

Truth and Artifact

by
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Art

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Message of Gratitude

I would like to give special thanks to my college faculty advisor, John Beckelman for all of his help and support in the process of writing this paper and throughout my college career. I would like to thank my drawing professor, Priscilla Steele, my philosophy professor John Lemos, and my high school art teacher Reuben Torres for their guidance as well.

Dedication

To all truth seekers who see that the truth is too complex to comprehend and adequately explain, but find value in looking and expressing anyway.

Writing about my artwork has been a struggle. I can talk about the materials I use, the techniques I employ, and the ideas that inspire my work but as with any artist, there is a great deal more to tell. I have taken this paper as an opportunity to attempt to provide a genuine account of the deeper aspects of my art because I want to clarify for myself, as well as for viewers, my intentions as an artist. The process of making art means a great deal to me. As pious and mystical as it may sound, I believe that art is an exercise of my soul; when I am making art I feel as though I am as sensitive, alive, and human as I can be. Because I work intuitively, it is hard to pinpoint the origins of my work, but by sharing some of my experiences, struggles, and philosophies throughout life, I believe I can more honestly explain myself and the manner in which I work.

I will begin by discussing some aspects of my childhood that seem to have led me to become an artist and still continue to affect my work. When we are young, the most trivial things inspire us. As a child I was a constant daydreamer. I imagined that hills were the resting bodies of extinct brontosauruses; lakes were gigantic mouths of underground creatures just waiting for the perfect moment to swallow us up. Everything seemed to have a life all of it's own, it's own inner poetry so to speak. As a rather quiet and vulnerable child these thoughts brought true happiness to me.

When I was little, I liked being alone. My mind was more lively and playful when no one else was around. My ideas resonated inside me, and I did not have the words to explain them as I saw them. I feared the possibility of being misunderstood, and I was often overly sensitive and quietly fragile. It was for these reasons that it was hard for me to be with people. I would often end up hiding away somewhere, sometimes for no reason at all. Over time, I have grown to understand that my sensitivity, although it often

reminds me of how insignificant I am and how little I truly know, it constantly tells me that I am alive and a part of a complex reality. I try to let my feelings, which are nearly as complex as reality itself, guide me through life as well as my process of creating art.

My first artistic endeavors were primarily drawings. I had always loved to draw, and it was through drawing and observing life that I could communicate more accurately myself and my ideas. I wanted to learn to draw better, and I would practice drawing from photographs. By drawing from photographs I began to recognize my own personal sensibilities. I was drawn to the textures of wispy hair, wrinkly skin, leaves, fur, and tree bark. I was fascinated by the character of various forms, like the structures and shapes of faces, eyes, and noses, pine trees, lakes, mountains, and toes. I challenged myself to figure out the right lines and marks to represent objects and photographs as I saw and understood them. It was through drawing that I would grow to appreciate the richness and complexity of things.

When I came to college, I was curious about the meaning of art. I knew that I liked to make what was called art, but I was not sure why. I wondered why people enjoyed looking at works of art or why they valued some work over others. Most of all, I wondered what could be considered art in the first place. No one seemed to have an answer to that question, and I did not realize what a difficult question it was until I tried to come up with my own answer. The relevance of science in society is more easily understood. Artists are often plagued with the questions, “Why are you doing this?” “What significance does this have?” Throughout college I have been challenged constantly with these questions. I still have not found an adequate answer, but this

constant questioning would eventually lead me to understand the nature of art and its importance to me.

Throughout college I have taken several art and philosophy courses that have left deep impressions on me and, consequently, on my work. In high school I had had very little experience with three dimensional art, so when I came to college I decided to try my hand at sculpture. I really liked the idea of challenging myself to make a work of art that was interesting from all angles. However, I believe that the most profound impact that this class had on me was the emphasis on abstract art. I had already enjoyed imagining the moods and character of the subjects that I drew pictures of, but my professor challenged us to make abstract representations of our subjects, using the different feelings, moods, and concepts that certain subjects, materials, and spaces evoke. I learned that I did not need to copy nature in order to create a form that I felt strongly about; I could compose my own stimulating forms. Despite my enthusiasm for abstract art, it seemed sort of egotistic and selfish to me; it seemed to be immersed in the individual artist and completely disconnected from viewers. I did not understand how a viewer could take a genuine interest in some man made object that he/she had no experience with. This problem with abstract art continued to bother me for a long time.

When I took a philosophy of art class during winter term my freshmen year I was introduced to several texts that discussed the topic of abstract art. I began to understand that abstract forms were not completely disconnected from the viewer, because people could relate to the colors, texture, and materials used by the artist. I came to understand that abstract art had value because it was not a mere illusion of reality. This class helped

me to understand that a viewer can appreciate an abstract masterpiece as it is in itself, rather than the thing that it imitates. This sparked my interest for abstract art once again.

The next year, in a drawing class, I learned how to capture my subject more accurately, and I became much more aware of my own presence in my drawings. I was more sensitive to the quality of the lines I was using and the various drawing tools that I had not previously explored. I played with water color pencils, oil pastels, ebony pencils, vine charcoal, and gesso. As I experimented, I became increasingly intrigued by things in reality that reminded me of my drawings and the lines and materials that I used. My hesitant wondering lines drew my attention to the unpredictable contortions of tree branches and dead plants; the terracotta water color pencils made me look at the rich color and texture of rust patches with new excitement; oil pastels reminded me of the waxy texture and translucence of feathers. Drawing with new materials peaked my interest in some of the materials that I would eventually sculpt with. Drawing also increased my interest in perspective and foreshortening of the forms that I drew. Observing objects from unique viewpoints would help me create more dynamic sculptural forms. I learned a great deal in this class, but the skill that I was most proud to obtain was the ability to create volume, to make a three dimensional object look three dimensional, on paper. I loved form, and I was finally able to capture it through drawing.

While I was in this drawing class, I was also in my second sculpture class. In Sculpture II, I continued to explore new materials and create abstract forms based on concepts. I remember becoming unhappy with the idea of having my work dominated by a specific concept. In drawing I never worried about concepts, I just drew what I saw. It seemed to me like there was a lot less freedom in abstract sculpture than I had originally

thought; it seemed like everything had to be preplanned. There were so many questions that had to be answered, like why are you using these materials and colors, and what are these forms meant to suggest? I felt overwhelmed by these questions. I wanted to continue making abstract forms, but without a concept, idea, or a subject in reality to sculpt from, it seemed as though a form would have no meaningful starting place. So I continued to look for specific concepts on which to base my work, because I did not know of any other way to make abstract art.

Later in Sculpture II, I began researching artists for inspiration. I looked at Eva Hesse who used synthetic materials, like liquid latex and fiber glass, in her sculptures. My research of Eva Hesse lead me to experiment with liquid latex. This material was fun to play with; I began spreading it out on a flat surface with my hands. When the latex dried, it had a bumpy texture from the crisscrossing paths that my hands and fingers had made. When I peeled off my bumpy sheet of latex, it was strong, stretchy and smooth. Despite its synthetic nature, it felt very organic; it looked alive and vulnerable. I liked the stretchiness of it, and the way the light shown through it. It was beautiful, but at the same time looked much like dead skin. I began creating huge sheets of latex and imbedding all sorts of organic materials, like dead leaves and sticks, into its surface to see how they would interact. I also put other synthetic materials that looked organic into the mix, like shredded twine string and burlap. I was attracted to these synthetic materials because of their wispy quality; they reminded me of line drawings.

This concoction was simply an experiment with materials for which I had a sensitivity. I did not have any other apparent reason for mixing them. The reason was not important to me at the time; I was just enjoying myself. I was playing with materials,

watching what they could do, and letting my imagination react to them. I liked this better than imposing my own ideas onto them right away. As I mixed the materials together and liked the way they interacted, it was interesting to see synthetic and organic materials at home in one place.

I had acquired a group of materials that I liked, but I had no idea what form they would take. For this reason I was drawn to installation sculptures, because I could let the space I was using help me determine the form I would create, rather than starting from scratch. I began to think about different places to install a sculpture. Because the sheets were synthetic but natural looking, I decided to see how they would interact with nature. I put the sheets of latex around a tree, stretching one sheet from the ground to a branch. My mixture of materials fit right into this natural environment. I found the scene quite beautiful; it looked as though the ground had opened up and given birth to a tree, a concept which I found interesting, but doubted that others would respond to.



Birth of a Tree, organic and synthetic materials, Sculpture II Project, Between First Avenue and Dows, Coe College, Fall of 2002 (Next page: Detail).



Later, I hung a sheet of latex in front of a window in one of the high corners of Dows, the art building at Coe College. As the natural light shown through my latex sheet, it looked beautiful to me. It looked like a web of skin had mysteriously grown in an unreachable corner of the lobby and was snacking on leaves and sticks from the indoor plants by the window. This sounds sort of disgusting, and I am sure other people's imaginations lead them elsewhere, but regardless of the variety of interpretations, I really responded to the beautiful form itself. I thought it interesting that I could create something disturbing and beautiful at the same time. By the end of Sculpture II, I was beginning to have more fun as I was working; the process of making art began to feel free again.

Following Sculpture II, I took a winter term class called ‘Finding Your Voice.’ It was a class designed to help art majors find their own artistic style and write about it. I was still in the exploring and testing stage with my work, but it was good for me to think about and discuss where my work was coming from. It was strange, because I did not find it hard to write about my work at that point in time. I could easily speculate about the origins of my forms. I talked about my curiosity for nature and my interest in disturbingly beautiful things. I liked the idea of nature taking hold of things that people had forgotten about, like buildings that wear out and collapse or old rusty machines that become homes to mice and birds. When these forgotten things are re-inhabited by nature they take on a whole new meaning, a whole new beautiful quality. I wrote about one of my childhood memories of cleaning the barn with my Dad, a place where natural chaos ran rampant amidst a manmade structure.

During this class I continued to introduce myself to new materials. I gathered together some materials that I liked such as paper, cobwebs, stones, feathers, straw, and sticks, several of which I retrieved from my barn at home. I let the materials interact with each other and let my imagination go to work. I began ripping up sheets of newsprint; the strips I pulled off began to curl and twirl gracefully as I relieved them from their restricting rectangular habitat. After I ripped the paper, I mixed it with watered down wood glue. When the paper dried, it held steadily in its place. I began to think perhaps I could sculpt something out of this material. Just to see what would happen, I draped some gluey paper on wires that I had hung from the ceiling. I really enjoyed this process; I felt like I was drawing in space. When the paper dried, the structure looked very airy, light,

weak, and fragile. I draped cobwebs and shredded twine string on the paper structure for variations in line quality, something I had learned in drawing class. When I finished this first sculpture it looked as though it was slipping away into nothingness, although it still looked alive to me. It made me think of the degeneration of the body and the slipping away of one's spirit. It reminded me of my grandmother, who was alive but slowly losing her mind to dementia. Even though I did not consciously direct the form toward a particular end, it still had resonance in my heart. I liked that even though my classmates did not know exactly how I felt about the sculpture, they could interpret their own feelings for it if they were inspired to do so.



Slipping Away, organic and synthetic materials, 24"x10"x32," January, 2003.

I continued to work intuitively throughout the term, adding more materials together and making different structures that felt right to me. I was asked how I knew when my sculptures were done, and I did not know how to reply. I was working toward a unified form that evoked a particular feeling within me that I could not find words to describe. The continuity for my pieces did not come from a particular concept, it came rather from my sensitivity for materials and my own personal reaction to the forms themselves. It came through my own dialogue with the materials. The dull colors and light fragile materials that I used made the pieces look vulnerable, sad, and decaying. Yet the overall forms themselves looked graceful, beautiful and alive. As the term went on, I began to draw these ideas back to my recurrent desire to be alone and forgotten and at the same time, my fervor for nature and life. I thought perhaps that these were the reasons why I was interested in these materials and forms.

As my work progressed during the term, I began to work towards a more particular theme. I began to use sticks as armatures, which were like a natural bone structure that I could install a sculpture onto. I used strips of rigid paper as metaphors for weak decaying skin. I sculpted paper structures onto the sticks and filled them with shredded twine string and burlap. These subtle, quiet, and playful materials seemed to bring life and uncertainty to my forms; they were the spirit and energy in my sculptures. Amidst the wispy strings within the paper structure, I would place something dense and strong; it would be the core, the soul, the permanent unshakable part within the sculpture. I would place a stone in the center of my sculptures, concealed by a weak decaying body. These fragile sculptures reminded me of myself; they reminded me of people in general, of living things in general. This was a very deep, personal, and philosophical body of

work, but as I continued working, my sculptures began to remind people of nests and I began to create nests intentionally. This process was less intuitive, and even though the “nests” I created were interesting to look at, I felt that their nest-like appearance overshadowed the deeper poetry within the forms. It was interesting to think of the body as a nest for the soul, but in order for people to see that my pieces were more than just nests, they would require an explanation. My artwork had a greater resonance in my heart that I did not want to be overshadowed by a narrowly defined concept.



Cradle, organic and synthetic materials, 16"x10"x20," January, 2003.

The next summer was the beginning of a very difficult time for me. I began teaching art classes at a recreation center, and had less time to think about my own art. I continued to be bothered by my forms: I did not want to make nests, or any other

apparent thing. I just wanted to make inspiring forms, forms that did not depend on a particular concept or any conceivable form. I wanted to make sculptures intuitively, like I had done before I made my sculptures look like nests. I felt more connected to the sculptures that I left as mysteries, but I knew it would be difficult to explain this change. It seemed like everyone that I talked to wanted art to be motivated by something tangible, something that could be explained, and it would be a serious task for me to explain what I wanted my work to be.

Teaching during the summer was a huge challenge. I had never taken education classes and did not really understand much about children. I never considered the “art classes” that I had in elementary school to be art classes. I learned most of what I knew about art on my own. I tried to think of what I liked about art when I was little. The times when teachers gave us free time to draw what ever we wanted were the times that I cherished the most. I knew that this method of teaching would not be an option, but somehow I wanted my students to get excited about the world around them and the materials they were using. I did not want to plan cookie cutter projects for them to make. So instead, I developed projects that would introduce them to some of the things that I knew that their materials could do, and let them experiment and find out their own favorite things about them. Some of my students were so terrified of doing something wrong that they would not even try, others were not at all concerned with the concept of right or wrong and ended up getting out of hand. Some of my students seemed to have a lot of fun, but didn’t get anything accomplished, while others felt very nervous and didn’t get anything accomplished. I also became very nervous, and the parents were often displeased. I was completely unsure of what I was doing, and I attempted to preplan step

by step projects, but in my mind that sort of teaching had very little to do with art. I altered my classes quite a bit in that first summer. In the end, I started to get the hang of teaching and began to ask my students many of the questions about art that I had been struggling with. I would ask them “what is art?” and as they tried to come up with an answer, they would understand that there was no inherent right or wrong in art, yet there was still the question of what art was. I had a few successful classes that summer, but even so, I was still very unsure of myself and my understanding of art.

I came back to school feeling very alone and insecure. It was strange because I had always enjoyed solitude, but at that point in time, solitude felt extremely lonely. I had begun to seriously question myself, my ideas about art, and my philosophies about life. I wrote in a journal almost obsessively; I sketched in it and wrote about my philosophy and my art. I envied the people that could just cruise through life seemingly impervious to doubts, but as I thought more and more about it, my art and philosophy began to come together and I would become more comfortable with my doubts. In writing a paper on Descartes’ *Meditations* that semester, I began to believe that our own personal understanding of the world was all that we had, and that it was not simply “I think therefore I am,” as Descartes believed, but rather, as Rousseau once put it “I feel therefore I am.” I thought that our sensations, emotions, and feelings were the primary building blocks for our thoughts and understanding of the world. I knew that it was important for us to analyze the world to help us function in it, but there were mysteries beyond the realm of rational knowledge that we could not explain, justify, or prove. For instance, what is the meaning of life? How ought one act? What is real? It seemed like there was so much more to reality than the functional world of knowledge and rationality,

and often, the search for reason seemed to make me oversimplify the reality before me. When I began to depend on this oversimplification of the world, I forgot how rich, complex, and beautiful it was; I felt narrow minded, rigid, and disconnected.

As I thought more and more about this philosophy, I began to believe that perhaps art was supposed to be free from a rigid conceptual frame, and open to the infinite world beyond our understanding. I began to understand that, at least for me, that was what art was about. Perhaps beauty could get people to forget about looking for the truth and just feel it for a moment. Perhaps, as an artist, I could create work that people had no business being interested in, but would be inspired to feel and appreciate anyway without need for an initial explanation. I wanted to show them that they were not slaves to thought and reason, but free, feeling, and organic human beings.

I explain this with ease now, but it was much more difficult for me to explain last year. I had been working intuitively with my materials, and I could not explain to my professor or my classmates what I was doing or why I was doing it. The questions just kept coming. I had an answer to them, but I could not explain it. This problem was wearing away at my confidence. I began to hate listening to other people try to talk about and explain my work. I felt very immature, because I did not want help from anyone anymore. I did not want to talk about my work anymore, and I hated being in a classroom. My professor, however, was very tolerant of my awkward moods and behaviors. He seemed to understand my struggle on some level. During Sculpture III, he assigned artist reports in which I would research a particular artists each week and write a page description of their work and my response to it. As I researched, it became more apparent that other artists like David Smith and Andy Goldsworthy, the artists that I most

responded to, had a similar philosophy. Even figural sculptors like Auguste Rodin, Henry Moore, and Albert Giacometti were inspired by their deeper gut feelings, reactions, and intuitions. These figural sculptors did not make sculptures that merely depended on the figure for their beauty. They used the human figure as a starting point and created their own gut reactions to the figure, just as I had used particular spaces as starting points in my initial installation pieces the year before. These sculptors gave me the confidence to continue working intuitively. Each of these sculptors talked about something unspeakable within their sculptures, an inner life, a spirit. It was very helpful for me to read about other artists during this difficult time.

The next semester I traveled to New York City. This was, perhaps, my most difficult challenge yet. I had finally begun to understand myself and my way of working, and I was transplanted into a whole new world where I would not have the facilities to sculpt. New York was definitely an exciting place. I went to the ballet, I watched modern dance, plays, orchestras, and jazz ensembles. I went to art museums and saw real masterpieces that, previously, I had only seen in books. All of these forms of art awakened something inside of me. I began looking for the unspeakable life that artists release with their work; I began to feel what I could only describe as “the truth” within the art, the common feeling that each member of the audience becomes immediately aware of before they struggle to find words and associations to make sense of it. There was so much energy in the movements of Balanchine’s graceful ballerinas, and the life in the unnerving music composed by Prokofiev was undeniable. I did not need an explanation of the work or a concept to grasp in order to love what they had created. I just felt it and it was spectacular. I thought perhaps if the rest of the audience just felt the

art too, if we would all just let it move us without looking for reasons, together we could bask in the free, unified, and harmonious truth of the work.

This all sounds very wonderful and inspiring and it was, but what made New York hard for me was the loneliness that I experienced there. I went through a long period of disconnectedness. I had many ideas awake inside me but no one to share them with. Eventually I would discover a place called the Art Student League. The building smelled of graphite and linseed oil; it smelled like art to me. I went there a few times a week for life drawing sessions and to read in their very old library. I was genuinely comfortable there. I realized that I did not need to talk about my ideas (words were never my strong suit anyway). Instead, I could read about other artists' ideas about art, and I could activate my own ideas by using them to inspire the spirit and energy in my drawings. This process made me feel human again. While New York was a very difficult place for me to live. In many ways, the experiences that I went through eventually encouraged me; they taught me a great deal about myself and had an undisputable impact on the spirit of my artwork.

The next summer I finally had time to settle down and relax. I came back to Iowa to teach at the same recreation center I had worked at the summer before, but this year I was much more confident, and my classes went quite smoothly. I was given my own studio space at Coe and I was ready to begin working again. I continued to work intuitively, as I had in the fall during Sculpture III. I attempted to create works of art with movement and beauty, like I had seen and heard in New York City. I worked carefully, slowly, and meditatively because I was still learning about myself and my materials. I enjoyed watching a form grow and evolve slowly. It allowed me to be sensitive to the

tiniest wavering details and allow them to tell me how to direct the overall form. I finished two sculptures that summer. I also made drawings from life, read philosophy books, and wrote about my art.



Beautiful Form, organic and synthetic materials, 5"x21"x5," completed Fall of 2003



Intimate Whole, organic and synthetic materials, 9"x9"x10" Completed Fall of 2004.

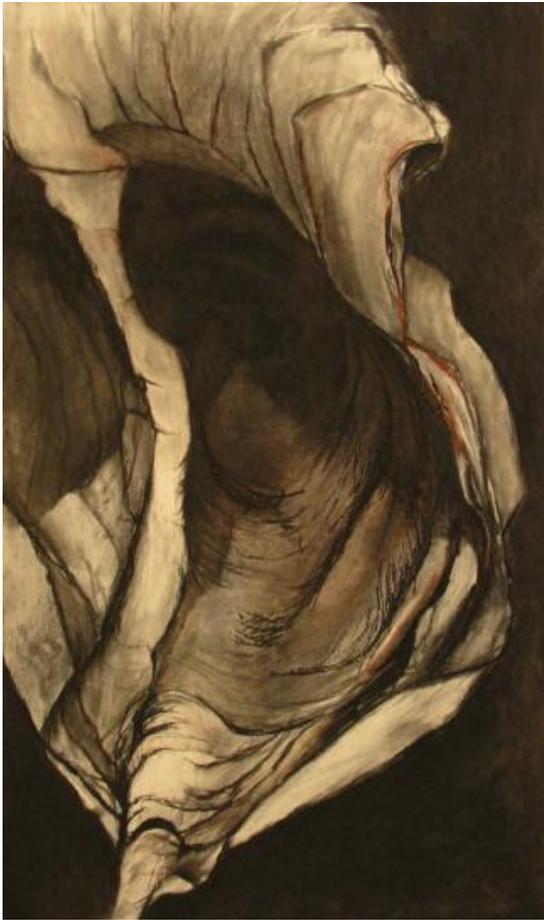
When school started in the fall I felt ready to begin my senior year, yet I knew it would be a challenge to generate enough work for my senior show at the slow pace I was working. I

was, however, willing to take that risk, as I did not want my work to suffer simply because I had a deadline to reach. There were many worries that I entertained that first semester. I did not want my work to become stale or academic. I wanted my experiences, observations, and passions in life to inspire the work even though my sculptures were nonrepresentational. I wanted my audience to know that I created art for a reason, and it was not simply for a grade, or to amuse them. I created art because I was compelled by a deeper force. The question “Why?” continued to upset me, and my first advanced art critique was a disaster. One of my professors asked “Why are you making these?” I knew there was a reason, but, once again, I could not explain it. I tried to explain, but started crying and could not continue the critique. Later I would give my professors a paper I had written that helped explain my intentions, but this still was not enough. I needed to keep making more forms that would eventually show what my intentions truly were.

Even after completing several sculptures, there was still something missing. The sculptures were quite intriguing, but looked like invented forms disconnected from the viewer. They were powerfully quiet and captivating objects, but the connection to my own personal observations was not as evident as I had hoped; I wanted my vision of reality to be more apparent. During my first semester of Advanced Art, I began to make drawings of some of the volumes and forms that inspired my work. These drawings helped explain my love for form, my sensitivity to materials, and provided a link to my own inner vision of the outer observable world that the audience could connect to more easily. When I began to show my drawings and sculptures together the whole body of work seemed to speak with deeper clarity.



Lichens, Charcoal and Mixed Media, 40"x26" Completed Spring of 2005.



Right: *Beautiful Form*, Charcoal and Mixed Media, 40"x 26," Completed Spring of 2005. Left: *Open Cylinders*, Charcoal and Mixed Media, 40"x26," Completed Fall of 2004.

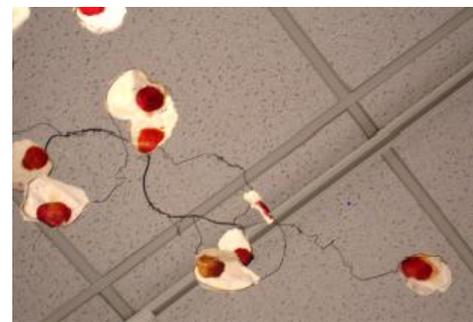
As I progressed throughout my senior year, my creative process began to feel more free and natural, and I began to find new ways of presenting my work. I started grouping similar forms together, and putting them in a pile or hanging them from the ceiling. I had always been drawn to the congregation of similar yet distinct forms in nature, like the way similar bodies have different shaped features or like the structures of hands or the way that toes are shaped to fit together. Even though the forms were similar, each one had its own distinct identity and contributed to the overall unity, rhythm, and complexity of the whole. These felt like metaphors for culture and society: each human being, whether considered bad, ugly, good, or beautiful, contributes to the whole complexity and over all harmony of the race. This was one avenue that my work traveled through towards the end of my senior year.



A Gathering of Beings, Installation, ceramic vessels of various clay bodies, 15"x25"x20,"



A Gathering of Hanging Forms, Installation, organic and synthetic materials, 32"x42"x22,"



Floating Rhythm, organic and synthetic materials, 12'x60"x30," (Right: view from below).

The over all body of work that I have created for my senior show embodies my quiet, intimate, and often philosophical observations of the infinitely complex world in which I live. My art, as it is connected to something infinite and unknowable, has become something spiritual for me. It is my escape from the habitual world and my solace for dream, doubt, and discovery. This body of work is a milestone in my progression as an artist and human being.



Artifacts, Senior Thesis Exhibition, April 8th-15th, 2005, Coe College Sinclair Galleries. I shared this space with artist and friend, Eric Bjella. He created several of the wall pieces shown here.