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What We Give

Nicole B. Stupin

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What We Give

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Honors

By

Nicole Stupin

The Honors College

Fine and Performing Arts Scholars

East Tennessee State University

May 6, 2014

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Don Davis", written over a horizontal line.

Don Davis, Faculty Mentor

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Scott Contreras-Koterbay", written over a horizontal line.

Scott Contreras-Koterbay, Faculty Reader

[Note: Signature of mentor **is required**; signatures and listings of faculty readers are suggested, since they like to be included, but optional at the discretion of the student.]

Abstract

The artist discusses the concept, imagery, and research influences behind a body of work entitled *What We Give*, for the completion of her Bachelor of Arts Degree and undergraduate research for the Fine and Performing Arts Scholars branch of East Tennessee State University's Honors College. The artist used this body of work to explore her personal relationships with the ocean, Aspergers, and information. Particularly, the artist's pseudo-mystic beliefs about the ocean, her frustrations with her life struggles, and fascinations with scientific facts and libation vessels are discussed. Dysfunctionality is cited as the driving force behind the thought process of the project. Her work includes two sculptural vessels, rendered in ceramics and painted with house paint. The artist cites gastropod shells, ancient libation vessels, and contemporary artists Marcel Duchamp, Beth Cavener Stichter, and Alison Evans as inspirations.

Acknowledgements

My thesis committee:

Donald Davis and Scott Contreras-Koterbay,

Thank you deeply for all the time you have committed to this project. Your classes have had a significant impact on me, and I would not be the artist I am today without your instruction. Don has taught me virtually everything I know about ceramics, and for that I will always be grateful. Scott has been a professor and mentor to me for all of my years at ETSU, and his confidence in me and my ability to succeed is something I truly cherish. Thank you both particularly for your immense patience and trust.

The faculty and staff of ETSU,

Despite my frustrations with metal smithing, Mindy Herrin has been a huge influence on my art during my college career. She initially encouraged my sense of abstract design, and I have not looked back since. I would also like to acknowledge the biology staff at ETSU. Minorng in biology has taught me a lot and fostered many new interests for me.

My family,

My mother and father, Christine and Eugene Stupin, have always been there for me through the best of times and the worst of times. They bore the brunt of my childhood troubles with Aspergers by my side, and for that I am forever grateful. I would not be half the person I am today without them, and I certainly would not be graduating college with honors. Thank you. I love you and I always will.

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Introduction

Throughout my college career, my artwork has centered on the abstraction of marine life forms. In the beginning, it was almost a game. My very first sculpture project at the college level was required to be a wire version of my favorite animal. As a lover of both fish and ancient species, I chose the coelacanth- A fish thought extinct for millions of years until scientists espied one at a fish market. Subsequent projects also became about fish, at first unintentionally but later intentionally. Later classes encouraged my sense of abstract design, but I kept with the Piscean theme. There are more species of fish than one could make art about in a lifetime, and many of them are interesting in their own special ways. I started taking ceramics classes in my junior year, and it changed my work irrevocably. All of my classes focused on making functional objects, like cups and bowls, and I was infatuated with the process. Creating functional objects is no doubt an excellent way to teach basic ceramics techniques both hand-built and wheel-thrown, but eventually I felt it disconnected too much from my previous work. I wasn't willing to make the shift from the abstract sculpture I had been making to mass-producing objects with a mandatory functional shape.

My thesis began as a way to reconcile these two separate bodies of work. Fish were always my favorite, but I dabbled in other inspirations. I often drew from cetaceans, anatomy, and once or twice I borrowed from mollusks. In my search for new inspirations, I came across mollusk shells again and decided they were perfect. As objects from the ocean that once held a living thing, they went well with my older works. As an empty shell, they started to look like vessels to me, so they could also be functional.

Background

At first, the driving forces for this project were scientific in nature. My design process starts with finding interesting species and learning about the things that make them unique and beautiful. This stems from my love of biology, and is one of the many reasons I chose to minor in biology. Taxonomy is particularly fascinating to me, and I often enjoy researching how my favorite species fit into the grand phylogenetic tree. Among all the fascinating facts about shells, the way they coil jumped out at me. Gastropods, like snails, conchs, and whelks, have coiled shells and correspondingly coiled bodies. The coiling pattern is determined by holding a shell with the short, tightly-coiled spire upwards and the opening facing toward the viewer. 90% of all gastropod species open on the right when viewed this way, and they are called dextral (Parkhaev). The remainder of gastropods open on the left, and are sinistral. This property is called chirality.



University of California Museum of Paleontology, *Variations in shell morphology of some marine gastropods*, Retrieved from <http://www.ucmp.berkeley.edu/taxa/inverts/mollusca/gastropoda.php>

In all the snail species that have been studied, chirality is inherited directly from the mother (Shilthuizen and Davison). Maternal inheritance is possible because coiling direction is

apparently due to the presence of some factor (suspected to be RNA, or some protein) in the developing egg, before it is even fertilized (Shilthuisen and Davison). Because the mother is producing this factor and giving it to the egg cell pre-fertilization, her children will always carry her phenotype. Chirality also displays classic dominance, though in some species the dextral variant is dominant and in others the sinistral variant is (Shilthuisen and Davison). Interestingly, snail parents occasionally give birth to broods with both dextral and sinistral children. This theoretically shouldn't happen in cases of pure maternal inheritance, and why it does is currently unknown.

My focus shifted when I found out that seashells had been used as libation vessels by ancient cultures. A particularly impressive species, *Turbinella pyrum* (commonly called a chank or a conch), is sacred to the Hindu religion and was used to pour libations. Libation vessels, by definition, are vessels used for pouring sacred offerings, often to gods or in funerary rites. The *Mahabharata*, an ancient epic, describes the sacred chank being used to sprinkle holy water at a coronation (Hornell). Interestingly, Hindus and Buddhists perceive the rare sinistral chanks as sacred and associated with Krishna, and thus value them even more highly (Hornell). To Indians, what we deem “sinistral” chanks are in fact right-handed, as they view it with the posterior end upward and the spire downward (Hornell). Libations of water and flowers are poured from chanks at the dedications of Hindu temples and shrines (Hornell).

I have already reasoned that seashells are like vessels, but the idea of them as libation vessels drove the concept even further. I began to see visual similarities between different seashells and different kinds of libation vessels I had seen while researching ceramic forms

for my classes. Ancient Iranian vessels found at Tepe Sialk are of particular

interest to me. They have round, globular bodies and long, elegant spouts, which some authors suggest are meant to be reminiscent of birds (Ghirshman). Frequently found as a grave good, it is thought that they were used for funerary rites (Ghirshman). The general shape of a whelk has a lot in common with this particular vessel. The whelk has a body portion that is globular and rounded, though less spherical than most Sialk vessels, and their apertures form long points that extend outward from the body much like spouts. Even a casual glance reveals these two objects



Christie's, *A Tepe Sialk Painted Pottery Spouted Vessel*, Retrieved from <http://www.christies.com/lotfinder/ancient-art-antiquities/a-tepe-sialk-painted-pottery-spouted-vessel-5546855-details.aspx>



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Bronze Patera (Shallow Bowl with Handle)*

Retrieved from <http://metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections/255965>

as very similar in form. Once I made this connection, I started looking for other connections between libation vessels and mollusks. Roman pateras, circular, shallow vessels used for pouring libations, seemed an appropriate comparison to one valve of a bivalve's shell. Field guides have been a surprisingly valuable source of information, and a flip through the pictures quickly brought up pen shells- Exactly the kind of

shallow bivalve I had been looking to relate to the pateras, and as a fantastic bonus they have a long, spout-like end (Meyer).

Work

With all of this in mind, I began gathering materials and thinking about processes. I decided from conception that all of the vessels would be hand-built. I learned how to throw in my Junior year, and continued to throw into my Senior year. Working on a wheel quickly became tiring and difficult for me. I struggled to throw larger forms, even modest serving bowls. Hand-building allows me to make whatever forms I want much more easily, albeit at a slower pace. Primarily, I use slab and coil-building techniques. Once I build the basic form, I take my time embellishing each piece with textures, cuts, and details. It is a slow process, especially because I am a habitually slow worker, but I enjoy it. Because I take so long to work on each individual piece, I like starting with really wet clay. It makes the initial forming of the piece somewhat difficult, but it is easiest to add bits and pieces in this state. Starting with wet clay helps keep the pieces moist while I work on them for these extended periods of time. Clay bodies and materials do not matter much to me. For all of these pieces, I used a stoneware called phoenix from Highwater Clays in Asheville. It is smooth and does not crack in its wet state and fires buff in oxidation. I bisque my work in an oxidation electric kiln, and that is the “final firing”.

The decision to make a primarily sculptural body of work opened up a lot of options for surface treatment. Functional ceramic objects that are meant to be used are almost always lined with glaze, which makes a surface waterproof and easy to clean. However, glaze tends to be thick and shiny, obscuring sculpted textures. Furthermore, a thin application can be achieved by

brushing, but it is difficult to keep a brushed glaze layer consistent. Glaze is beautiful and serves a purpose, but I have never liked the idea of it on sculptural work. Beth Cavener Stichter, my favorite ceramics artist, uses matte interior house paint on her sculptures, and I have been enamored with her surface treatments ever since I first saw her work. House paint is not only a viable surface treatment, but a surprisingly fitting one. Glazes and paints contain many of the



**Beth Cavener Stichter, *The Four Humors (Choleric)*, 45" x 45" x 11",
Stoneware and mixed media, 2010**

Retrieved from <http://www.followtheblackrabbit.com/Choleric.htm>

easy, precise application. It also gives me complete control over color. It takes countless tests and constant guesswork to produce a specific color in glaze, but paint is easily mixed to achieve the desired color. Glazes can also vary from firing to firing, while paint is always the same. Paint also allows me to use shadows and highlights to emphasize certain aspects of my work, something that would be difficult or more likely impossible to do with glazes.

My artwork usually several hours image and information gathering, and these works have been no different. My interest in collecting seashells began in earnest the summer before my

same ingredients (Pinnell), and Beth Cavener Stichter notes that 99% of the materials in a high-quality matte, interior latex house paint are calcined clay and other ceramic materials (Cavener Stichter). She equates it to using an unfired slip on her work. Paint provides a matte surface and

senior year, before I even knew what I was doing for my thesis. I searched for them on the beach in Italy, and was disappointed to only find a few very small fragments. Ironically, I had more luck collecting seashells in Johnson City. They are common objects at antique and knick-knack stores, and I acquired a good number of them at the Tree Streets yard sales. Friends also gifted or loaned me interesting specimens here and there, and I found a particularly nice shell at a furniture store. I enrolled in Coastal Biology in my fall semester, and this class goes on a weeklong field trip to the Outer Banks over fall break. This time, I did get a decent chance to collect seashells from an actual beach, and while I hunted hard for the gastropod shells I prized so much I found mostly bivalve fragments. Two field guides were assigned as textbooks for this class, and as I have mentioned they are invaluable sources (Meyer) (Spitsbergen). They are particularly handy in identifying specimens from my own collection, which was mostly acquired at the Outer Banks and from people who had been to other beaches in the region. Like many contemporary artists, I also work heavily from images found on the internet. It is a wonderful resource for pictures of rare specimens, and allows me to quickly google unfamiliar species names as I come across them in my research. A multitude of sources is important to my work, because I often pick, choose, and recombine different aspects from different species into one work. For example, *Turbinella* (2014) takes the overall form of a whelk, slightly abstracts it to more closely resemble Sialk libation vessels, and takes the holes and overall coloration from



Turbinella, stoneware and paint, 2014

common conchs. These choices are primarily formal, cherry-picked to make the most interesting design. While it is normally important and highly interesting to me that

taxonomic classification be correct and clear, I forego this concern when I am making art. It does not bother me that whelks and conchs are entirely different species, or that I named the work after a conch genus when the form is more heavily inspired by whelks. Achieving the best design and my process of abstraction are far more important to my art than accuracy.

While conceiving this project, I endeavored to think of ways to keep it sculptural and interesting to contrast the functional forms and bring my abstract style to the table. My design process usually starts with reducing an organism to basic forms, and then re-embellishing this base with details inspired by my favorite aspects of the animal. These



Photograph of sliced conch acquired from a yard sale.

pieces were no different, though some basic shapes became more complex than the simple teardrops and sigmoid shapes I had been using because of the inherent complexity of the vessel

shape. Perhaps my favorite yard-sale find is a halved conch, neatly cut from the spire to the tip of the aperture, revealing the inner structure and color. Holes seemed like a good way to stress the sculptural nature of the work and downplay the functionality of the vessel. I adjusted the conch cut shape to be easily repeatable and interlocking and covered *Turbinella* (2014) with it. I accidentally made the walls of the vessel thicker than I normally would have, but I was thankful for this oversight when it came time to make my holes. The wall thickness gave the piece the integrity it needed to withstand the cutting and be structurally strong when I was done. This process got me thinking about concept. At first, it was just a funny jab at my frustrations with making functional objects, but it gradually evolved into a full-fledged concept with a life of its own.

Concept

Unusually for me, these pieces became strongly conceptual. I liked the idea of the seashell as a vessel, first for the animal that lives in it and afterwards for the offering. Libation vessels have been used to pour a variety of offerings, from beer and wine to clarified butter, but I quickly decided that mine were meant for ocean water. Water archetypically represents life, which ties in with the idea that a living organism once inhabited this shell. Water easily represents human life as well, since it is vital to our survival. Ocean water is a particularly important symbol with personal significance. Along with my fascination in fish and ocean life has come a sort of pseudo-mysticism. For me, the ocean is an almost mythical place. This idea is deeply rooted in events from my past. When I was a child, my family lived in Long Island, New York. Despite being surrounded by the ocean, we rarely visited the beach. We moved to Virginia, far inland and far away from the ocean, the summer after I finished the sixth grade. Video games had a huge impact on me growing up, and I immersed myself in their stories and

fictional worlds as a way to cope with my social issues. One in particular, *Baten Kaitos*, depicted a world where people lived on floating islands, worshipped an ocean they had never seen, and told stories about a mythical whale. Logically, I know that the ocean and whales exist and do not have metaphysical qualities. Emotionally, the ocean still strikes me as powerful and sacred. I went to Italy in the summer of 2013 for a study abroad course, and our class took a field trip to the beach. Stepping into the ocean for the first time I could actually remember was a weirdly transcendent experience, and I felt like I was touching something truly mythical and powerful. More than anything, I felt like I was somewhere that I truly belonged. The fact that the ocean is such a compelling and common archetype in all kinds of media only reinforces this concept for me. It seemed only fitting that ceremonial vessels inspired by the ocean ought to pour its sacred water. From a technical standpoint, I thought it a good way to sum up my artwork and give it more focus.

The most potent part of my concept came with the decision to make my vessels dysfunctional via cuts and holes. What is the significance of a vessel made for pouring sacred offerings, but failing in its purpose? Once I started making these pieces, I started relating them to my own life. The offerings of life (in the form of life-giving water) became synonymous with offerings of effort, since the drive to work hard and do well has been such an important part of my life to date. As an individual with Aspergers, I have always had to put in extra effort just to be on par with my peers, and I believe that all the good things I have in my life have come to me through the hard work of myself, my parents, or occasional luck. However, I often feel like I have worked incredibly hard for very little gain. Academically, my gains have always been apparent. I make good grades, but as time goes on this means less and less to me. I still work hard in my classes as an investment in my future, hoping I will feel it paid off later. I always feel

like I am missing out, though. My friends always seem to have more time to go out and have fun, or just stay in and play video games, while my time for these things has steadily decreased. I have even cut essentials like sleep out of my life for the sake of a better grade. None of this work has earned me the things I want now. I have very little time for meeting new people and having fun with the friends I have, and I carefully ration and restrict time spent on video games to study breaks. I have allowed myself more over the past year, but my work is not as good as it used to be and I know it.

In a roundabout way, I expected my efforts in school to bring me successes in other areas, especially socially. I have rarely enjoyed schoolwork or found great pride in a good test grade. It is more like something I do, because I know it is expected of me and will earn me respect. It is a penance for my personal benefit, so that I can be the kind of person who deserves to have the things they want. The flaw in this thinking is that one rarely gets what one actually feels they deserve, and my case is no different. The offering I give is my life-effort, but it is not magically transmuted into the things I want or feel I deserve. In fact, effort in one realm will only ever yield results in that same realm, and they do not always yield those results either. As an atheist, this point is more poignant. I deny that there is a god to appreciate my efforts and reward me in the afterlife, and I deny even a sense of good karma or similar metaphysical ideas. A libation vessel that cannot pour its offering is an elegant symbol for my wasted efforts. Equating the ocean water offerings with life and effort ties these ideas together.

Artists to Note

While writing has always been a strong point of mine, there are definitely aspects of it with which I struggle. In particular, it is always a battle for me to translate the original ideas in my head to prose. My thoughts are often vague, tangential, and cross over themselves in weird pathways. For example, the fact that ocean-water libations, live-giving water, living organisms, human life, and effort were all synonymous and simultaneous was obvious to me, but I endeavored to illuminate my thought paths and make that concept clear and sensical. The artists I come across often resonate with me in similarly off-beat ways. While my work is visually not much like the artists I admire, they often influence my methods or thought patterns in unconventional ways.

For example, I have already mentioned Beth Cavener Stichter and her affinity for



Beth Cavener Stichter, *Tangled Up in You, 65*”, stoneware and paint

Retrieved from <http://hifructose.com/2014/02/24/beth-cavener-stichter-and-alessandro-gallo-collaborate-on-ornate-sculpture/>

housepaint. Details on her surface treatments are increasingly hard to find, as she frequently prefers not to cite her surface treatments (simply stating “mixed media” on

almost all of the pieces on her website), and only seemed to be mentioned vaguely in the “Materials” portion of her website. However, I feel certain that she is still using paint, especially after my experiences with the medium. Interestingly, it is hard to capture the color in matte paint. In my simple smartphone pictures, the colors always appear greyed and washed-out. Looking carefully at multiple shots of Cavener Stichter’s work reveals this same quality. Her latest work, *Tangled up in You*, depicts a grey rabbit tangled up in a blue snake, and how blue the snake appears tends to vary based on the shot. Cavener Stichter is also a bit of a role model for me, as we both work with clay and identify as sculptors. I have often felt like a fish out of water among my classmates in the ceramics studio, particularly when the opportunity arises to participate in a sale. I am often the only student with nothing to sell, which is always a weird feeling.

Marcel Duchamp is another artist that I feel a great kinship towards. Initially enamored with the beauty and mystery of his piece *Étant donnés: 1° la chute d'eau, 2° le gaz d'éclairage* (*Given: 1. The Waterfall, 2. The Illuminating Gas*), I delved deep into his writings. A paper I wrote for my contemporary art history class focused on attempting to interpret and find the meaning behind this artwork, and the more I learned the more I became interested.

The key to unlocking the mysteries of *Étant Donnés...* turned out to be another famous Duchamp work, *The Bride Stripped Bare by*



**Marcel Duchamp, *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (The Large Glass)*, 109.25” × 69.25”
Oil, varnish, lead foil, lead wire, and dust on two glass panels, 1915- 23**

**Retrieved from
<http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/54149.html>**

her Bachelors, Even. I became entranced with his descriptions of the mechanical workings of *The Bride...* and the way he had invented his own processes and descriptions of them. I very much think Duchamp's work is influenced by science and its processes, and it is refreshing to see the way he grounds his concepts in his pseudo-scientific machinery (Duchamp). Science has been an important part of my life since I learned how to read, and it has occasionally struck me that its strong influence on my art plays an important role in making it unique.

A much more obvious parallel is evident in the work of Alison Evans. Even though her work is primarily commercial and functional, I am still very much interested in her designs.



Allison Evans, *Mint & Charcoal Stout Teapot*, 14"x7"x6", ceramic

Retrieved from <http://www.aeceramics.com/teapots/mint-charcoal-stout-teapot.html>

Evans uses the natural shape of sea life to create unique and beautiful tableware, including plates and serving dishes. My favorites, however, are definitely her teapots. She has masterfully incorporated a very functional shape with the sculptural aspect of a seashell. That the lid opens to reveal another intimate shell detail is an especially pleasant design choice. I endeavored to make my design

choices similarly fitting and functional.

Conclusion

Learning about ceramics and creating this body of work has vastly changed my perception of the art I create. Through this, I have come to accept functional forms, albeit with

my special modifications. Interestingly, when I think about creating more sculptural work, I often think about it in terms of modified vessels. Before this project, my sculptural objects were often weird, purposeless items. Creating sculptural vessels gives my work more purpose and helps it stand on its own, while still allowing me the abstraction and marine inspiration that I love so much. Reflecting on my artwork also gave it a new levity that it had previously lacked. Beforehand, ocean life was just another thing that I liked and obsessed over, as trivial as my favorite band or author. This project has clarified its meaning and cemented its true importance.

As one who rarely concerns herself with concept, it has truly been a journey to delve into my past and see it fleshed-out in artwork. My struggle with Aspergers gets easier and easier with each passing day, but my disorder is something that I can never truly obliterate. I have often internalized my difficulties and kept the real reasons behind my social deficiencies to myself, my family, and my closest friends, and it is almost refreshing to finally voice my frustrations. Imagery and information borrowed from the ocean have been my biggest influences for my entire college career, and it has taken this project to realize the source of my fascination and reverence. I will touch the ocean again this summer on vacation with my family, and I know it will be as significant as it was in the video games of my childhood and as breathtaking as it was in Italy.

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