2016
MFA
GRADUATE
THESIS
EXHIBITION
vcuarts
2016 MFA GRADUATE THESIS EXHIBITION

Virginia Commonwealth University
School of the Arts
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Ryan Flores | *Fundamental Units* | Ceramic, mixed media
At VCU, as at most universities, the thesis required to earn a Masters of Fine Arts degree consists of two elements: the exhibition of artwork, and the filing of a formal written statement. Most outside viewers experience only the former, visiting the thesis exhibition, arguably the more public of the two components. Meanwhile, the written thesis remains relatively un-accessed, with the exception of professors and other thesis committee members. Several months after seeing the 2016 MFA thesis exhibitions, I was invited to contribute the essay for the accompanying catalog. Not wanting to rely solely on my memory, I decided to draw on the artists’ written theses more heavily than an essayist typically might. To my pleasure, I found those written theses to be extremely rewarding reads; articulate, deeply personal, thoughtful, and revealing. Some of the graduates approached them akin to research papers, others as platforms for expression not constricted by convention or rhetoric. Because they are so compelling, I decided to use the artists’ own words liberally in this text.

It may be impossible to unite thirty-two artists along a single common thread, or even two or three for that matter. The variety of interests, mediums, and approaches among the group are as diverse as one would expect, with each artist possessing unique qualities. However, in reading through their writing, I found that there were certain shared themes that seemed to rise to the surface. Graduate school is a time of transition, so it is perhaps not surprising that many of these students wrote about assessing their pasts, examining their present places in the world, and taking ownership of their futures. Several of them spoke of a process of “finding” their work by breaking rules and letting go of control. Lastly, given that 2016 was dominated by an historic Presidential race in which the deep divisions between Americans became impossible to ignore, it is not surprising that many of these graduates were taking a critical look at the United States – especially at the conflicts around its land, values, and identity.
Acknowledging the past, shaping the present

“We take from the past forms to create new forms and they become the present tense. It is not an act of demolition when or where history is erased but rather a growth that births a new structure.”

Ryan Flores

For many of the 2016 graduates, the imprint of heritage, family, and autobiography are so crucial that they serve as the basis for their artwork. Not that these artists regard their backgrounds as strict or restricting parameters, but rather as complex, fluid, and even potentially confusing sources from which to draw.

For quite a few artists born outside of the U.S. or as children of immigrants, their mixed cultural heritages are the foundation for their current hybrid identities. These variegated identities can create conflicts in how these artists view themselves and are seen by others. Saudi-American Farrah Al Sulaiman reports that she often is asked to identify preferences regarding her dual heritage: “I have often been asked which country or people I like more, as if one could like their right eye more than their left.” For Victoria Ahmadizadeh, being a first-generation American with both Persian and Puerto Rican ancestry, her hybridity stirs up feelings of shortcoming: “... try as I might to be proud of my traditions and who I am, I feel as if I am a fraud... possessing only partial knowledge of the traditions and norms that construct these cultures, I am exiled from all three, an impure, unwelcome hybrid.”

Farrah Al Sulaiman | One of Us (detail) | Fabric robes
While they may look to their own past for a foundation, these artists don't define their identities as being in any way static or fixed. Instead, they recognize that they are in a constant state of becoming. Al Sulaiman acknowledges that her identity is continuously shifting. She writes, “The edges of my personality and beliefs create a vague, undetermined place in a constant state of transition, a place in which the prohibited and forbidden are in a constant state of flux and are rife with emotional residue.” Similarly, Saulat Ajmal, an artist raised in Pakistan who came to the U.S. as an adult, writes “In an endeavor to place myself between my present environment and my past, I look for ways to fabricate a new reality where tradition, culture, politics and nature come together in ways that speak to my state of being.” Sense of self can be a slippery thing to locate. As Eva Rocha writes, “If we look at ourselves in our childhood, that is us and not us. When we project ourselves into the future, that is us and not us. When we look at ourselves in the mirror, that is us and not us.” Despite this, these artists seek out their sense of self, no matter how elusive that may be.

**Letting Go and Breaking Rules**

“This was the only way to push past the fear. The fear of losing control, the fear of putting myself out there and not being accepted, and the fear of not succeeding... I had to poke at those vulnerabilities and to push the wound open even further to get to the core.”

*Alicia Dietz*

Quite a few of these artists center their work around shunning structure and convention, shedding their own sense of comfort and control, and ultimately letting go.

For some, the rules to break are the ones of medium-specific conventions. Matthew Warren and Abbey Lee Sarver both write of conflicted feelings about digital photography. Warren's contentious relationship with photography leads him to discover a combination of acceptance and rebellion: “Accept the digital photographic process for what it is, and what it is not. Allow for uncertainty and surprise.” Sarver's frustration results in her using images in sculptural ways, rejecting the perfection of glossy advertising images. “My audience is not counting pixels,” she quips.

Emily McBride writes of allowing herself to break her own rules, and finding unexpected value in moments of boredom. She finds her subject in absence: “… it is the nothing that I notice. The nothing I take pictures of. The recurring nothing that gets lost in memory.” For painter Beatrice Modisett, striking a balance between control and chance is the key realm for creativity: “I embrace and cultivate risk in the studio... while also inventing devices that allow for control. In dealing with the two there is fear of the
pendulum swinging too far in either direction; to be completely in control is equally as frightening as missing out on the experiences that come along with relinquishing control. Hovering on the brink between the two is the tumultuous but highly productive space in which I work.”

American identity, land, and concerns for the environment

“This is an American History conversation about artifice and consumerism...”

Eric Diehl

Many of the 2016 graduates use their artwork as a lens to look closely at aspects of American life. Specifically, quite a few artists focus on the troubled relationship between the physical land and booming American consumerism. Several artists are concerned with the lingering myth—propagated in the nineteenth century and associated with the doctrine of Manifest Destiny—that the American land is pristine, wild, and available for the taking. For Kathleen O’Connor, romantic, seductive, and inherently deceptive images of the landscape feed national identity and viewers’ sense of longing. “These images fool and merge, convincing some that all of these places exist together. America is one unit. America is a place filled with wild tracts of land, not bought and sold, but waiting. Empty. Void and sublime... The image is proof, extracted to speak to beauty meant to be consumed.” Ben Jordan also examines romantic views of the land and ideas of the pastoral. With his crafted objects, he seeks to reveal “the commodification of the western landscape, to portray it not only as a tangible purchasable asset for a small percentage of the population, but also as an ideal of western Americana that is sold to us in order to bolster the American narrative of freedom, independence, individualism and a god given right to spread unabated.” Shared critical concerns with rampant American consumerism and the proliferation of disposed waste lead to different results for Jeremy Zietz and David Moré. Zietz fashions carefully designed and handcrafted objects that thwart typical market goals. He questions, “Why should only products which would render immediate sales be researched and developed? What greatness should objects aspire to, or where do our possessions fall on a spectrum which plots their healthiness?” While Moré embraces the re-use of detritus, albeit it with highly conflicted feelings. On one hand, he enthuses, “Trash is really exciting. It suggests possibilities.” On the other, he observes the social and environmental horrors of materials like industrial plastics and Styrofoam, noting their historical links to the use of chemical weapons by the U.S. in warfare, and their inability to decompose. He confesses, “I feel a conflict within my desire to make
things in a world that already has so much. I feel a responsibility about bringing new things into the world."

In their written theses as well as in their final artworks, the graduating class of 2016 analyze the foundations that got them to this point, the transition and growth they experienced during their studies, their astute and complex observations of their environments, and—perhaps most importantly—how all of these things swirl around and shape their complex identities. They are finding their place, as artists and as citizens of the world.

Ben Jordan | Synthetic Landscapes | Slip cast, underglaze, cactus, wax encaustic, steel
CRAFT/MATERIAL STUDIES

Victoria Ahmadizadeh
Morgan Babic
Alicia Dietz
Carli Holcomb
Ben Jordan
Emily McBride
Kathleen O’Connor
Timothy Woodbrey
Zena Zakanycz
Jeremy Zietz
While you roam through frozen waters
Hot sculpted glass, found plastic chain
Euphoria with no brakes (detail)
Bicycle reflectors, vinyl coated cable, zip ties
Practice
Sterling silver
Alicia Dietz
 Collective Cadence (detail)
Birch, hickory, maple, walnut, image transfers on aluminum, glass
(Upper left) *Unknowable Terrain*
Brass, wood, clay, tourmaline crystal, crystals, hemp rope, coal slag

(Bottom left) *Crystallized*
Bronze, silver, cubic zirconia, crystals, smokey quartz

(Above) *Entangled*
Copper, patina, bronze dust, coal slag
(Left) *and His Cow*
Terra cotta, underglaze, wax encaustic, steel, cement

(Top) *Synthetic Landscapes (detail)*
Slip cast, underglaze, cactus, wax encaustic, steel

(Bottom) *Powderhorns*
Slip cast, terra cotta, underglaze, gold luster, wax
so much apparent nothing
objects, print, video

Emily McBride
So Much Apparent Nothing
Objects, print, video
Climbing Mt. Rainier (detail)
Mixed media
(Left) **Museum Quality Lions**
Earthenware, porcelain, marble contact paper, 2x4’s, plywood

(Above) **Thesis Installation View**
Earthenware, majolica, luster, commercial decals, 
marble contact paper, 2x4’s, plywood, sandbags,
(Top) Thesis Wall Installation
Earthenware, majolica, commercial decals, marble contact paper, plywood

(Bottom) Some Things Doing Thingly Things
Becoming Something (detail)
Earthenware, porcelain, majolica, commercial decals, marble contact paper, 2x4’s, plywood
(Right) A Thought on Pots
Earthenware, cardboard, balloon, artisanal hot air, marble contact paper, 2x4’s, plywood
If You Can't Care For Yourself
How Could You Care For Anything Else?
New and used air conditioning filters, dead and
dying plants and mop water from the Depot gallery
Instrument of Mind offers an invitation to step out of the rut and enter an alternate mental space. These ubiquitous forms are deeply resonant with us; to make of it is often overwhelming, yet so to be envisioned.

The objects are an ongoing response to how we are made to exist in difficult times of our lives. With our most and much time, or grow away our personal sacred things. The series seeks to widen the epistemology of object change through the use of everyday rituals.
Calendar (detail)
Ash, brass, string
100 Year Ark
Douglas fir, holly inlay, brass
KINETIC IMAGING

David Moré
Eva Rocha
Kelsey Sheaffer
**The Idiot Annex** (detail)
Mixed media
*Tag* (detail)
Multimedia installation
Choreographic space (detail)
Ink on paper, sound
PAINTING + PRINTMAKING

Saulat Ajmal
Carolina Aranibar-Fernandez
Eric Diehl
Mathew Gasparek
Devin Harclerode
William Matheson
Beatrice Modisett
Jake Reller
Kristen Sanders
Saulat Ajmal
(Left) **Serenity**  
Ink and acrylic

(Top) **Red Scape**  
Video still, 6 min14 sec (loop)

(Bottom) **Diptych**  
Gold black sumi ink
The water in between: Where I am and Where I come from (detail)
Woven textiles, video projection, cardboard boxes, handmade coins
(Above) Vegas Scarecrow  
Acrylic on linen

(Left top and bottom)  
Death Vegas Valley (detail)  
Acrylic and oil on linen on wooden panorama
100
Oil and acrylic on canvas
Devin Harclerode
Sweaty Mother Slow Groove
Video installation
William Matheson
Para
Two channel HD video
Beatrice Modisett
*The Dunes on Pluto* (detail)
Oil on canvas
Sailing Stones (detail)
Oil on canvas
Hlioskjalf
Oil on canvas
(Above) *That's Where They Paint The Houses*
Oil on canvas

(Bottom) *Bookburner*
Oil on paper
Prehisitoric Scifi Babe
Oil on canvas
How I Learned About The World (detail)
Fired and glazed ceramic, plexiglass, fabric, wood, acrylic
PHOTOGRAPHY + FILM

Farrah Al Sulaiman
Abbey Lee Sarver
Alex Matzke
Matthew Warren
Farrah Al Sulaiman
One of Us
Patterned fabric robes, HD video and performance
*Artifacts* (detail)

Mirrored plexiglas, adhesive fabric
**Hollow Cairn** (detail)
Mirrored plexiglas, adhesive fabric
Confirmed Kill
Archival inkjet print
Gender Panic After Action Pants
Archival inkjet print
Matthew Warren
Ink on Paper
Mixed media
SCULPTURE + EXTENDED MEDIA

Ryan Flores
Shana Hoehn
Savannah Knoop
Steven Randall
Pallavi Sen
Levester Williams
Fundamental Units (detail)
Ceramic, mixed media
Shana Hoehn
Monitor
Video projection
Savannah Knoop
The Bare Units
Mixed media and performance
Steven Randall
The Curiosity of Con, Petrified Breath, and an Accident known as Blue (detail)
Ferric ferrocyanide (Prussian blue), salt, water, elodea plants, phenol red (pH indicator), etched paper, rope, milled polystyrene, cast polyurethane, steel, cast silicone, plexiglas, plastic buckets, aluminum pots, burners, breath
*Hot House* (detail)
Quilts, paper, string, mirror, ceramic objects, water color, screen prints, ceramic tiles, golden wire, adhesive tape, batting, golden frames, silver tape, mylar, Indian gift wrapping paper
F.O.B.E. #1
Buoy, wood, paint, transducer, speaker wire, cord, audio

F.O.B.E. #2
Foil balloon, foil, wood, paint, transducer, speaker wire, audio
Muahlin O Wand
Resin, foam, paint, vinyl on wood, plexiglas, pickle juice, plastic, metal, nails, transducer, speaker wire, athletic flexi-cord cover, audio
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William Matheson

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Terry Brown

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Yaeyoung Emily Park

Virginia Commonwealth University
School of the Arts

Pollak Building Suite 201
325 N Harrison Street
Richmond, VA 23284-2519