OBJECTS OF LIMINALITY

Douglas E. Browe
B.A., New College of California, 2006

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OBJECTS OF LIMINALITY

A Thesis

By

Douglas E. Browe

Approved by:

____________________________, Committee Chair
Ian Harvey, MFA

____________________________, Second Reader
Robert Ortbal, MFA

____________________________
Date
Student: Douglas E. Browe

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the thesis.

__________________________, Graduate Coordinator

Ian Harvey, MFA            Date

Department of Art
Abstract

of

OBJECTS OF LIMINALITY

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“Objects of Liminality” documents my life, at this point and time, through the sculptural medium. Entering into a rigorous path of academic study of art after 30 years as a practicing artist has had a profound effect on my life, my worldview and most importantly my artwork. This thesis body of work is comprised of objects informed by this passage into a “Liminal State” as student. I have chosen to express this passage in the artwork through internal force acting on forms surface to imply change or transcendence, and the dissecting or disassociating of form to convey change or transformation through reorganization. These objects speak directly of my personal journey. If successful, they will speak to the journeys, and subsequent trials, common to many.

_______________________, Committee Chair
Ian Harvey, MFA

__________________________
Date
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OBJECTS OF LIMINALITY

In 1909 Arnold van Gennep the anthropologist coined the term ‘liminal’ in “Les Rites de Passage” (1) his book on social structure in traditional and tribal societies. He used the word ‘liminal’ to describe the transitional state accompanying change in social position within the society. The word is derived from the Latin term, limin, meaning threshold. He used it to represent that action of crossing over from one societal construct or structure to another. He described it in 3-parts: the separation, the liminal period and the reassimilation. He maintains that during their ‘liminal period’ members of the society step out side the boundaries and structures of society and stand separate and apart.

The Liminal State

Victor Turner wrote that “shamans, diviners, mediums, priests, those in monastic seclusion, hippies, hoboes, and gypsies”, live in a constant state of liminality. (2) Here he stretches the adjective liminal to the noun liminality, meaning those who reside in a limbo realm, forever on the threshold, never stepping across and rejoining the structure of society.

I believe that many artists dwell to some degree in this state of liminality. Some exist in this state to such a degree that we call them outsiders, while others move freely back and forth between the ‘real world’ and the world of their own construction.

These writings and others have informed my belief that I have been skirting the edge of liminality since returning from five months working in a Burmese refugee camp in Thailand. Furthermore, since returning to the life of a student in the CSUS Masters of Studio Art program in 2006 it has became clear that I am living fully in a liminal state.
MY PERSONAL LIMINALITY

I have had the good fortune, through luck and hard work, to have lived and worked the majority of my adult life as a studio potter. From 1977 – 2004 I was a self-supporting studio artist. During the latter twenty-year portion of that time I became the ‘Village Potter’: the local ceramic artist well known by everyone in a small city in Northern California. My studio practice in those years was one of devotion and dedication, interweaving me in the local society and its structure. This was evident in my art making and life as well. As a student of Soietsu Yanagi’s book, “The Unknown Craftsman”(3), Michael Cardew’s “Pioneer Pottery”(4), and Bernard Leach’s “A Potter’s Book”(5) I learned of the deepened connection to the user possible through the making of everyday utilitarian objects. I also discovered an expanded level of consciousness and personal expression through the meditative repetition of simple art making tasks. My studio practice became a ritualized effort striving for a strong connection to the user through the creation of utilitarian objects.

Image 1. *Gray Striped Tea Pot*, 6” h x 10” w, Doug Browe, 2010
The writings, and the practices these authors and artists promoted and celebrated the tradition of making utilitarian objects for everyday use. Similar to the concept Walter Benjamin speaks of in his 1930 paper, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”(6), these concepts speak of the art and beauty within the everyday actions of life: not making any one single action or moment precious, and recognizing the importance and beauty in all actions and all moments. In the making of utilitarian objects, objects that bring focus and celebration to our everyday acts, the maker allows the user to join with the artist, through use of the objects, in a deep action of seeing and focusing on life.

I enjoyed this studio work and flourished, making a few great pieces, and thousands that were useful and of good quality. During these years many apprentices heard of the studio and came to study and learn. This aspect of my life became economically, artistically, and socially important, and was a source of great personal enrichment. This positive relationship with apprentices came at a time of growing personal desire to be of assistance in the world. These feelings, coupled with my commitment to the international relief work of Potters For Peace, encouraged me to say yes when they asked me to travel to the Umphium Refugee Camp in Thailand and to set up a pottery studio and train the Burmese to make pottery.

Thailand

I arrived in Bangkok late at night with no arrangements for room or board, no Thai language, and little in the way of currency; the first of many mistakes and misunderstandings. After a week of wide-eyed travel and learning experiences I arrived
at Umpium Mai Refugee Camp, on the wild western frontiers of Thailand along the Burmese border.

There is seemingly little relation to this experience and my work as a graduate student. Yet it was the work at the refugee camp that led me back to school. While living with the Karen Hill Tribe people I realized that teaching was my true calling. Existing without modern conveniences, working at the edge of my ability and knowledge, I found I was completely alive and present. This feeling has had a profound effect on me. Not only did it convince me to return to academic studies to pursue teaching professionally, but it has also spilled over into my studio practice. Making art is a dynamic relationship between envisioned outcome and creative action; a continual questioning of goals and objectives; not unlike teaching with few resources, little time, and limited language skills.
GRADUATE STUDIO PRACTICES

Studio practice is central to my art making. While creating my thesis work I spent four consecutive days each week immersed in studio practice. The first day was investigating, sketching and contemplating my concept while preparing the clay. The next two days were spent working the clay, creating the objects and looking, thinking and questioning. Their value, physical presence and strengths were considered and evaluated; how well did they define space and work within that defined space. The final day I would reanalyze the work and make final changes before the clay stiffened past mobility. This process became a dynamic relationship between the material, the work and myself in an effort to find a synthesis.

In contrast to the village potter studio work past, I now work in relative isolation and at a remove from society. The new work being produced is not to fill a commission or order. It is free to evolve, to change paths and even to fail. There is also a difference in the amount of effort this new work demands throughout the whole process. It is not just the physical effort, but the more strenuous conceptual effort of constant evaluation of what is actually happening visually and conceptually in the piece; what the work needs next. It is a process of exhaustive and constant questioning.

In the work *Removed*, this process consisted of a struggle to understand how the work was evolving and how it related to what I was trying to express. Working in this way is a process of questioning on one hand how the work address my needs, and how it can hang together as an aesthetic object, resonant to others.
Art making has become a new, dynamic and active relationship for me. In the past I would conceive of an object, make a sketch or drawing, make a few quick studies in clay and then begin producing the object. It was a straight line of action. This new practice is one of a non-vertical, nonhierarchical relationship between the material, the object and myself. It has become a conversation, a dialogue from which ideas and solutions begin to emerge that are new and unexpected.

It is through constant reevaluation that the possibilities for the work remain flexible and dynamic. In this new paradigm, it can take weeks, months or even a year before I understand the rightful purpose for an object or idea.

Image 3. Removed, ceramic and paint, 49” h x 8” w, Doug Browe, 2008
This active, open relationship with the work is the most significant addition to my studio practice. These following examples of works in progress offer an insight into the making processes employed for this thesis body of work.

Image 4. Objects of Liminality Exhibition Instillation, 2008

The Making

The actual making process is multi-layered. It begins with a 75 to 100 pound slab of clay roughly 3/4” x 40” x 60”. This large slab is then cleaned of the canvas impression that speaks too strongly of the machine used to roll it. Then the surface is scored in a pattern reminiscent of wood grain. It is irregular, yet clearly a pattern, unresolved, not unlike the marks of a seismograph, suggesting truths hidden within the earth.

Next, the slab is flipped over onto a piece of foam with the scored side down. Then the mark making that informs the surface of the objects begins. Using moistened fingers I push deep into the slab, pushing just less than the point when the clay rips, or
just past to create a rent or passage through the surface to the interior.

Image 5. *White, in Black*, ceramic, 11” h x 38” l, Doug Browe, 2007

The foam supports the clay from below on either side of the point of pressure, allowing my finger to create form and line only where my finger presses. In this state the wet clay is very receptive, recording the history of each mark. This process can take one or many hours per slab depending on the complexity. My goal is to inform the material I use; to create a rich, many layered, textured surface that, in combination with the original linear scoring, has the visual impression of a material not made of man but formed and informed by nature itself. It becomes a material alive and historical.

During the making process I work until the clay will allow me to go no further due to the limits of its workability, or when the object itself travels beyond my comprehension, when the dialogue stops. It is odd that something of your design and construction can move outside of your realm of understanding.
Yet, I find it mirrors my life. How often have I said, “I’ll have to think about that”, or we say, “I’ll have to sleep on that”. My work in clay often takes on a complexity that I cannot grasp immediately and needs time for reflection. Often it grows past my understanding and I need to gain more information. This may mean returning to the concept to rethink it, or it may mean the work has moved past the original concept and arrived at a new conceptual location that needs consideration.

All of this interior dialogue is founded in instinctual response and conscious evaluation of how objects move in space.

One of the many things this surface texture references is the patterns and rhythms of planted crops in the agricultural valley that surrounds us.

Agriculture is our history, where we invest our known understanding. Through effort and attention we tend the crops and follow them to the unknown of harvest.

Image 6. Withheld, ceramic, 8” h x 26” l, Doug Browe, 2008
For eons the earth has been worked to produce our food. Our relationship to it has changed dramatically in the last 50 years. The use of agro-business technologies has changed our connection with the land in more dramatic ways that our move to urban life. I investigate this connection in the group of works that make up the Architectural Image 7. Landscape Series, *Village*, Doug Browe, 2008, pictured above.

This group of disassociated, and dissected forms are at once, not fully realized and coalescing. They are breaking away from their former unity and speaking of dispersion and reorganization simultaneously. My connection to the earth is both metaphorical and physical. It is in the clay I mine at the kiln site and in the construction of the kilns themselves. The “Village” forms speak of my connection to the earth as ceramic artist, gardener, worker of the land and advocate of the world environmental movement.

In all the fired clay work, in the patterning, the undulating forms, and the surfaces seemingly affected by an unseen and hidden force from within, are the mapping and history of their creation. This complexity, juxtaposed to the smooth surfaces that counter them, speak of my struggles to cross cultural lines of city and country. This dynamic is
repeated often in the work. In this urban and urbane landscape I itch to plant my feet in the soil and my hands deep in the earth. I am a stranger in a strange land, here for the purpose of my education, yet detached from my source of reassurance, ungrounded.

The unfired adobe forms of *Archive*, presented on tables inferring a laboratory or an archeology museum, share much with the previous works discussed.

Image 8. *Archive*, (detail), adobe, 10” h x 18” x 19” l, Doug Browe, 2008

Their development was a long maturing project that came together over a year’s time. The original body cast was born of a yearning to illustrate my willingness to allow
myself to be reformed. Into this body cast I press-molded the adobe material made from the clay of my land. The use of adobe refers directly to the soil of my home and to the forming of kiln bricks in the refugee camp.

The forms lie on their tables, awaiting reorganization and reconstruction, or as specimens for display and investigation. They exist as separate forms, hinting at unity, yet remaining disconnected.

Image 9. *Archive*, adobe and wood tables, 32” h x 30” w x 280”, Doug Browe, 2008

THE OBJECTS

These sculptural objects document a journey I have undertaken, its costs and rewards. This is the only truth I am certain of. The work, manifest in the sculptures pictured in this document and exhibited in “Objects of Liminality” at the Else Gallery, CSU Sacramento, trace one path traveled. Many feel humanity shares commonality in its paths and destinations. Hopefully, this work will resonate with the journeys others have traveled and will speak to them as well.

When starting this body of work I considered how my life journey had changed over the past few years. How previously it started and ended in what I knew. That has
changed, and this work reflects that change. I struggle in my life, as in my work, to start with a concept, a known, and then to move into the realm of the unknown: to learn as I work to become new with the work. I believe this coming, or moving, to the unknown is the primary change in my approach to making and the underlying force of these objects. It is not comfortable to start an object with little idea of where it will end. Incorporating a model like this into our practice allows our work to have a true life of its own. The work can inform, enlighten and empower us in our lives as well.

Making for me has become a partnership with the work being made in which maker and work enter into an alliance. I have learned to respect the work enough to start with a concept and not lock it in or confine it to that initiating concept. By starting from a concept central to my past and present experiences, the objects have a foundation central to me. This relationship, coming from my historical context, is imparted to the viewer through a loosely figurative or architecture essence in their vessel form. From that beginning foundation each work evolves to become an active and alive entity of its own, nurtured by my active decision-making throughout the making of the piece. It is essential to keep fully engaged with what is evolving in the form. It is important not to be confused or deceived by what it should, could or might become based on some preconceived idea.

Conclusion

In reflection, this path of liminality did begin in a refugee camp. I went to teach, and I learned the most; I went to help, and I needed continual help; I went to change lives, and mine was changed forever.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


