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<https://doi.org/10.18297/etd/2139>

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TRACES OF THE HAND

By

Molly F Passafiume

B.F.A., University of Louisville, 2011

M.A.T., University of Louisville. 2013

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of

Master of Arts in Art (Creative) and Art History

Hite Art Institute
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2015

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A Thesis Approved on

April 3, 2015

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Barbara Hanger-Thesis Director

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to:

My mentors for all of their support during the creating of my work for my exhibition and the writing process for this thesis.

-and-

My family for all of their support in and out of the studio throughout the entire process of completing my degree.

Thank you!

ABSTRACT
TRACES OF THE HAND
Molly F Passafiume
March 12, 2015

This body of work, titled “Traces of the Hand,” consists of a series of mixed media pieces that are made up of one or more clay forms that act as vessels to contain handmade paper. Each piece is a cross section or artifact that I created through abstraction and repetition. The clay acts as a frame for preserving these artifacts. The paper is arranged in a manner which abstracts natural patterns that mimic each other: the flow of water, the grain of wood, the strata of rocks, and the swirls of fingerprints. Each individual work captures and enhances a natural pattern--like looking at it through a microscope or in an archaeological grid. I have enlarged these patterns to emphasize their inherent similarities.

Within each piece, I take inspiration from patterns found in nature. The patterns of the flow of water are created by the water avoiding obstacles it approaches during its natural flow downstream. It is the undulation and waving water line that inspired *Flow* and *Path*. Tree grain patterns are created due to the varying growth patterns of the tree through the different seasons. Cross sections of wood can be seen in the pieces, *Grain and Plane*, which mimic cuts of wood

that are commonly used for flooring and furniture. In nature, rock strata are formed from layers of sedimentary material settling in variation over time. This process of sediment transforming to stone can take tens to hundreds of thousands of years. The pieces *Stalactite*, *Strata*, and *Weathered*, each represent a separate element of rock strata that occur in nature. The patterns found in all of these pieces/phenomena- undulating and swirling- can even be found on the tips of our fingerprints which are formed in utero from pressures on the fingers which create the “friction ridges” that make these impressions.

This rhythm and harmony in nature repeats itself right down to the tips of our fingers. This body of work seeks to point to this regularity and symmetry that occurs and makes the claim that humans through natural design are deeply entwined and connected to nature.

Figure 1- Molly F Passafiume, *Exhibition Shot 1*, 2015.

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HISTORICAL/CONTEMPORARY CONNECTIONS

I am a ceramic and fiber artist working with clay and handmade paper. As a ceramic artist interested in traditional hand building techniques, I relate to Wayne Higby's comment, "Ceramics, writes Rawson, is the result of a complex interweaving of materials, human action, and symbol," (Rawson xiii). I am drawn to the action of my hand and the result it leaves on the clay's surface. The ceramic vessel has a history of containment and preservation. Ceramic vessels were first created for the catching and holding of rain water, and the holding and consuming of food and drink. Originally vessels were also used for the recording of history and fable through decorative imagery. There is reasoning behind the shape of each of the vessels I create, linking the shape to the natural pattern being referenced in each given piece. As with each of the natural patterns, each of my pieces is unique. The surface texture that each ceramic vessel has is created through my hand building process. Rawson also states, "Texture, like shape, has its own symbolism, working on similar principles; and although the references of the symbolism are, on a whole, general and vague. There are surface treatments which can have fairly obvious and direct symbolic references..." (Rawson 85). The symbolism behind the texture my hand building technique creates is that it can only be made in its exact form, from the pinching technique that I use and in essence from my hands. It is an intuitive and

spontaneous process that cannot be replicated. It is for these reasons I titled this exhibition "Traces of the Hand," because evidence of the hand is left behind throughout the creative process.

My ceramic vessels contain the paper which is arranged in a manner that displays the natural patterns I examine. As a fiber artist, I am interested in the making and using of handmade paper. Traditionally, paper was used to preserve the written word or drawn image. It historically has always been contained in some way: scroll, bound book, or filing system. Similarly, the handmade paper in my pieces is always contained by a ceramic vessel. From A.D. 105 when paper was first created until the Industrial Revolution in America, from 1760-1840 when sheets of paper were made by machines, all paper was made by hand. After that time handmade paper was only created for the purpose of art and official documents that required watermarks. There is something intriguing to me about working with a material that in most instances has been lost for everyday use. As I preserve and compare the natural patterns I represent in my pieces, I find it even more interesting to preserve the patterns using a material that needs preservation of its own. The way I use clay and paper in my work, relates back to their original uses. The tactile and traditional processes that draw me to working with clay and handmade paper are becoming a lost art. Nature is also fleeting like the processes I use, and the pieces in this series are creating permanency for the patterns and the processes.

Josep Asunción states, "In the present worldwide culture, which is developing largely through virtual reality such as movies and the Internet, people

long to relate to materials in a more natural way without the mediation of machines. The pleasure of touching paper that retains the mark of the hand that made it-expressed through uneven edges, texture, and irregular beauty-is a humanizing influence in the center of hectic contemporary life” (Asunción 17). I have a passion for exploring the traditional handmade processes of working with clay and paper. By participating in these processes I engage with the material in a way that is often overlooked, because of the availability of commercialized tools and products. Asunción also states, “Many artists are now using handmade paper as a medium, not merely as a ground for their works. Paper, like any other material, has so much potential for expression that it is fascinating in and of itself” (Asunción 17). In this series of work I have pushed to explore and prompt paper as a medium, looking at all of its qualities and possibilities outside of its normal uses. Also with my use of clay in my pieces, I promote the tactile qualities of hand building, as Robert Piepenburg writes, “This is clay, full and soft as I comfortably squeeze it between my fingers. Smooth and compact, it gently yields; responds to my touch...” (Piepenburg 423). In conjunction with these original techniques, I make vessels traditionally used to hold things and fill them with handmade paper taking the customary utilitarian element out of the pieces. My work brings a level of uniqueness compared to contemporary fiber and ceramic art. I use traditional methods but do not put them together in a predictable manner. Conventionally, there is not this mesh/webbing of the two materials.

I have found that I can most closely connect my ideas, techniques, and artwork to a group called, The Artists of Breaking Barriers. This group agrees that, as Matthew Kangas states, “The most adventurous American craft makers today want both aspects-ideas and materials-just so long as the artwork is able to retain a physical autonomy while conveying the possibility of complex meaning to the viewer” (Kangas 42). Some of the artists included in this group-Wendell Castle, Jane Sauer, Abert Paley, and Dale Chihuly- emerged from the art style of modernist abstraction, “yet each ameliorates the severity of abstraction with natural growth forms and symbolic landscape environments. In their work the meaning is subtle, submerged, and awaiting interpretation,” states Kangas (Kangas 43). I am most drawn to the will this group has to have their work focused both on ideas and materials; my work has strong pulls in both of these directions as well.

Figure 2- Molly F Passafiume, *Exhibition Shot 2*, 2015.

MATERIAL/PROCESS

As Glenn Adamson writes, in “Thinking through Craft,” “... craft always entails an encounter with the properties of a specific material. This could be wood, glass, metal, clay, paper, plastic, paint, stone,—anything—or more than one material in combination” (Adamson 39). In working with craft materials I am drawn to the traditional processes and the physicality of those processes.

Through the use of the natural materials of clay and paper I further the connection between my hand (and finger prints), as the artist, and the content of the works of art. I chose to work with materials that have malleable qualities. Both clay and paper are natural materials that can be controlled and manipulated, allowing for the imprint of the hand to be left behind in the materials. Evidence of the hand is an essential element in my latest body of work. The methods I use to reach my final pieces leave the marks of my hand behind, subtly pointing to the patterns.

In the clay elements of my work I use a hand building technique, specifically, pinching. These processes are suited to this body of work because the physical marks of my fingers and hands are left on the surface of the clay. The form the vessel takes is simple, not to distract from the paper’s edge, which is communicating the content. I start by rolling out a slab to create the bottom of

the vessel, which will hang against the wall. I use a coil building technique to create the vertical portion of the vessel. The outer edge of the slab is one thick coil that is connected to the slab through scoring and smearing. The pinching technique transforms the coil into the vertical wall of the vessel. During the pinching process I use only my fingers and hands to move the clay into its final form. It is at this point in the vessel making process where the mark of my hand is recorded.

Once dry, the vessel gets even coats of colored underglaze, which is the start of the finishing process for the ceramic elements of my work. The vessel is bisque fired in the kiln to 1900⁰ F. After bisquing the vessel, several coats of a variation of the John Utgaard Fluid Base glaze is applied with a mop brush and bloated on to give the glaze greater variation from one point to the next. After glazing the vessel is refired to 2000⁰F. The variation along with the runniness of the glaze creates a unique and serendipitous surface that highlights the texture of the hand formed ceramic vessels. The overall color choice for each vessel is determined in advance and is dependent on the artifact being preserved in that work of art. Each color gives clues to the inspiration for the work. In the piece Weathered I used a mottled grey color to indicate rock. The additive process of hand building the vessels, and the process of manipulating the clay and glaze by my hand to achieve its final form very much parallels the additive process of the paper in my work.

The paper elements of my work are developed from hand pulled sheets of paper. When working with handmade paper the element that reveals the hand,

the uneven rough and deckled edge can only be achieved through the hand pulling of paper, which is very different from the cut edge of manufactured paper. The handmade paper used is a combination of cotton and abaca paper pulp. Paper pulp is a lignocellulosic fibrous material prepared by separating cellulous fibers from wood, crops, or waste paper. The cotton pulp is made from the cotton plant and the abaca pulp is made from a species of banana plant indigenous to the Philippines.

In creating hand pulled sheets of paper, the pulp fibers must first be mixed into a large vat of water, where the individual fibers become suspended in the water. A mold (a stretched screen with fine openings) and deckle (a frame that sits over the screen and will dictate the shape of the paper) of a chosen size and shape is used, to dip into the vat of suspended pulp. The mold and deckle is then raised back out of the vat, the water drains through the screen as the pulp is left on the screen's surface. At this time the fibers are interwoven but not set into place and could be easily disturbed. In order to set the fibers into the sheet form, the deckle is removed, forming the deckled edge. The screen is then turned upside down onto the stack (handmade sheets with a blanket laid between each layer). This process is called couching. During the couching, some of the water is pressed out by hand although there is still too much water between the fibers to keep the sheet from separating after they are dry. Therefore, after the desired amount of paper is pulled and couched, the entire stack is placed in a paper press and pressed at 4000 pounds of pressure; this will remove the remainder of the water from the paper and further mesh the fibers together. After the paper is

pulled from the press, each sheet is removed from the blankets one at a time and laid on a metal tray to complete its drying process.

Many paper makers want to make pristine sheets of paper for drawing, painting or book making. I give paper life and movement by purposefully working haphazardly in the making and drying processes, which reflects the chaos and randomness of the natural patterns I represent. I intentionally lay the paper for drying quite irregularly on the trays allowing for variation in each sheet of paper. By doing this I am able to have more diversity in the line created by the edge of the paper in the final works of art.

After I have the two components created (clay vessel and paper) I then begin to place the sheets of handmade paper according to the natural pattern that being mimicked. I will use a sketch, created from looking at a natural pattern and zooming in and abstracting it, to determine how the paper will be arranged within the vessel. One sheet is added at a time, this additive process continues to mimic the vessel building and paper pulling processes which come before it. The paper's edge communicates that each sheet is hand formed and not cut. I am interested in how little of the surface of each sheet of paper can be shown and still point to traces of the hand.

THE BODY OF WORK

The ceramic vessels in this series were made using a pinching technique, which was meant to leave my fingerprint behind by the process. By doing this I create a texture on the clay's surface that cannot be mimicked exactly without my hands. Each ceramic vessel is meant to express an element of the pattern being

explored in the piece. Every piece is then filled with the handmade paper I produce. The paper reflects the natural pattern which is being explored in the piece. Each piece acts as a snapshot from a close-up view, preserving the natural pattern. This microscopic view fascinates me because of the abstraction I am able to create by looking at these patterns up close.

Flow examines how water flows to avoid the obstacles in its

Figure 3- Molly F Passafiume, *Flow*, 2014.

way. There are many possible paths but the water has to choose one at each obstacle it approaches. The paths left behind formed the pattern represented in this piece. The interaction between water, stone and current gives the stream its flow. The oval vessel allows for a view of a stream to be looked at in a controlled shape, placing the emphasis on the displayed movement of the paper, and not on the shape of the vessel itself. The glaze for *Flow* was chosen to resemble a mossy rock, much like one that would obstruct the flow of water in a stream.

Path not only gives the viewer a way to examine the pattern of the flow of the water in a stream, but also allows them to observe and explore the path the water forms. As an installation piece, *Path* was created so the

Figure 4- Molly F Passafiume, *Path*, 2015.

viewer could see the direct connection between the water's flow and the path the water created for itself. Having the piece take up such a large area allows for the

viewer to have a more intimate viewing of the piece, being able to walk around it and explore its changing paths. *Path*'s overall form was a recreation from streams I have visited in nature, while the blue glaze is meant to represent the water itself. The waterfall element of the piece is representative of the small falls that occur in streams due to ground level changes. These falls also often give momentum to the flow of the water. The grid that breaks up the individual elements that make up the piece in its entirety was mimicked off of an archaeological or surveying grid. This grid was a unified way to separate the stream into sections. By looking at one section the viewer can take a close look at the patterns created. Looking all the sections together the stream can be seen, and the grid lines that divide the individual elements starts to fade.

Figure 5- Molly F Passafiume, *Path*, 2015.

Figure 6- Molly F Passafiume, *Grain*, 2014.

Grain is a look at a long board of wood, and the grain it contains. The grain, regions of darker and lighter wood, is different in every tree due to the growth patterns of the tree through the different seasons. *Grain* is a display of one board's wood grain displayed within two separate vessels. I intended the two parts to display wood grain as it is commonly seen, as boards cut to create floors. There is not one board that will exactly mimic another, as shown here; the two boards are different from each other. *Grain* refers to the subtleties of our everyday surroundings and how the mundane can be spectacular upon closer examination.

Figure 7- Molly F Passafiume, *Grain*, 2014.

Figure 8- Molly F Passafiume, *Plane*, 2015.

due to the growth patterns through the different seasons. By having such a large area of the tree showing in *Plane* it is interesting to see the grain of the wood and how it changes.

Stalactite is a cross section view of the rock above a new forming stalactite and the stalactite itself. Stalactites are icicle-shaped formations hanging from the ceilings of caves, which are formed from

Plane is a view of grain from a plane of wood that came from a vertical cross section of a tree. The abnormal shape of the vessel on its right side mimics the irregular edge of the tree while the glaze resembles the bark of a tree. The grain, regions of darker and lighter wood, is different in every tree

Figure 9- Molly F Passafiume, *Stalactite*, 2015.

the dripping of water, holding minerals, through the cave ceiling. The circular vessel at the top show the strata of rock above the stalactites and the dipping form below, which symbolizes the stalactite, shows the layers created from the dripping of the minerals. This piece was made of earthenware clay and left unglazed to point to the unrefined surface of rocks.

Figure 10- Molly F Passafiume, *Strata*, 2015.

Strata are separate layers of sedimentary rock that lay one on top of another to form a larger rock and can be visually distinguished from each other. *Strata* is a representation of the layers in rock and the earth. The three horizontal vessels symbolize the layering of different types of sediment, while the paper inside the vessels shows how sediment forms layers in uneven sections causing the unique patterning some rock surfaces have. The

glaze for *Strata* was chosen to represent a common rock surface that exists on earth.

Figure 11- Molly F Passafiume, *Weathered*, 2015.

Weathered is a free standing sculpture made to represent the rock formations in nature that exist as independent objects, formed from all surrounding mineral being eroded away. *Weathered* was created as a vessel with the opening for the paper on one side of vessel. The paper shows the variation rock strata can have on even the most abnormal rock surfaces. The mottled grey coloring of the piece is indicative of rock.

Figure 12- Molly F Passafiume, *Arch*, 2014.

Figure 13- Molly F Passafiume, *Loop*, 2014.

Figure 14- Molly F Passafiume, *Whorl*, 2014.

Like the other natural patterns I use, the fingerprint is unique, no two being exactly the same. The fingerprint holds an even greater tie to my work due to its connection to the processes I use to work with the materials for my pieces. Through *Arch*, *Loop*, and *Whorl*, I demonstrate the differences and similarities between the different fingerprint classifications. The different glazes and shapes of the vessels used for *Arch*, *Loop*, and *Whorl* further point to the differences of fingerprints.

Figure 15- Molly F Passafiume, *Untitled 1*, 2013.

Untitled 1, perhaps best sums up this body of work. Being the first pieces created in this series, *Untitled 1* was made to represent all of the natural patterns explored in this series, collectively in one piece. This collective representation makes *Untitled 1* the perfect opener and perfect concluder to the series. In this piece, all of the other pieces can be explained. It is sort of a map or key to the rest of the work. The three ceramic vessels are meant to symbolize the multiple patterns represented within the same piece. Having more than one vessel also allows for the patterns to be divided into sections by the clay walls. This enables the viewer to see the continuation between the separate frames and hopefully make further connections between the patterns that surround us in our daily lives.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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Education

University of Louisville 2007-2015

M.A. candidate, 3D Studios, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY,
May 2015.

M.A.T., Art Education, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, May
2013.

B.F.A., 3D Studios, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY, December
2011.

Exhibitions

2015 *Traces of the Hand*, M.A. Thesis Exhibition, Hite Art Gallery, University
of Louisville, Louisville, KY

2014 Artist Spotlight Show, Gadabout Gallery, Jeffersonville, IN

2013 Student Show, Hite Art Gallery, University of Louisville, Louisville,
KY

2011 B.F.A. Graduating Exhibition, Hite Art Gallery, University of Louisville,
Louisville, KY

Teaching Experience

January-May 2015

University of Louisville, Louisville, KY. Teaching
Intro to ceramics.

January-March 2013	Seneca High School, Louisville, KY. Student teaching placement; teaching intro to art, photography, and ceramics.
March-May 2013	Highland Middle School, Louisville, KY. Student teaching placement; teaching ceramics grades 5-8.
April-May 2012	Westport TAPP, Louisville, KY 40242. Long-term Substitute for art teacher; teaching Art I, II, III, and Humanities.

Teaching Field Experience

January-May 2012	Barret Traditional Middle School, Louisville, KY. Observation and aided mentor teacher.
January-May 2012	Neighborhood House, Louisville, KY. Tutoring.
August-October 2012	DuPont Manual High School, Louisville, KY. Under Supervision, team planned and taught two lessons to a Folk Arts class, mixed grades; observed junior fibers class.
October-November 2012	Stonestreet Elementary, Louisville, KY. Under Supervision, team planned and taught two lessons, one to 3 rd grade and one to 5 th grade; Observed 3 rd , 4 th & 5 th grades and special education art classes.

Related Work Experience

October-February 2012	Co-Coach for a house league ice hockey team. For ages 8-14.
October 2007-March 2010	Assistant Coach for Assumption High School's Ice Hockey Team.
Summers 2006-08	Swim Team Coach, Upper Highlands Swim Club; Ages 4-18.

Publications

June 2013	<i>Mural highlights students' star potential.</i> Jefferson County Public Schools, Monday Memo. http://www.jcpsky.net/Pubs/MondayMemo/060313features.html
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December 2011

UofL BFA students show off their hard work [Visual Art]. Highlighting my work from my BFA exhibition. Louisville.com.

<https://www.louisville.com/content/uofl-bfa-students-show-their-hard-work-visual-art>

Scholarships

January 2012-May 2015

President's Office, Graduate Assistant Scholarship.

August 2010-December 2011 Allen R. Hite Scholarship- Tuition.

May 2010

Allen R. Hite Scholarship- Travel Grant.

August 2007-May 2011

KEES Scholarship.

Awards

2011

Bill Fischer Senior Project Grant

2015

Outstanding Graduate in Fine Arts