FAILING, TO SUCCEED

A Project

Presented to the faculty of the Department of Art
California State University, Sacramento

Submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Art Studio

by

Jeremy Paul Jordan

SPRING 2012
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Jeremy Paul Jordan

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Date

Department of Art
Abstract

of

FAILING, TO SUCCEED

by

Jeremy Paul Jordan

Failure is the benchmark of success. This phenomenon came to front during my tenure as a graduate art student at California State University, Sacramento. This paper documents my discovery of this very phenomenon. Within the confines of these pages resides a comprehensive record of how this realization came to be. An explanation is provided as to how I interacted with the three components of this idea; concept, material and process. I address how they operated in the formulation of four separate bodies of work. It was during the construction of these works that I reached my highest and lowest points.

___________________________, Committee Chair
Andrew Connelly, M.F.A.

___________________________
Date
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Nonnie, my sole grandparent. When you entered this world, two and one half months early, you came in fighting. Your raw determination, calm nature and soothing spirit are some of the greatest traits you passed down to me. At just under five feet tall, you were and shall remain the strongest person I have ever known.

Mom, you showed me how to stand up and speak with authority. When to verbalize my thoughts and when to stay silent, that empty words yield hollow thoughts. Papa, of all the tools you bought and lent me, the one I depend on the most is the ability to confront any problem without hesitation. A solution exists; it just has not have been discovered yet. You both gave me the latitude to become who I am without fear of disappointment or ridicule. I am who I am because of me, yet I was only able to get here because of you.

Jennifer, without the strength of your love, and The Spin Doctors Jimmy Olsen’s Blues, I may not have been here to achieve this. I find comfort in knowing unquestionably that no matter what, my big sister is always there to protect and defend me.

Kris, with your love and support I was able to traverse the unpredictable terrains of this program with utmost confidence and endless drive. Your patience and understanding allowed me to follow unconventional schedules and countless hours. You accepted, without prejudice, that being married to a graduate art student meant 8 – 5 Monday through Friday only referred to the hours of the Art Department office.

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Erik, Laura, Jillian, Leslie and Merh, I am very fortunate to have traveled this road with you. As graduate art students we set the standard for studio practice, as a group we were the definition of camaraderie, as artists… we kicked ass!

Elaine, as a student in your classroom I benefited greatly from your vast knowledge of art history, significantly expanding my interest and understanding of the subject. Outside the classroom, as my friend, you shared with me your opinions and thoughts of both the world of art, and the world in general, a practice that will assuredly continue. Under your guidance, I achieved feats I never thought possible.

Andrew, your faith in my abilities and trust in my practice afforded me the opportunity to travel to countless horizons of exploration, to wander off into the abyss of possibilities. Your guidance gave me the strength and direction I needed to return. Under your supervision, I was able to focus these discoveries and achieve unprecedented success. I am privileged to have known you as my Professor and Advisor, and honored to call you my friend.
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“If I find 10,000 ways something won't work, I haven't failed. I am not discouraged, because every wrong attempt discarded is another step forward.”

–Thomas Edison

The Wright brothers crashed more times than they flew. Nikola Tesla caused so much damage to his laboratory, the building was condemned. Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was rejected 121 times before its publication. Pablo Picasso received such ridicule by his friends and peers for painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* it remained in the shadows of his studio before it was ever in view of the public. Edouard Manet’s *Luncheon on the Grass*, along with James Whistler's *Symphony in White*, were denied entry into the official salon exhibition of 1863 in Paris. Both Rachel Whiteread and Richard Serra were ordered to remove site-specific sculptures. On two occasions, Damien Hirst removed work from an exhibition due to flawed fabrication.

One of the strongest things these historical icons have in common is they pushed themselves and their work to the point of failure, an idea that the ego of Thomas Edison would not acknowledge or allow. They pushed the envelope so hard it shattered, clearing the path of new ideas, movements, inventions and discoveries. Like Edison, they were
not discouraged, and did follow the steps forward. Without their numerous failures, they never would have experienced the levels of success they undeniably achieved. If they were not experiencing failure, they were not pushing themselves hard enough to make significant strides. Their concepts would not grow and evolve to the highest attainable level.

It was in my own experiences during my tenure in the graduate program at California State University, Sacramento that I truly understood and experienced firsthand this phenomenon. It was through the creation of four bodies of work where I discovered the interaction between three essential components: my materials, my process and my concept. In order to pursue and achieve the level of success desired, I needed to push myself to the point of failure. I knew that until I was fluent in the abilities and limitations of my materials and processes, my concept would never come into being.
In my first body of work, it was determined that clay would best represent my concept. I wanted to communicate the natural, unrestrained behaviors of the forms. I sought to reveal how these forms were of the effect of external forces and outside manipulation. How they bore evidence of traumas and tribulations encountered, while still sustaining their own identity. I wanted to represent visually how these forms reacted to catastrophic occurrences while maintaining the sovereignties of free will and boundless existence.

With this idea in mind, I began to discover and hone the processes required. I felt it was paramount to remove evidence of the artist’s hand from the constructed form. The result of this was often failure. Several pieces fell apart during this process; the ones that remained intact never possessed the feeling or essence I desired. In some cases, the pieces would fracture, the broken edges remained as an attempted means of expression. [Fig. 1] The development of temporary apparatuses became a crucial component in maintaining the form and supporting the clay body during firing. This developed disconnect between the work and myself. The concept began to dissolve into the process, my focus shifted from intuitive free form creation to the analytical development of jigs and fixtures.

Figure 1  Twist IV, 2010, ceramic, 8” x 17” x 10”
By the time I had completed the work, the pieces read as incomplete. They literally and figuratively lacked the ability to stand on their own. It became necessary to fabricate armatures, stands and shelves to display the work. [Fig. 2] The act of creating these fixtures pulled my hand back into the construction process, yet the work continued to withdraw from the concept. The reaction to these works yielded mixed reviews; there was continuity in the responses to aspects of the pieces that seemed to work and confusion in others that fell short. At this point, changes needed to be made, focus needed to shift.
Devastation

After spending some time analyzing the previous body of work, mainly sitting in my studio staring at the pieces, I came to the realization the mounts were the contributing factor to the problem. They distanced the concept from the resulting forms and created an incongruent visual read. The forms never connected to the calculated, engineered and fabricated mounts. They shifted the visual read to that of museum artifacts or scientific specimens. These elements became a distraction and were in need of alteration or removal.

With this realization, I proceeded to push the limits of the materials even further and disregarded the positioning or mounting of the forms completely. I began to over fire the ceramics, purposely stressing the clay body. [Fig. 3] Jigs and fixtures were provided that would be lost during the firing process. By pushing harder on the materials and exhausting the process, the failure rate of the forms drastically increased. The results of this failure lead to greater disappointment in the forms and a greater disconnect from the concept.

Figure 3  Tube V, 2011, ceramic, 14” x 38” x 23” (detail)
During the review process, the mixed responses and lack of continuity among my professors confirmed my response to this array of work. My concept had been completely lost; all avenues were exhausted. The forms constructed from this material would never express my ideas. They would never visually represent how these forms reacted to catastrophic occurrences. The process would never produce forms capable of visually representing my concept.

When setting up the show it became very apparent to me, it was a colossal failure. The use of distressed and disgruntled tables and placing some pieces directly on the floor was a desperate attempt to force the pieces to appear to be more than what they were capable of becoming. [Fig. 4 and 5]

The failure this show represented split my mind, shattered my heart and stained my soul. I knew at this point that I needed to assess all aspects of my creations. The materials, the process, even the concept itself needed to be reevaluated. Once again, I sat in my studio and absorbed the forms around me. I knew that it became crucial to start
anew and began looking for different materials and methods to use. The confirmation of the chaos residing in my mind forced me to look deep within and differentiate between my work and myself. I realized the “hands off” process did not benefit the creation of the work, but was an attempt to create a tangible representation of the intangible, to embody my own experiences.
Breakthrough

“You found your voice,” were the words that resonated through my head less than one second after they were told to me by one of my professors during a studio visit. He was responding to my change in materials and adjustments to my process. These changes came about from once again sitting in my studio, analyzing and dissecting my previous bodies of work. I had realized which aspects of my process worked the best and yielded the greatest response and understanding from my professors. The pieces resulting from this process were the ones where the most “hands on” time was invested. The pieces I had designed, engineered, formed and fabricated came to front as the best representation of who I am, how I work and what I am trying to say.

In my studio, two pieces I had constructed from modified wood; wood specifically engineered and treated to bend into non-linear forms captured my attention. These pieces of wood had been bent into twisted shapes, creating forms similar to the ones I was trying to derive from my ceramic pieces. In an interesting twist of irony, this wood and bending technique appeared in a piece from my first body of work; the bent wooden form had been combined with a ceramic piece. [Fig. 6] I proceeded to work
with this material to create free form objects. I started to notice a relationship between these forms and my earlier ceramic forms. These similarities confirmed this was the appropriate material to complement my concept.

In addition to the free form pieces, I tapped into my analytical side and designed, engineered and fabricated works derived solely from mathematical calculations. From these calculations, two-dimensional “blue-prints” of the pieces were rendered. [Fig. 7] The resulting pieces satisfied my logical side yet left my creative side yearning for more. [Fig. 8] I began to design pieces that would pull from both sides and incorporate the calculated design with the free form manipulation of the materials. [Fig. 9] The result of this loose collaboration created a body of work that divided in half. When looking at the completed body of work, without question, I knew they were a visual representation of what goes on in my head. It was this realization that lead to the show title “Left Brain / Right Mind.” A point had been reached where there was
continuity of response to my work; my work began to resonate. Within the confines of my mind existed the means to decode this body of work and produce pieces that would express my thoughts, communicate my ideas and breathe life into my concept.
Convergence

Thinking about the two distinctive approaches utilized for the creation of my previous body of work, I needed to determine what aspects related the most. What elements best communicated my idea, my concept. At first, the two different bodies of work remained separate; the focus concentrated on what separated them. From this, I sought to pursue the one body of work that resonated the best. A point of realization surfaced; a decision could not be reached between the analytical or the free-formed works.

In preparation for final reviews, I did not sit in my studio and surround myself with previously created works as I had done in the past. The only criteria for where to go and consider my next body of work was simple, not my studio. This change in environment gave my mind the opportunity to wonder without the distraction of my previous work, my stored materials or my tools. I knew the importance of getting out of my studio, escaping from my cognitive mind and feeling my thoughts. After a while, the reason a decision could not be reached between the two bodies of work became clear. My voice, my expression and my essence resided and resonated within both. I did not need to pick one over the other, a way of combining the two and allowing the synergistic reaction to take place had to be found. The problem was eliminated by picking up one of my drastically underutilized sketchbooks and proceeding to draw. [Fig. 10]
I made it a point to have some form of sketchbook with me at all times, every thought, consideration and mental image, found its way onto paper. This allowed me to take my analytical, computation-based ideas and use them to manipulate the freeform designs. A visual representation of the conversations between the two halves of my mind began to appear. I was able to see the development of the forms without having to consider any physical limitations of the materials, the process, or myself. I had truly found a way to merge the two ideas into one cohesive form.

Having laced together the two halves of my mind and beginning to meld cohesive designs, my intuition took over and proceeded to adjust the flow and depth of the work. My calculations afforded the eternally sought precision; the materials provided the desired spontaneity. Pieces were generated that followed the structures I constructed and the forms I sensed. The thoughts, feelings and actions that conflicted and tormented me in my earlier works began to culminate into genuine expression. Forms were created that legitimately represented the two halves of my mind. A body of work reflective of who I am, how I think and what I feel was born; a body of work that legitimately embodies the visual manifestation of my concept. [Fig. 11 – 16] The work became a visual
representation of the sovereignties of free will and boundless existence. An existence only achieved once self-induced limitations are removed. The inadequacies of materials and exhaustion of processes provided the failures I needed, the failures ultimately leading to the astounding success I achieved.

Figure 11  Ribbons I, 2012, wood, 57” x 63” x 16”
Figure 12  *Bundle I*, 2012, wood, 40” x 65” x 35”

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