins. In the spirit of kintsugi, I want to remember what the piece went through while being created, so I fill cracks and repairs with contrasting clay. Such care isn't always taken by me in life. I may not read a situation, person, or relationship with accuracy. I may be insensitive, or worse, defensive. What I love about relationships is there is always a chance to mend mistakes, to apologize, to leave the person or the relationship open to change and reconciliation. My work gives me an opportunity to reflect on this--to exercise and practice hope of care, change, and repair in relationships. I can slow down and approach any given situation in my mind again where I can practice greater care towards the person or relationship.



Left: *Torn work in progress detail*, 2023, Porcelain and TNNA sculpture body.

Center: *Momma, Poppa, and Baby: Thrown and Torn Series work in progress top view*, 2019, Porcelain and buff stoneware with sand.

Right: *Momma, Poppa, and Baby: Thrown and Torn Series work in progress detail of bottom*, 2019, Porcelain and buff stoneware with sand.

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Opposite: *Stacking Standing*, 2023, Porcelain and buff stoneware with sand.





*Momma, Poppa, and Baby: Thrown and Torn Series unstacked, 2019, Porcelain and stoneware.*



*Momma, Poppa, and Baby: Thrown and Torn Series side view, 2019, Porcelain and stoneware.*



## EXHIBITED WORK

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*Handheld Sculptures in Behind Glass Display up close, 2023, Colored porcelain and aggregate.*



The display of my created work seeks to evoke tension between viewer expectations with ceramics in a museum-setting (to be seen) and the intended experience of my created ceramic works (to be held). With this tension I seek to highlight the themes of growth, integration, and play present in my work through displaying my pieces in ways that deny, illustrate, or invite interaction.

As personal, intimate objects, intended to be held and used, ceramics are created with their surfaces in mind. They encounter sensitive parts of the body. For instance, the surfaces of a mug meet lips when sipping, or hands when being held for warmth. Since the tactile qualities of ceramic objects are deeply considered by the creator in the making, they should be experienced to be understood.

In addition, the temporal experience of using ceramic objects is often very intimate, becoming part of the private moments of our lives during intervals when we are often unguarded. For instance, when using a ceramic mug, it is often for a morning cup of coffee, or a cup of tea while still in a robe, before a shower, or before makeup goes on. While the experience of ceramics at a museum is quite public.

Since ceramic objects have a unique opportunity to become part of our daily routines, with daily interaction, and daily contemplation—I am honored and relish that my functional works can hold such a unique space as a work of art. Contemplation is a very important part in the completion of a work of art according to the application of Reader Response Theory.<sup>5</sup> According to the theory, my works cannot be completed until they are contemplated (or “read”). I feel they can only be “read”, contemplated, or experienced through their intended contexts.

The themes present in my work can be experienced through vision alone, but sight was not the only way I intended for them to be experienced. I feel a tension between the context I created my works in (experiencing the sensory and tactile qualities of clay) and the context I created my work for (with the practical function and daily use in mind) push and pull with the experience of the viewer within the museum-setting. The themes present in my work (growth, integration, and play) are intended to be experienced through interaction (within a personalized context such as the home) and use (to sense their form, textures, and weight). My argument is that

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<sup>5</sup> The Theory established that the meaning of a work is not static or inherent in the work itself, but it is in the experience of the reader “reading” the work that completes it. If according to reader response theory, works of art cannot be complete until they have been “read” or experienced by the viewer. Then, according to Reader Response Theory, my works cannot be completed until they are contemplated (or “read”). Stanley Fish, “Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics,” *New Literary History* 2, no. 1 (Autumn 1970): 123–162, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/468593?seq=8>.



my works cannot be fully “read” in a traditional gallery-or museum-setting because they are not able to be experienced adequately. According to Reader Response Theory, seeing is not reading. When a work is experienced within its context, for its intended use, this completes the work. When the viewer holds one of my sculptures it causes them to contemplate themes of the work by interacting with them in the ways I intended. By holding the sculptures, they can contemplate the work through their sense of touch, feel the relationship of size of the form to their hands, bumpy, smooth, or glassy surface textures, and turn them over to see many angles. I created the sculptures with these qualities in mind. To be adequately contemplated they must be experienced. And according to the Reader Response Theory, for the works to be completed, they must be contemplated.<sup>6</sup>

The three displays in my exhibit include: “Behind Glass”, “Invitational Display”, and “Sculptures at Home”. With these displays I seek to highlight modalities in which my ceramics are not able to be experienced, and therefore not able to be contemplated or understood, in certain settings, and with certain viewer expectations by inviting, illustrating, or denying interaction.



*MFA Thesis Exhibition at Springfield Art Museum, May 2023, Digital photograph.*

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<sup>6</sup> Fish, “Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics,” 123–162.

My “Behind Glass” display includes three bodies of work: my “Integration Series” of sculptures, my “Handheld Sculptures”, and a pair of sculptures titled “Working Together”. All three works feature themes of integration and play. Because the works are on display behind glass, it frustrates the desire of the viewer to interact. This denial creates a tension between the given context of the objects and their titles.



*Behind Glass Display, 2023, Digital photograph.*



The “Integration Series” is a collection of stoneware sculptures which explore interpersonal acceptance and merger through the combination of spiral forms which appear to accept one another fluidly without resistance. Two becomes one in a network of intersections and sites of connection. Then, two becomes three. The sculptures are made from high-fire stoneware, porcelain, and glaze with gold or platinum luster accentuating the tops of their curving and intersecting contours.



*Integration Series Behind Glass Display at the Springfield Art Museum, May 2023, Porcelain and stoneware.*

Top Left: *Mitosis*, 2021, Buff stoneware and 24k gold luster.

Top Center: *Multiplying*, 2021, Porcelain and black sand.

Top Right: *Telophase*, 2021, Porcelain and buff stoneware with aggregate and 24k gold and platinum luster.

Bottom Left: *Meiosis*, 2021, Porcelain and TNNA sculpture body with aggregate and platinum luster.

Bottom Right: *Trifecta*, 2023, Mixed stoneware and aggregate with glaze.

My “Handheld Sculptures” are made from mid-fire porcelain in white, black, and blue. Additions of sand, broken colored porcelain, and various other materials were added to some clays, but not all. The different colors of clay are swirled together creating a repetition of striped and varied line-patterns on the surface. Some cups are solid. Some cups stand alone, and intact. Others are sliced or torn and opened on one side. Many sliced or torn cups are combined in ways like the sculptures in the “Integration Series”. Though they share similarities, no two cups or sculptures are alike.

The sculptures themselves are intended to be held. Initially, I wished to provide an invitation to experience those tactile qualities and initiate that personal experience with immediacy, within the exhibition or museum setting. However, the lighted cabinets at the museum allowed me to highlight the theme by frustrating the viewers' ability to use anything other than their sense of sight to interact with the work.



Right: *Handheld Sculpture III unfired*, 2023, Colored porcelain.  
Left: *Handheld Sculpture III fired*, 2023, Colored porcelain.





Last in the glass cases are a pair of sculptures titled “Working Together”. The sculptures are a puzzle made of individual layers stacked together with uniquely shaped spacers between them. The base and layered forms of the sculptures were sliced and opened on opposite and alternating sides. This creates a back-and-forth movement that is conversational and playful. The layers, while made of the same high-fire clay and glaze, were fired in different kiln environments (electric and gas). This gave a slightly warmer and cooler tint to the respective layers (warm in electric and cool in gas). These variations in firing results are difficult to discern unless compared side by side. Behind the glass, one sculpture is “solved” with layers carefully balanced atop one another with their ear-shaped spacers in-between. The other is not. Layers lay unstacked on their sides with the spaces scattered at the base of the sculpture, unable to be arranged or solved.



*Working Together at SAM, 2021, White studio stoneware and clear glaze.*

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Opposite: *Handheld Sculptures in Behind Glass Display side view, 2023, Colored porcelain and aggregate.*



“Invitational Display” includes mugs, a handheld sculpture, and a small stacking sculpture set on top of a large pedestal with a sign which asks viewers to touch or hold the work. In handling the sculptures, my intention with the display is to provide the museumgoer with an invitation to experience the tactile qualities of my ceramics and step a bit out of their comfort zone. The display allows the viewer to hold and interact with my work—right there at the museum. I expect this to feel very different from a typical experience of a ceramic piece in an art exhibition. So, in asking attendees to touch or hold the mugs and sculptures, even when given permission, I expect some won’t and others to eagerly engage. The interactive exhibition invites the viewer to overcome their taboos towards touching art in a museum. It also helps the viewer experience the qualities of my work more authentically. Through the viewer holding, not just seeing the work, they are better able to experience and “read” it. Additionally, in coaxing them a little out of their comfort zones I hope to help widen their experience of ceramics in a museum-setting.



Left: *Invitational Display Handheld and Puzzle Sculpture*, 2023, Porcelain and stoneware.  
Right: *Invitational Mug Display*, 2023, Porcelain and stoneware.

The “Sculptures at Home” display contains various sculptures which were created for integration and interaction within the home environment. As I mentioned before, the ideal environment for my sculptures is not the museum but the interior of someone’s home. A bookshelf or fireplace mantle is not only the ideal place for display, but also allows the sculptures to exercise a function which is absent in a sterile white-cube-setting—to make connections. Reader Response Theory emphasizes the importance of this interaction—that viewer experience and response with the works is essential to establishing the meaning. This act of bringing the sculpture into a personal interior (interacting with and integrating it into the home) completes the work.



*Sculptures at Home in MFA Thesis Exhibition, 2023, Porcelain and stoneware.*





Top: *Sculptures at Home Installation Ovoid Vase Form I*, 2023, Porcelain and stoneware.

Bottom Left: *Sculptures at Home Installation Stacking Sitting*, 2023, Porcelain and stoneware.

Bottom Right: *Sculptures at Home Installation Handheld Sculpture II*, 2023, Porcelain and stoneware.



Top: *Sculptures at Home Installation Small Terracotta Warrior with 14k Gold Luster at Lisa's House, 2023*, Terracotta 14k gold luster. Center: *Sculptures at Home Installation Reaching Out at Grandma Mary Anne's House, 2023*, Porcelain and black sand. Bottom: *Sculptures at Home Installation Terracotta Warrior with Yellow Slip at Lisa's House, 2023*, Terracotta with yellow slip.



## CONCLUSION & CONTINUED EXPLORATIONS

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*Brother's Keeper work in progress, 2019, Porcelain and white stoneware.*

In conclusion—my early and lasting impressions of the therapeutic and relational qualities of clay have stuck with me. I continue to use clay as my primary medium for artistic expression due to the satisfaction of agency and interconnectedness I feel making ceramic objects. Though, I talk a lot about the meaningful interpersonal and intrapersonal work I do in my studio; to be honest, it's sometimes just me playing in the dirt. Through many hours of work, I have become increasingly aware that my activities do nothing for getting me real healing or hope if it is just symbolic activity done in the echo chamber of my studio. The pathways—I find making ceramics—must be taken.

In my continuing studio practice, I plan to further my explorations of growth, integration, and play through symbiotic sculptures, expanding on my mug handle design to merge sculptural work with functional vessels, integrating pottery aggregate into functional and sculptural pieces, and developing ways to include participants in the destruction and recreation of my work. With these projects, and others, I intend to continue my practice of finding hope and healing for greater interconnectedness within community through exploring my main themes of growth, integration, and play. I intend to explore these themes both inside, but more increasingly, outside my studio.



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