

Stomach Flowers

by

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Abstract

This paper outlines the themes and concepts behind the ceramic sculptures produced during my time at the University of Manitoba as a Master of Fine Art candidate. The series of work tackles the notion of plant and human hybridity when the microscopic becomes colossal. By highlighting unique building methods along with the use of colour inversion, this paper explains the connections to the biological influences within the sculptures such as, bio-mimicry, biomorphic abstraction, gut health and alternate world-building.

The notions of hard and soft, wet and dry, contamination and growth are the themes that drove the artistic process of my graduate work at the University of Manitoba. Pushing the process of building into the uncomfortable, or Non-Linear building, was integral to the creation of this body of work. I have delved into the health of my own body flora to create human-plant hybrid ceramic sculpture. Using my body flora, I investigated the idea of alternate realities coupled with biomorphic abstraction. Using the theory of colossi and biomimicry to obscure the origin of the microscopic, these large-scale ceramic works have been made with clay. It is the vehicle used for the creation of my own gut flora, my stomach flowers.

This series began as an exploration into what “gut flora” would look like if it were not a microorganism. My initial response was to shape a sculpture in the form of the human stomach with a flora-like finial where the bacteria would be able to grow. This was an extreme deviation from my earlier purely representational works, moving my investigations into more intuitive and abstract formulations. My former series was originally focused on the challenge of recreating animals such as gorillas, rhinoceroses and dodo birds, to their natural shape and size; this was a means of acquainting myself with the nature of making these in large scale out of clay. The continued use of clay as a sculptural medium has “overt connections to story-telling, mythologies and scientific accounts from around the world related to the creation of life. At times, this places some who make from clay in the distant but oddly connected position of being “creators” (Marsh paragraph 5). Matt Wedel is an American sculptor who works in large-scale ceramics. He was one of my professors at NSCAD University where I completed my undergraduate degree. Like Wedel, I celebrate an alternate reality created by hybridizing flora, fauna, and human-like references in the making of colossal ceramic sculptures.

Flora is the term used to describe microorganisms that exist on and within the human body; each are specific to locations in our bodies. This series of works investigates the deficiencies of my body, manifested through weakness – the necessity of having to wear glasses, the absorption of heavy metals through my skin, sensitivity to irritants and foods I should be avoiding that aggravate my gut flora. The dichotomy of creating these intuitive human and plant hybrids lies in the conversion of the soft and ephemeral material made into an everlasting ceramic form.



Marg, ceramic and found material, 41"x 15"x 15", 2018, photo credit Nolan Drew

I am working with the theoretical premise that we as humans create environs that mimic nature through the concept of colossi. Through mimetic techniques such as transforming the shape of tree trunks into marble columns, we have sufficiently altered them to represent something new entirely. In the *Monumental Impulse*, George Hersey states that human beings “consciously mimic structures found in non-human nature. Some might argue that this is a uniquely human thing to do, thus proving our special self-conscious role in the scheme of things. But there are plenty of nonhuman organisms that borrow or mimic the structure of other species” (Hersey 39). Just as termites and ants create an interconnected infrastructure of tunnels, humans mimic this activity and burrow into the earth in a similar fashion to form structures such as mining operations and subway systems. Historically, the most famous forms of colossi consisted of the construction of supersized human physiques, like the Babylonian’s representations of animal hybrids and sculptures such as Michelangelo’s *David* and the *Lincoln Memorial*. Colossi can also be inversely conceived in the creation of a portion of a self-similar form, such as a cellular structure, “...to the notion, dream, wish or actuality that we build and inhabit giant plants, animals or body parts” (Hersey 184). Working from this premise, I have researched and referenced cells and internal flora in the making of an external world, expanding them to colossal proportions.

There are different types of world-building – imaginary worlds, alternate realities and actual locations. Imaginary worlds are found predominantly in science fiction and fantasy genres. Alternate realities are parallel to our own, with details re-imagined. Actual locations are described as fantastical events happening in our world (Hill-Scott, Lorraine, Bradshaw, Claire preface). I posit that my idea of world-building fits into the category of “alternate reality” (Hill-

Scott, Lorraine, Bradshaw, Claire chapter 2). Through the act of basing this body of work on pre-existing micro-organisms and taking inspiration from the life cycle and form of the plant life of our world, I have immortalized this flora and have created an alternate reality.

I am building off pre-existing forms and altering them to create my own version, resulting in my botanical plant and human hybrids, a form of biomorphic abstraction. I think of the works of Dale Chihuly here, of his *Glass Environment* where he “embedded small, tendril-like glass tubes in the forest floor... Chihuly sought not to copy nature but to emulate natural processes—to find the common ground between the nature of glass and nature itself” and through doing so has created an alternate reality where these floral works are encapsulated in their most beautiful state. In reflecting on *Glass Environment*, James Carpenter observed that for Chihuly, “The environment was the primary emphasis. To be in an environment of nature and to respond to it.” (Carpenter paragraph 36). Conversely, my work through clay responds to the internal world of the human body, unlike Chihuly’s work that focuses on encapsulating nature’s most picturesque moments, frozen in glass.

My flora sculptures are representative of growth, disease, and death. These biological states are shown through the inversion of glaze, colour, and texture. The point is to simultaneously show the life cycle of flora as if you were experiencing all four seasons at once. Where some are growing, and flourishing others are shedding in preparation for hibernation or dying and decaying; waiting for decomposition and regeneration to continue their perpetual cycle. I have created a series of works titled *Goblet Cells*. The goblet cells exist in human intestines, where they produce the mucus keeping the intestines coated and the digestion process moving smoothly. These ideas of decay and rebirth all harken back to the health of my

own body. By displaying these different states together, an impression of constant growth and change will be created and offer a ray of hope. For along with disease, decay, and death, there is also the possibility of colour, fecundity, and a new world built.



Goblet Cell #1, ceramic and found material, 19"x 12"x 10", 2017, photo credit Nolan Drew

In my studio investigations, some questions I am asking are: Why do these sculptures look like they are still growing? Is the use of high gloss glazes meant to symbolize wetness, is

this recalling the visceral wetness of our internal flora? Is my inclusion of the cold-surface technique called flocking representative of pollen? For millennia flocking has been employed to embellish objects to make them more attractive and therefore more valuable. The flocking technique dates back 3000 years with its origins in China, where a resin would be applied, and natural fibers dusted on the object. Flocking as a cold surface technique absorbs light rather than reflecting it, unlike a ceramic glaze, which is typically reflective. In turn, this generates another surface layer that enhances dimension and depth and creates an opulent richness.

There has been a resurgence in the use of colour in the art world. As with all contemporary ideas, they move in trends. We are moving out of the simple, austere and monochromatic fashion back into the vibrant, revitalized, unabated use of colour, “we were absolutely destitute to the sense of colour – apathetically cold to its vivid or its delicate charms and protected by our apathy against its most violent offenses” (Van Rensselaer 282). Colour may act as a form of symbolism, enforcing an idea intuitively. In the case of my other-worldly hybrid works I have used the inversion of colour, such as the negative of a photograph. The common, cooler green is the base colour for most plant life on earth, and because of this I have chosen to focus on warmer tones for my flora, using the colour green sparingly to enforce the idea that these botanical works are other-worldly. Colour in the end is just that, colour; the object is asking to be seen from the unseen. Glen Adamson states this point eloquently in the introduction of *Thinking Through Craft*;

“When one says that an object is colourful, this is not taken to mean that other objects lack colour entirely; similarly, when we say that something is highly crafted, we are distinguishing it only in degree, and not in kind, from other things that have been made. There

are artworks that are not only colourful, but are in some sense *about* colour... Equally, artworks may not only be well made, but may address the conditions of their own manufacture.”

Adamson 1).

One of the largest works in my thesis exhibition is my *Optic Flora* sculpture. Optic flora is the term for organisms living within the cellular structure of the human eye. *Optic Flora* is a tall, sweeping collection of flowing, branch-like elements attached to each other. The tubular arms stand on simple oval shaped feet. This work draws from the sculptural theory of colossi as it is based on what the flora in the human eye look like at the microscopic level. I have inverted the original shape, dimension and size of the organic form. This work is based on one of my own physical deficiencies. I have a minor stigmatism that causes me to see a shadow at a distance where there shouldn't be one. To be grotesque, my eyes are diseased, as such I have adorned the sculpture *Optic Flora* with a bubbling, igneous-mass style of glaze. This work is the centrepiece of my thesis exhibition, outside of the fact that it is the largest sculpture being exhibited, it is the most technically and visually complex.



Optic Flora, ceramic and flocking, 42"x 33"x 18", 2018, photo credit Nolan Drew

In the act of clay building there are two distinct methods that separate and dictate the type of clay utilized and works produced, Linear and Non-Linear building (Gault 12). Those who choose to make in a more traditional manner, adhering to a sequential method of forming, assembling and finishing in a familiar approach, are considered Linear makers, who would employ a traditional clay body. A Non-Linear builder's work is produced by practices that would seem impractical or impossible in traditional clay making methods (Gault 12), such as continuing to work with pieces that are bone-dry or experimenting with fast drying of large works just to understand how and where cracks or weak points will occur. The Non-Linear makers would utilize the non-traditional paperclay. As a Non-Linear builder I can create the

minutia built on the inquisitive imagination of one who grew up on a country acreage, with little to no understanding of the word impossible. “In order to create with ceramic materials, one needs to be in solid possession of a curious set of impulses, directive and tactics for success, not to mention great reserves of physical energy. It requires that one be, in varying degrees, alchemist and scientist with a trace of a shaman. In other words, both an empirical and intuitive being” (Marsh paragraph 8). The series titled *Goblet Cells* when viewed through the scope of a trained ceramist, would be underwhelming by the simple fact that it is known exactly how they were constructed; the mystery of my artistic touch in transforming a material is lost. I would counter that by stating, because my technique is blatant, I am celebrating the material and exposing it to the viewer. As stated by the American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, “A work may have the delicacies of a rare orchid or the staunch fortitude of the oak, and still be simple. A thing to be simple needs only to be true to itself in organic sense.” (Wright 206).

The act of sculptural making is an introspective and highly personal form of creation, from conceiving and refining an idea, to mixing the clay from powdered materials to forming your own work. Part of the process is watching the work dry and losing the life that water in the clay provided, then subjecting the work to the bisque firing with extreme heat and slow ramp up, to quartz inversion. Finally, there is the choosing and mixing of glaze, adorning the work in glaze, and ultimately firing it again to its vitrifying temperature, thus creating a work of ceramic sculpture. It is then transformed further by presenting the work in a contextualized setting.

I use clay because of its additive and subtractive qualities, also its malleability and lack of pre-conceived form. As one who identifies as a sculptor I have experimented with multiple mediums, including woodworking, welding, fiber, and paper, but it is with clay that I have been

able to transcribe my concepts most completely. Clay is a vehicle for my imagination as well as a form of record keeping. Specifically, I have focussed my explorations on paperclay. Paperclay is very similar to other traditional pottery-making clay bodies, the main difference being the inclusion of paper pulp in the body. This creates a matrix within the clay, adding workability while in a wet state, and increasing in tensile strength as it shifts into the delicate bone-dry stage. The inclusion of paper pulp also allows the sculptor to attach and mend elements well into the leather-hard and dry stages – the network of fibers provided by the paper pulp absorbs the liquid being used and disperses it so as not to shock the body, which would generally result in cracking in a traditional clay body. The difference of using paperclay is that it frees artists from standard conventions and allows them to extend their building methods. Since the material is versatile and pliant one can build large-scale works. A good example of someone who is using paperclay and exploiting its unique qualities is Matt Wedel. I have been using his paperclay recipe for the past seven years. He developed it specifically as a large-scale sculptural clay body. His works have been known to exceed the height of a house. Clay is earth, and when fired “one factor that truly separates ceramic materials from most other art-making materials is its transformation by extreme heat. There are constant shifts in the work throughout the process of making; in scale, colour, hardness and form.” (Marsh paragraph 7).

For my thesis exhibition I am presenting seventeen finished ceramic sculptural works. They are displayed in a gathered island-like configuration, employing several low ceramic and wooden plinths to elevate the sculptures to suggest the idea of a forest. In this body of work, I have four related strains of flora as well as several individual botanical sculptures. These groupings share similar forms and shapes acting as links to self-similar plants in nature. Some of

the strains are representative of the life cycle this vegetation would experience. Walter McConnell's unfired, encapsulated clay works comment on the relationship between culture and nature, and they have been an influence on my practice. The consequence of him using raw, unfired clay is that it grows mould on the surface and within the body and as it decomposes, it returns to its formless, original state. I am taking this inspiration from the microscopic growths and challenging the idea of a frozen-in-time moment through sculpture. The paradoxical freezing aspect in my work occurs when firing the clay in a kiln and putting the work through quartz inversion, resulting in the irreversible process of clay turning into hard ceramic.

In my time at the University of Manitoba I have experienced an evolution of thought and practice. My goal was to show this evolution in my works, showing their life cycles in enduring sculptural form. Through using the ceramic medium, glaze experimentation, cold surface finishing techniques and an unabashed use of colour, I bring the viewer into an alternate universe. Displaying the pieces collectively in an installation pushes the idea of creating an alternate external world based on our internal world, such as my stomach flowers. By using the theory of colossi to invert the dimensions of the internal flora found in the human body, I have transformed these stomach flowers into gigantic versions of themselves.



Stomach Flowers Installation View, School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, 2018, photo credit Nolan Drew

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Appendix

Thesis Exhibition

Stomach Flowers

May 18th – June 15th, 2018

School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba