Natural Forces, Natural Forms

Robert Benjamin Randolph

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NATURAL FORCES: NATURAL FORMS

Robert Benjamin Randolph
NATURAL FORCES, NATURAL FORMS

A Thesis

Presented to

the College of Graduate Studies of

Georgia Southern University

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master’s of Fine Arts

in the Department of Art

by

Robert Benjamin Randolph

April 2001
April 23, 2001

To the Graduate School:

This thesis, entitled "Natural Forces, Natural Forms" and written by Robert Benjamin Randolph is presented to the College of Graduate Studies of Georgia Southern University. I recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master's of Fine Arts Degree in Visual Art.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my director, Jane Pleak, for her encouragement, patience, confidence and overall support during my long journey. Her positive attitude and her willingness to let me grow at my own pace made my completion of this program possible. Thanks to my studio mate, Linda Whitt Smith, for shepherding me through these past ten years and sharing all of her knowledge, skills, tools and love. Thanks also to my committee, Julie McGuire and Richard Tichich. Their patience and willingness to stick with me through my many stops and starts is appreciated.

A special thanks goes to my mother, Rebie Randolph, and my life partner, Fred Richter, for their willingness to give me up to the studio for the countless hours needed to complete the many classes and the work for the thesis show. Their willing sacrifice made it possible for me to concentrate on my art without distraction.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

My art has always been driven by my natural environment. The textures, colors and forms found in nature inspire me. Objects that I normally experience as part of a broader impression reveal more universal messages when I focus on them as individual images. The beauty is in the details. Tree bark, pebbles, leaves, branches and seed pods are some of the particulars of nature that reveal their own beauty when observed close up and separate from the whole. Their individual character and design fascinate me and speak to me of the complexity of the natural world.

A closer look at the designs within nature illuminates the connectedness that we have with our world. Each aspect serves to reiterate that we are a part of a larger whole. The seasons, the reproductive cycle and the daily progression of night into day and back remind me of the similarities that we share with the rest of the natural world.

The images within our natural environment have always been closely connected to my definition of aesthetics and my attraction to these images has defined the path that my life has taken. When I think of beauty, I usually visualize a natural landscape or an organic structure such as a flower or a plant. That’s where I draw my inspiration. But the inspiration is not based solely on aesthetics but rather on appreciation that the beauty is only the surface of a deeper and more complex structure. The flower is beautiful not because it exists for our enjoyment – that is what I would call the “aesthetic bonus” – but
rather because it needs to reproduce and its attractiveness draws some creature necessary to the fertilization process. Red flowers are red because they need a pollinator that can see red and will be drawn to it. Other flowers use structure or scent to attract their helpers. Perhaps certain fruits are delicious because some appreciative creature is needed to process and disperse their seeds.

This relationship of form to function fascinates me and attracts my creative energy. The simple appearance and the underlying complex structure of nature inspire me to pay tribute. I therefore strive to create simple forms that illuminate the complexities of nature. These objects serve as reminders that our comprehension of the natural world is fleeting and simplistic. My first challenge for this project was to identify and understand the complexities of nature - looking deeper and attempting to understand what I see. The next challenge was to expose and present those complexities without overwhelming the simplicity of the forms. These were challenges that will continue in both my life and my art.

The forms I have created for this series attempt to capture the energy of life - to expose the processes that represent living. These forms speak of the universality of the mechanisms of life and the connectedness of all living things. The use of the vessel as the origin of each form further connects the viewer to these natural processes. The vessel represents the containment of the potential that all life possesses. The energy in each form serves particular processes present in all living things. The mechanisms for protection, nurture, reproduction and replenishment are depicted through these forms in a manner that exposes their presence throughout the natural world.
CHAPTER II

PERSONAL AND ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

The most influential force in my artistic creativity is nature. From the time that I was a child, my life has been spent in appreciation of and wonderment at the natural world. My childhood was full of typical wanderings and explorations in my natural environment. Most of my earliest memories are filled with visual experiences of local flora and fauna. Fortunately, I have never lost my need to remain close to the natural world and to spend as much time as possible relating to and reveling in the wonders of nature. My thirst for new experiences in nature has been unabated. My choice of careers, habitat and avocations is directly related to my need for constant connection with my natural environment.

Nature inspires me to create. I’m not content to just observe my surroundings. I feel the need to pay tribute. I also feel the need to develop a deeper understanding of nature through my work. And what more fundamental medium in nature to cultivate that understanding than clay? It’s not hard to comprehend the choice of clay for my preferred medium. The tactile quality, the connection to the earth and the versatility in construction are some of the aspects that draw me to the medium.

The experience of creating with earth is an aesthetic experience in itself. The feeling of wet clay oozing through my fingers is sensual. The malleability of the clay and the
way it lends itself to additive and subtractive processes allows for freedom of expression. The medium encourages continuous experimentation.

The primary technique I utilize to achieve my desired forms is the potter's wheel. Throwing on the wheel delivers a deeper level of significance to the experience. The turning mass of clay centers the mind. I'm in control and the medium responds instantaneously to directions from my mind through my fingertips. The lightest touch is all that is required to produce expressive forms. Consequently, as the mind wanders so can the form. This process of turning, forming and refining provides a direct link between the contemplative mind and the medium.

My fascination with the vessel form can also be attributed to nature. It seems to be an inherent attraction that is shared by many and probably comes from our identification with the vessel as an embracing, nurturing form. We are conceived in, nurtured, born from, fed and sheltered by, and delivered back to nature in vessels. Nature is full of examples of the vessel as a symbol of protection, embrace and life itself. Everything from the egg, the womb, seed pods, shells and countless containers serves to embrace and nurture life in its many forms.

My methods of working with clay are influenced by the many master potters who have come before me. I've absorbed an attention to detail, an appreciation for good craftsmanship and a simplicity of form through attention to the works of potters such as Warren MacKenzie, David Shaner, Bernard Leach and many of the Japanese and Korean folk potters of the last century. Respect for the medium and a desire to let the material speak has influenced my approach to creation in clay.
The forms and concepts for my thesis show were not derived from or influenced by any particular artist or period through conscious observation. However, many years of exposure to and inspection of a broad range of sculpture and ceramic art certainly provided ideas, visual vocabulary and aesthetic intuition. Forms within nature were observed within the natural environment as well as within scientific texts and botanical references. Published images were helpful in visualizing the characteristic details of particular natural vessels and inspiring the process of creation.
CHAPTER III

METHODS OF CREATION

My work was created using two clay bodies, two firing temperatures and two firing methods. My intent was to experiment with the processes in order to achieve the look that I wanted. The vessels were formed primarily on the wheel. Surface textures were achieved using a variety of objects as tools including wooden dowels, aluminum rods, steel trimming tools, plastic shapes, nails and fingernails. All aspects of each piece were formed by hand from wet clay with the exception of Mother (Figure 1), which required a two-part mold for construction.

The two clay bodies consisted of a high-fire, white stoneware and a low-fire red clay. The formulas for these bodies are given below. I chose these two bodies in order to provide a broad range of opportunities for construction and effect. The red clay offers a more plastic medium that will survive extreme construction methods such as highly variable adjoining thicknesses and long, unsupported appendages. Shrinkage is reduced and warping is minimized due to the openness of the body and the strength of the greenware. The color and texture of the red clay also offer a richness and depth in both glazed and raw states. The red clay matures at Cone 04 (1940 °F).

I chose a white stoneware body for its color, texture and overall refinement. Certain pieces needed the more formal appearance of the white stoneware to contrast with their construction methods. The white stoneware enabled me to achieve the impression of a
Figure 1: *Mother*, Robert B. Randolph
precious or refined quality. The color of the body also allowed for brighter and more subtle glaze colorings. Construction methods using the white stoneware were more limited, however, and most of the construction problems occurred due to the shrinkage and warping of this clay body. The white stoneware matures at Cone 10 (2360 °F).

I used a variation on each clay body to create paper clay bodies for both high temperature and low temperature. Processed waste paper was mixed with a slurry of each clay body at a 1:1 ratio by volume. This mixture was then dried to a workable state. The resulting white stoneware paper clay body was rolled into slabs for use in the piece diaspora (Figure 2). The red clay paper clay body was applied as a thick slurry in a mold for the piece Mother (Figure 1). This variation on the clay bodies was used for its greatly-reduced post-firing weight and its strength in the unfired state. In the case of Mother, the size of the piece required weight reduction in order for the piece to survive the final firing. It also needed to be strong in the greenware stage in order to move it to the kiln for bisque firing. In the case of diaspora, the desired effect was that of the tissue thin membranes found on maple seeds. Paper clay allowed for the individual pieces to be extremely thin without cracking and the post-firing result to be light and airy.

One installation piece, exodus (Figure 3), was constructed from a combination of the red clay and the white stoneware. Three external pods and the bases were made of the red clay and the individual fruits for all three pieces were formed from white stoneware. The fruits were attached to the pods using a slip of white stoneware. The pieces were fired to Cone 04 (1940 °F) in a reduction atmosphere.
Figure 2: *diaspora*, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 3: *exodus* Robert B. Randolph
Glazes were made up of 1 part mason stain, 1 to 3 parts Ferro Frit 3134 and 5 to 10 parts water by volume. These were applied using an airbrush, with some hand brushing performed on smaller pieces and for contrast. Changes in the percentage of frit and water resulted in changes in the fired surface. Generally speaking, the more frit that was used, the glossier were the resulting surfaces. And likewise, the less frit used in the solution, the more matt were the surfaces. Changes in the quantity of water affected the texture of the surfaces. The more water that was used in the solution, the smoother were the resulting surfaces. Less water resulted in a surface that was more grainy and rough.

The inside of the vessel portion of many pieces was brushed with a commercial black glaze. This added visual weight to the enclosed volume and provided a strong contrast between interior and exterior spaces.

Reduction firing was performed using natural gas in a Bailey downdraft kiln to Cone 04-1 (1940-2120 °F.) The kiln was fired under oxidation conditions until the last five minutes of firing when it was put into medium reduction. This process was used to bring out the richness of the clay body and to enhance the surface effects of the glazes. The kiln was then shut off and the pots were cooled slowly. All red clay forms were fired in this manner. The mixed-clay installation piece, exodus (Figure 3), was also fired in the natural gas kiln.

Oxidation firing was performed in an electric kiln to Cone 9 (2345 °F). All white-stoneware forms were fired in this oxidation environment.
The following clay bodies were used to produce the series

LOW-FIRE RED CLAY BODY
(CONE 04)

REDART  50
GOLDART  15
FIRECLAY 10
BALLCLAY 10
FRIT 3124 15

TOTAL  100

add 1.5 pounds grog
add nylon fibers

HIGH-FIRE WHITE STONEWARE BODY
(CONE 10)

TILE 6 CLAY  50
PIONEER KAOLIN 17
SILICA 15
G200 FELDSPAR 15
BENTONITE  3

TOTAL  100

add 1.5 pounds grog
add nylon fibers
CHAPTER IV

EXAMINATION OF THE ARTIST'S WORK

The forms presented in the thesis show are based on universal processes found in nature. The approach was to use generally recognizable natural vessel forms in various states of living. The challenge was to capture the energy of life through the natural processes presented. While most of the forms are abstract, they have obvious reference to natural objects.

Many of the processes captured in the forms relate to the nurturing of life. These processes include protection, renewal and procreation. Works such as midnight, precious cargo, home at sea, and forbidden fruit (Figures 4, 5, 6, 7) reveal the vessel as a protective home for the vulnerable stages of life. Works such as sprout, swell, and the green fuse (Figures 8, 9, 10) refer to renewal, growth and the life force in all living things. Other works such as diaspora, exodus, spent, and ripe (Figures 2, 3, 11, 12) capture the cycle of life and the processes of procreation including the energy of reproduction and the mechanisms for dispersal of new life.

The title “the green fuse,” was inspired by a poem by Dylan Thomas entitled “The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower.” This poem was one of the inspirations for the theme of the show. In the poem, Thomas addresses the life force present in all living forms and the interconnectedness that all living forms share. The
Figure 4: midnight, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 5: *precious cargo*, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 6: *home at sea*, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 7: forbidden fruit, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 8: *sprout*, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 9: *swell*, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 10: the green fuse, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 11: spent, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 12: *ripe*, Robert B. Randolph
poem was presented in the thesis show adjacent to the artist’s statement and is printed here in Appendix B. Other titles were chosen to complement a particular form and its intended representation. Language ploys such as double entendre, sexual innuendo, humor and other plays on words were used to insinuate multiple layers of meaning and to connect the natural objects to the life of the viewer.

Several iconic symbols were used to capture the essence of particular natural mechanisms. The vessel is certainly the most recognized and understood symbol of nurture and protection in nature. All of the pieces in the series are, or are related to vessels of one kind or another.

Thorns were represented in many of the pieces to signify safety and protection. Works such as midnight, precious cargo, nest and prickly pair (Figures 4, 5, 13, 14) are examples. While such thorns may often be interpreted as an aggressive sign, they are here presented as a passive, natural defense mechanism for the vulnerable life contained within the vessels. Some of these forms, in spite of being the greatest challenges in construction, were also the most successful of the series. The limits of the medium were constantly pressed in order to produce the desired effects. Extreme changes in clay thickness, uneven drying, warping, cracking and cantilevered appendages were just a few of the challenges faced. The construction process for these pieces in the series was by far the most demanding, but also the most educational portion of the work.

Similar to the thorns used in pieces such as precious cargo (Figure 5), delicate extruding elements were created to suggest energy and motion for other pieces. Works
Figure 13: *nest*, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 14: **prickly pear**, Robert B. Randolph
Figure 15: *thistle*, Robert B. Randolph
such as home at sea, the green fuse, and thistle (Figures 6, 10, 15) used construction techniques that required extreme patience, knowledge of the material and care in creation, handling and firing. Most of the pieces incorporating extruding appendages were constructed using the red clay body due to its more forgiving characteristics: slower drying rate, stronger tensile strength and minimal warping. But several were also successfully constructed using the white stoneware body. These included midnight, precious cargo, and home at sea (Figures 4, 5, 6). However, there were many failures with this clay body before I determined what was required in order to achieve the forms I desired.

Two pieces in the series addressed broader environmental issues. The piece last stand (Figure 16), refers to the destruction of nature and the psychological separation of humankind from nature in an attempt to avoid addressing the loss. The piece Mother (Figure 1), refers to the earth as the vessel from which all of nature, including humankind, is nurtured.

In sum, this thesis series attempts to illustrate the universal mechanisms of organic life through a selection of forms connecting the viewer to the natural world.
Figure 16: *last stand*, Robert B. Randolph
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Nature inspired the series of forms presented in this MFA thesis show. My challenge for the series was to capture the energy of life in a manner that brought the viewer into a communion with nature. I hope viewers will find some means of identifying with particular aspects of the displayed natural processes and translate that into a deeper awareness of the interconnectedness of all life.

Organic forms were used to translate the energy into a presence that could be understood and identified with. I explored new methods of construction, embellishment, coloring and firing in order to generate the energy and impressions of nature that I sought.

The transformation of clay and color into organic energy was successful in most cases. The forms took on a life of their own when presented in a gallery setting. While not every layer of significance and meaning was necessarily observed or understood by each viewer, nearly everyone found personal connections to nature within one or more of the objects.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

BIBLIOGRAPHY


The Force That Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower

The force that through the green fuse drives the flower
Drives my green age; that blasts the roots of trees
Is my destroyer.
And I am dumb to tell the crooked rose
My youth is bent by the same wintry fever.

The force that drives the water through the rocks
Drives my red blood; that dries the mouthing streams
Turns mine to wax.
And I am dumb to mouth unto my veins
How at the mountain spring the same mouth sucks.

The hand that whirls the water in the pool
Stirs the quicksand; that ropes the blowing wind
Hauls my shroud sail.
And I am dumb to tell the hanging man
How of my clay is made the hangman’s lime.

The lips of time leech to the fountain head;
Love drips and gathers, but the fallen blood
Shall calm her sores.
And I am dumb to tell a weather’s wind
How time has ticked a heaven round the stars.

And I am dumb to tell the lover’s tomb
How at my sheet goes the same crooked worm.

Dylan Thom