

Sabbatical: Spring 2016

Landscape Depictions in Clay: An exploration of abstraction and meaning.

My Sabbatical took place in Spring term 2016. Prior to the commencement of my sabbatical I attended a 8 week McKnight Residency in Minneapolis, Minnesota at The Northern Clay Center in January and February 2016.

This report shall describe what I proposed at the outset of my sabbatical and what I accomplished.

TIME LINE:

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| January/February | McKnight Residency at the Northern Clay Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota |
| March | Research trip to United Kingdom and The Netherlands |
| April/May | Sabbatical residency at The Banff center for the Arts in Banff, Alberta, Canada |

INTENT AND PLAN:

My sabbatical project focused on developing a new direction in my work which explored concepts of non-pictorial landscape narrative and increased scale. Also included was an investigation into alternate fabrication approaches, uses of different types of clay, new non-toxic soda kiln firing processes, as well as the examination of my cultural and artistic history as it pertains to my creative work. Lastly, I proposed to research glaze chemistry software applicable to the Alchemy Course I teach in Winter term.

PRE-SABBATICAL RESEARCH AND TESTING

January/February 2016 - McKnight Residency

I was awarded a fully funded McKnight Residency and was invited to work at The Northern Clay Center for the months of January and February 2016. I took an unpaid leave of absence to participate in this residency and it provided me with a valuable opportunity to begin to research techniques and test materials that I would use during my sabbatical. I was awarded the McKnight after I was granted my sabbatical and it impacted the order of my original plans only in so far as what I wanted to accomplish first. With this additional time it made sense to investigate clay types, glaze testing and to try out some new constructing methods. Upon my arrival to the NCC I immediately began mixing clay bodies and slips to test for suitability. I tried several porcelain and black clay bodies recipes.

Once the clay bodies were mixed I began making a variety of solid forms to use for making plaster press molds. My first idea regarding construction of the landscape forms involved modeling shapes that resembled abstracted rock formations. These were used to create plaster press molds that would act as a foundational support during construction. I used press molding along with slabs to create narrow horizon-like vessels with abstracted curving outlines. While I found aspects of these pieces held potential I realized that the rigid aspects of the plaster mold presented limitations to this technique so I sought another approach. I produced 10 forms generated from this plaster mold series.

My next attempt was to construct supports with drywall boards and props that were hinged and flexible. This resulted in greater access to working the form and more freedom to maneuver the work. These pieces evolved into hollow walled slab constructed vessels that were moving in a direction that I thought held strong possibilities but were still too firmly rooted in ideas of the traditional pottery vessel, I concluded that I needed to push my ideas of abstraction further. I was able to construct 6 of these larger double walled slab constructed forms with this technique.

My final attempt to reach further abstraction of the form involved cut out templates made from 1/4" masonite. Outlines of landscape silhouettes were cut into the masonite boards which I pressed slabs of clay through. The result was puffy, curvilinear landscape silhouette shapes that were used to construct vessels. I felt this process brought me closer to what I was looking for but there were still aspects to resolve. With limited time left in my residency to exploit this process I decided to wait until I began my sabbatical at the Banff Center in April.

During the same period I was exploring new techniques of construction I attempted other approaches to surface development. I tried various methods for creating depth of surface by building up layers of slips onto plaster tablets and transferring this to the surface of clay slabs (prior to constructing with them). I then took this approach to other materials such as sheet plastic, and various types of paper. The transferring of slips onto the clay slabs in this method produced distressed and layered results that suggested erosion and weather worn surfaces. The various techniques resulted in good to mixed results, the best being the uses of the newsprint paper due to flexibility, affordability and immediacy.

After completion of the clay body tests I was able to ascertain two clay bodies that best exhibited the attributes of pliability, plasticity, shrinkage and color that I was looking for.

One was a porcelain clay body and the other was a brown mid-range clay that fired from a rich red at Cone 2 (2088F) to a dark chocolate at Cone 6 (2232F). My next step was to figure out whether these clays would be workable in creating large scale vessels. I proceeded with attempting to make several forms from these test clays and I was able to construct several pieces with varying degrees of success. There were issues of cracking in the porcelain pieces that lead me to the conclude that the darker clay would be a better choice because of its plasticity in working in a large format. Besides, I liked the warmth and richness it gave to the surface of the pieces and when desirable, I was able to achieve a bone-like white surface when it was coated with a thin translucent slip made from the porcelain clay body.

In addition, I was able to run several lines of glaze tests in the lab that ranged from Cone 1 (2079F) to 6(2232F) over the clay body and slip tests. Overall outcomes were good and held potential. I decided to further develop these when I got to The Banff Center.

TRAVEL AND RESEARCH

In early April I flew to Manchester, England and rented a car to drive to Stoke on Trent, the former industrial hub of UK ceramics. This area has been known for its industrial-scale pottery manufacturing since the 1600's and factories such as Royal Doulton, Burleigh at Middleport, Spode and Wedgwood were established and based there. The local abundance of coal and clay suitable for pottery production led to the early development of the local pottery industry. It was my intention to study historical and contemporary fabrication processes to see how this could inform my sabbatical investigations. I spent a couple of days in the Stoke area visiting the Potteries Museum where I was able to examine a variety of wares including Samian ware (early Roman Red-ware exported to Britain in the 1st century AD) elaborately decorated with floral or figural relief designs that were made by throwing the pot within a mould. It was this molding technique that I found intriguing and suggested possibilities for me. I took a tour of the Burleigh Pottery, also known as the Middleport Pottery, a restored, fully functioning 19th century Victorian pottery that still produces wares in the old time worn methods employed 150 yrs ago. This was followed by an extensive tour to the newly modernized and mechanized Wedgwood factory, which uses modern technological manufacturing methods. Still, while assembly-line automations are employed all over the factory there are still some process that must still be executed by hand. I was able to visit with a pottery decorator who china paints scenes of landscape and applies 24K luster by hand to Wedgwood's finest pieces. The pottery painter offered suggestions for uses of these materials and demonstrated his technique for applying fine china

paints and lusters. I shall use his suggestions when introducing this decorating process to my students.

After several days in Stoke I continued my journey down to Oxford where I examined the Ashmolean ceramics collection of English Porcelain and English Delftware. I was looking to compare depictions of landscape and to examine the relationship of the images to the forms they were displayed upon. After my quick trip to Oxford I returned to Manchester where I took a train to London.

My time in London was brief however I was able to examine numerous specimens in the Ceramics collection of the Victoria and Alberta Museum. "The Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) is the world's largest museum of decorative arts and design, housing a permanent collection of over 4 million objects. Named after Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, it was founded in 1852, and has since grown to cover 12.5 acres and house 145 galleries. The V&A ceramics collection is one of the most comprehensive in the world and includes a teaching lab which examines techniques and processes of fabrication. I was able to study examples of molded forms as well as various landscape interpretations and depictions on pottery forms.

The last 6 days of my research trip were spent in The Netherlands. I was interested in examining their blue and white pottery traditions that focused on depicting hand painted landscape scenes. I was keen to see the Royal Delft Factory and the De Delftse Pauw Factory, a couple of the last remaining original factories of the 32 pottery factories that were established in the Delft area during the 17th century. Both factories are well known for their fine hand painted Delftware pieces that are still made in the original historical method, which have been active for more than 350 years. Delft Blue pottery started in the Netherlands around the 17th century when the Dutch East India Company brought the blue painted porcelain back from China. These Chinese wares inspired the Dutch ceramists to create their own version of blue and white pottery. Each piece is made from a low temperature white clay body, not porcelain because there are no deposits of porcelain in The Netherlands, which is coated in a tin-white glaze and then the decorative image is hand painted with varying strengths of cobalt oxide pigment. Many of the images reflect every day life, in towns and in rural settings, including many that display the landscape traditions of the painters of their day. I took a painting on tile lesson and look forward to sharing some of these decorative techniques with my students.

In addition to researching museum collections I had intended to examine some practical methods to working larger scale in porcelain at the Ceramic Work Center in Hertogenbosch, NL. However, the individual I was supposed to meet and consult with was unable to keep our appointment. Still, I was able to tour the facility and gathered some information for a possible future residency opportunity.

SABBATICAL RESIDENCY AT THE BANFF CENTER

I returned from my European research trip at the end of March ready to turn my attention back into the studio toward designing and crafting new work. With that in mind I set off to drive to the Banff Center in Alberta, Canada on April 4. I allowed myself 3 days to travel to Banff. I had lived in Alberta 20 years prior and I was looking forward to reacquainting myself with the open road and broad prairie perspectives that run along to the foothills up into the Rockies. I was looking to examine and gain a greater understanding of what I find inspiring in this scenery and what I personally identify with in the terrain.

Along the way I stopped and visited the pottery studio of Robert Flynn and the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramics Arts, both in Helena, Montana. I was interested in Robert's investigations into wild clay (naturally occurring deposits) uses and the additions of coarse feldspar inclusion into his clay bodies. He fires high temperature reduction gas and soda kilns and we discussed his test results and firing process. The Arch Bray is a public, nonprofit, educational institution founded in 1951 by brick maker Archie Bray, who intended it to be "a place to make available, for all who are seriously interested in any of the branches of the ceramic arts, a fine place to work." Its primary mission is to provide an environment that stimulates creative work in ceramics. I was interested in seeing the work that was being made by the current visiting resident artists and to take a look at their newly renovated facilities and kilns.

After my stop in Helena I continued my journey north to Alberta, taking secondary highways. I wanted to be able to stop and take time to photograph and sketch the scenery. It was my intention to use these images as reference material to inspire my first attempts in the studio at Banff. My thinking was to start with a broad, linear, abstract interpretation of landscape.

I arrived at Banff on April 7th. I spent my first couple of days in the sculpture studio working on the template idea that I had started in Minneapolis at the Northern Clay Center. I made a series of wooden frames and templates that held silhouette cut-outs

of landscapes derived from drawings made on my drive. I abstracted the images of the landscapes to create a less specific depiction of location.

During the 8 weeks in Banff I made of 3 different series of templates. Each successive series provided me with a better understanding of the potential for this process. In time I was able to use the templates with a fluency and flexibility that generated a variety of volumetric silhouette shapes that I used to construct and manipulate the shapes of pieces to achieve the desirable outcomes.

As I became more articulate with this method of working I started to develop ideas about color, surface quality, and texture that I hoped would express the type of finished surfaces I was looking for. I began a series of glaze tests intended to go in a variety of kilns. Time was limited for glaze testing since my focus was to build new forms. I was able to execute a single series of tests for each of the following firing atmospheres: electric, gas and soda. There were some good results that will require further testing in my home studio.

I took a series of organized group hikes put on by the Banff Center as well as a boat trip on Lake Minnewanka and a couple of self directed hikes to Lake Moraine, Peyto Lake and the Columbia Ice Field to I collected more images to use in the development of work in the future.

Most of each day was spent engaged in the practice of making in the studio or gathering inspiring imagery. In addition, I did enhance my studio practice regularly with readings from The Rutledge Companion to Landscape Studies. This collection contains thirty-nine essays that explore the varied uses and meanings of landscape, these writings have been divided into four thematic areas: Experiencing Landscape; Landscape Culture and Heritage; Landscape, Society and Justice; and Design and Planning for Landscape. I found that several of the readings informed my inquiries regarding how we perceive, inhabit and attach ourselves to places and landscapes. I am interested in gaining greater understanding about my own legacy of inherited and cultural landscapes. In many ways I have been inspired with more questions than answers regarding the ideas around landscape heritage, culture and belonging.

I was ambitious in what I thought I could achieve in 12 short weeks, however I can say that it was a valuable and inspiring time. I feel like I have just touched on the potential of my new approach to constructing my work and I also feel that an even bigger

challenge lies ahead in developing a palette and surface that enhances and strengthens the my pieces. Overall I am pleased with what has transpired during my sabbatical.

CHANGES TO SABBATICAL PROPOSAL

I participated in two soda atmospheric firings during my sabbatical, one during my McKnight Residency in Minneapolis and one at the Banff Center. I had intended to investigate this in more depth but there was just not enough time. Both firings provided me with some excellent information and alternative approaches to teaching this process, however I feel that more time is needed to fully develop an understanding of a more sustainable, enviro-friendly method to this type of firing. I will continue this inquiry at LCC with my students.

I have partially completed my research into glaze chemistry software for use in my Alchemy Course which I teach in Winter term. I should have come to a decision about which to use in this course by the start of Winter term.