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This thesis paper contains a descriptive analysis of works produced by the author for the 2010 M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition at the Weatherspoon Art Museum which runs from May 2<sup>nd</sup> through June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2010. The pieces included in the exhibition challenge prevailing assumptions about materials, their uses, and hierarchies of value while embracing notions of the physical and spiritual value of labor in creating a tangible sense of place.

EXPLORATIONS IN LABOR AND MATERIAL  
AS MAKERS OF PLACE

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## EXPLORATIONS IN LABOR AND MATERIAL AS MAKERS OF PLACE

My work in the MFA program at UNCG has culminated in my participation in the 2010 MFA Thesis Exhibition at the Weatherspoon Art Museum. I will be including two works both of which are installations of an extremely delicate and temporary nature. Once made, they cannot be moved.

The title of my first work, *100 Handmade Plates, Stacked* (image1 similar) is a literal description. It puts the viewer on notice as to what is being looked at and offers a point of departure for interpretation without being prescriptive. The work consists of one hundred handmade, unfired, porcelain plates turned upside down and stacked vertically on a large, low base. The fact that these plates are unfired means that they are very fragile. The act of stacking them gradually increases the weight bearing down on the rising column thereby producing structural failure. The shards from the broken plates spread out and mound up, providing a base to support the continuation of the stack. In the end the piece has become a precariously balanced tower of intact plates supported by the broken shards beneath them.

This work challenges prevailing assumptions about material, its uses, and hierarchies of value. Porcelain is perceived as a 'high value' material associated with a wide range of luxury consumption from Tang Dynasty vases to wedding registries. These associations operate on two levels; the material itself is the

most refined clay available and has historically been subject to the finest craftsmanship, both manual and industrial. Because of their high value, these items receive special care and often remain intact for multiple generations thereby accumulating the added value of heirloom status. The high cultural value translates directly into economic terms as high-priced luxury items. *100 Handmade Plates, Stacked*, challenges these structures of aesthetic and monetary value. By fashioning each plate individually on the potters wheel I pay tribute the historical value and skill of workmanship associated with porcelain, but by stacking the plates until they break under their own weight I then willfully negate these values. In the moment of their breaking I have rendered porcelain's verified value inoperative.

On a more personal level, my work engages at a metaphorical level with questions of work and labor. One of the formative influences from the home I grew up in is a strong work ethic based in a deep spiritual commitment to always putting forth my best effort. There was a pervading belief that work is its own reward quite separate from economic gain. *100 Handmade Plates, Stacked*, embraces this idea by doing all the work required to produce a product of economic value and then destroying that value. What remains is the intangible and non-utilitarian benefit of having done the work. One of these benefits for me is that in the physical engagement of doing the work a personal sense of place and belonging is developed. Through the process of doing the work, I find myself tangibly located in the world and in alignment with the spiritual values of my

heritage. In *100 Handmade Plates, Stacked*, had the plates remained whole and been completed as plates, it would be easy to assign a quantifiable value to the work. Their value would be tied to their identity based on use-value. In other words, the economic value based on function and the possibilities of contemplative, metaphorical, aesthetic engagement with the work are posed as mutually exclusive and antithetical.

As a sculptor, I have been interested in the process of stacking since I began my MFA studies at UNCG. Among the materials I have stacked are clay cubes, press molded slabs of paper pulp and rope. A stack of material is visually embedded with notions of accumulation and organization and is incontrovertible evidence that work has been done. Stacking reveals the specific characteristics of any given material as the dynamics of time, gravity and pressure operate upon one another. My work has been strongly influenced by post-minimalist art. My interest in stacking has been reinforced by exposure to the early works of Richard Serra. Particularly significant is the body of work using precariously propped and balanced lead components along with the *Skullcracker Series* from 1969. Serra produced this series at the Skullcracker Yard of the Kaiser Steel Corporation in Fontana California. *Stacked Steel Slabs*, 1969, is a tower of leaning steel slabs, twenty feet high. It juxtaposes fundamental properties of density, weight, gravity, pressure and time in such a way as to evoke a visceral response from the viewer. In these works Serra creates a situation of extreme tension based on the perception of the possibility of an impending structural

failure hovering in stasis just prior to the moment of failure. The viewer is caught between a desire to amend the situation in order to avoid the collapse and the fear of getting too close and triggering disaster. While Serra's work invokes the possibility of imminent collapse, my work with porcelain dramatizes a failure that has already happened several times and could happen again at any moment. Collapse has been integrated into the structural support of the piece. Serra's work stages the possibility of structural failure while my work actuates it.

My second thesis work is more closely tied to the idea of an impending rather than actual collapse, but has a far more delicate presence. *Sifted Dialogue*, 2010 (images 2-5 similar) is a large installation (5' x 17') consisting of a constellation of forms made from sifted kaolin arranged on sixteen gauge steel plates which have been placed on the floor of the museum. Robin Hopper, in his book titled, *The Ceramic Spectrum*, describes kaolin as, "the purest form of clay with a relatively coarse grain structure and, usually, low plasticity. Kaolin is used in the manufacture of white clays, particularly porcelain, and bone china" (pg. 47). My choice to use Kaolin is based on its physical characteristics of color, density, and texture rather than its poetic associations. Aside from the fabrication of the supports upon which the sifted powder rests, sifted powder is all that there is. The simple process of sifting enacted to produce the forms is immediately self evident, making the complexity of the forms which emerge as a result of the action employed all the more surprising. The formative processes in play are twofold, both a result of accumulation. First is the accumulation of

powder as it is sifted on to a suspended flat surface interrupted by holes which have been cut through it. Second, is the accumulation of the same powder as it falls through the holes to the surface below. The interplay of forms at various points either discloses or masks aspects of how the piece was made.

Tension develops between the beauty of the surface and fragility of its structure. Due to the flakey rather than granular particulate structure of Kaolin, when it is sifted it accumulates at a surprisingly steep angle that appears highly unstable. This fragility harkens back to Serra's work and its sense of impending structural failure, but here the implications of the failure are reversed. In Serra's work, the threat of structural failure carries with it the very real possibility of taking the viewer with it when it goes. The resulting caution in the viewer is motivated by a basic instinct for self preservation. In Serra's scenario, viewers are faced with their own frailty. In *Sifted Dialogue*, the viewer is immediately aware of the work being at risk from any unconsidered move on the part of the audience.

*Sifted Dialogue* has affinities with the work of Anish Kapoor and Wolfgang Laib. Kapoor has maintained a close tie to Minimalism in his commitment to masking the hand of the artist. His works possess a unified presence which appear to be "self made". Kapoor has said, "I have always been interested in the mythology of the self made object. As if without an author, as if there by its own volition. [ ] Yes the 'unauthored' work is a fiction, but still a very important way of thinking about a problem"(pp. 35-36). My approach can be distinguished from Kapoor in that the notion of process is a critical element in my work. The process

enacted in the making of a piece is visually self evident. The work of Wolfgang Laib is focused on the phenomenological presence of specific materials such as pollen or bees wax, organic materials that carry strong metaphorical associations. It is the very presence of these materials which transforms the space they occupy. *Sifted Dialogue* is not engaged with the metaphorical associations of a material. Rather I am interested in a concentrated physical interaction with a common inorganic material that results in an object that simultaneously reveals the process of its making and the characteristics of the material from which they are made.

The two works that compose my thesis have certain similarities in appearance and content while inviting different types of engagement. *100 Handmade Plates, Stacked*, has embedded within it multiple layers of cyclical processes: making, negating, making. A narrative of construction and destruction governs the viewer's experience of the work. With *Sifted Dialogue*, while there is an embedded sense of process, the piece has an ontological presence because of its more unitary presence that invites a more open ended and contemplative response.

My desire for these works was to have them be presented on a bare floor in the gallery so that they could be experienced in the same space as the viewer. As soon as an object is placed on a base or pedestal the space which it occupies becomes distanced from the viewer, much like a frame separates the space of a painting from the space of the gallery. As soon as this separation occurs the

viewer is able to view the work as occupying a domain of metaphor and allusion rather than as an object sharing the same immediate, physical space.

Practical considerations have made the preferred presentation impossible. I have decided to place steel sheets on the floor under *Sifted Dialogue* because the monochromatic modulation of the steel surface is as close to the desired surface of sealed concrete as I can get. *100 Handmade Plates, Stacked*, is installed with a base which rises above the floor about 2-3 inches, just enough to discourage viewers from stepping on the platform. A dark finish on this base insures another layer of continuity between the two works.

Some of the key concerns in my work have to do with notions of the value of physical labor, the accumulation of material as evidence of time, and challenging structures of value associated with materials or forms. My engagement with material is motivated out of a desire to discover ways in which that material might visually reveal its own characteristics by implementing simple and repetitive processes enacted over a period of time. I make objects that have a very delicate or precarious presence which reinforces the temporary nature of their existence. It is the tension developed between the embedded sense of investment of time and effort in the work and the ephemeral nature of the object that make the work compelling.

## LIST OF IMAGES

1. 220 Bowls  
Porcelain  
66" x 36" x 30"  
2010
2. Sift  
Sifted Kaolin  
42" x 30" x 5"  
2010
3. Untitled  
Sifted Kaolin  
Installation, dimensions variable  
2010
4. Untitled  
Sifted Kaolin, plywood  
13" x 6" x 4"  
2010
5. Sifted  
Sifted Kaolin, Particle Board  
70" x 40" x 26"  
2010

IMAGES



1  
Eric Kniss  
210 porcelain Bowls, Stacked  
2010  
Porcelain



2  
Eric Kniss  
Sift  
Sifted Kaolin  
2010



3  
Eric Kniss  
Untitled  
Sifted Kaolin  
Installation, dimensions variable  
2010



4.  
Eric Kniss  
Untitled  
Sifted Kaolin, plywood  
13" x 6" x 4"  
2010



5.  
Eric Kniss  
Sifted  
Sifted Kaolin, Particle Board  
70" x 40" x 26"  
2010

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