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Vernacular Whimsy.

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Vernacular Whimsy

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Master of Fine Arts in Studio Art

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by

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis supports the Master of Fine Arts exhibition entitled *Vernacular Whimsy* at Johnson City Area Arts Council, Johnson City, Tennessee, November 1-13, 2008. The exhibition is comprised of thirty ceramic sculptures presented on pedestals. The exhibition presents the artist's investigation and reinterpretation of regional architectural elements. Practical consideration of structure, technique, and influence is discussed. Included are detailed images as well as a complete catalog of the thesis exhibit.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Thank you to Nathan Jones of KIA DIA Industries for assistance in pedestal making and allowing me to trash and subsequently clean your shop. Also, thanks for granting me permission to create a sculpture of your likeness.

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Thanks to Daniel Marinelli, John Simmons, and all the other students for your honest opinions and help in this endeavor.

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CHAPTER 1

FINDING CLAY

I took four ceramic classes during my time as an undergraduate student. I loved how clay was such a responsive medium. I felt that I could translate my creative ideas into clay. Also, I was learning that working with clay could teach life lessons such as patience, ingenuity, the importance of working as a community, and how to emotionally detach from your art after spending a lot of time working on it.

My undergraduate degree was in Metalsmithing. This medium is too dangerous to work with children present, and having the option of my children around is important to me. I needed to learn more about a medium that would be conducive to my lifestyle. Therefore, I applied and was accepted into Graduate School to learn more about Ceramics.

During my first semester I realized I had a great deal to learn about Ceramics. According to The American Ceramic Society, Ceramics has been an outlet of expression and utility for approximately 24,000 years. An understanding of chemistry and geology involved in ceramic art is more important than one might expect. Mistakes can be avoided by becoming familiar with compatible chemical compositions. Knowledge of how aggregates degrade and precipitate into their most simple element form can also be helpful. Thankfully, I enjoy these scientific aspects and use them to help me better understand the many properties of clay and how to get consistent results. I cannot say that I did, or will ever learn all there is to know. Every change made to a clay body, glaze recipe, or firing process has the potential to greatly affect the outcome of a ceramic piece. In other words, ceramics is a continual learning process.

CHAPTER 2

FOCUSING

It took the first two semesters to grasp what I really wanted to focus on in my graduate school experience. Two important factors in ceramics are that there are endless possibilities and that it is hard to be unique in such a popular and established medium.

Another factor in my graduate experience involved deciding whether to concentrate on functional or non-functional wares. Though this may seem trivial, the two categories demand distinctly different approaches to ceramic work. Functional ware is created with a utilitarian purpose in mind such as containing food or serving other pragmatic needs (also known as pottery). "Non-functional" describes objects that are considered to be sculptural, i.e. to be admired, but not to serve a specific utilitarian purpose. In comparison with non-functional wares, I recognize there is a slightly more predictable means of income in making functional ware. Nonetheless, I wanted to explore the possibilities that can come with making ceramic sculpture.

Whatever I make needs to have visual and tactile texture, proportion of a relatable size, and the simplicity of a contained form with subtle details. With these desired qualities in mind I created cups, bowls, and vases. I found that in making these strictly functional vessels I could not achieve the qualities for which I was striving. I was intuitively more concerned about their existence being visually pleasing than their success as functional wares. My pots did not feel smooth when touched to a lip. They were too heavy. Their surface did not have the glassy quality of most pottery. I felt that I was not making a successful pot because I did not want to give the necessary attention to all aspects. All I wanted to put time into was the visual form. Though it is hard to know

how successful a utilitarian pot is until it is touched and used, I consciously realized I gave more consideration to pots' appearance than to their usefulness. This realization encouraged me to focus on forms that were more sculptural.

Before shifting to sculpture, I became intrigued with creating forms that were deceptively sculptural in that they still served as functional wares (in the most basic sense) but looked more like sculpture. For example, I made towers that could be used as goblets and buildings that could be used as flower vases. I liked the forced dichotomy in one form; the fact the owner of the piece would have to make a decision of what she or he felt was the purpose. My work became a statement of the internal frustration I felt from being forced to choose one purpose over another.

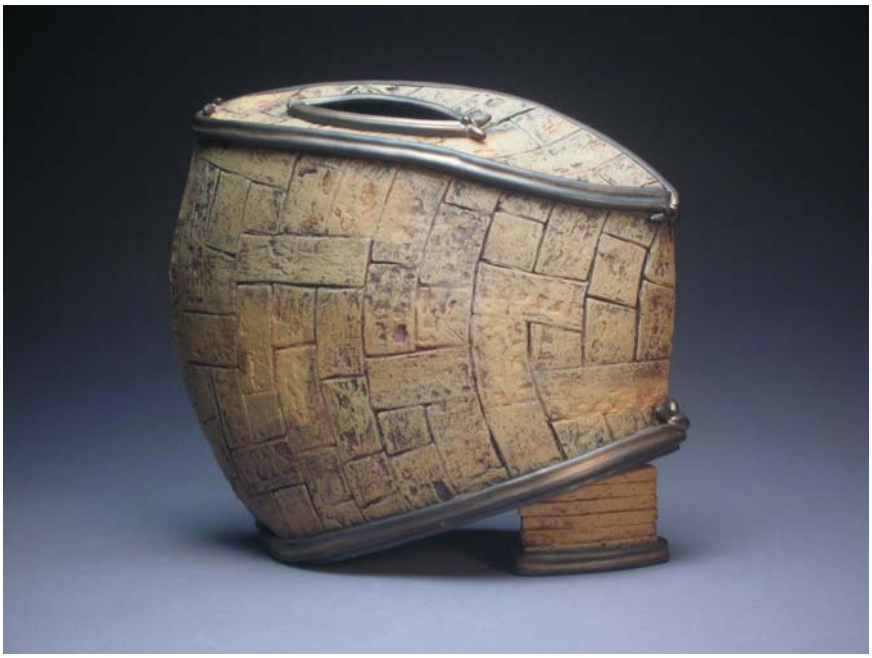

Figure 1: ***Rotruck-Lobb*****. 10 x 12.5 x 4.5. 2007**

In "Rotruck-Lobb" as well as two other sculptures, I had in mind forms that were to be made with architectural elements such as bricks and planks. They were to have a component of tension in the plane on which they sat. They also needed slits or cavities that opened up to vase-like pockets so they could hold a floral arrangement.

After many critical conversations with peers two particular questions kept surfacing: "Why must the forms *appear* functional?" and, "Why can't you just make them strictly sculptural?" These quandaries helped me establish a focus on sculpture. I decided that I would create architectural forms that would reinterpret my imagination and would no longer be concerned with the aspect of function. This allowed for a new approach to creativity that was not hampered by the inclusion of functional aspects. I was excited to create forms that I knew would be satisfying, not frustrating, to make.

CHAPTER 3

COMMUNICATION WITH MATERIALS

Whiteware was first clay body I chose to work with to make my forms. This consisted of fine particle clays combined to give a smooth texture and an off-white appearance when fired. The sculptures made with this clay body varied from 2 inches to 4 feet tall. This whiteware gave vibrancy to the colored glazes and slips applied. It also replicated textures richly. However, it did not have the correct physical properties for constructing sculpture in the manner I favored. In order for clay to be formed into individual parts that are then attached to each other without cracking or breaking apart, it must have varying size particles. This aids the pieces in remaining bonded throughout the drying and shrinking stages that clay goes through before reaching a permanent state. This clay body cracked at the joints persistently which made the sculptures weak.

My next attempt to find a clay body was sustained by a background in Geology. I worked for the Gray Fossil Site, Gray, TN, and at fossil digs in Saltville, VA for a number of years. In Gray, the areas where I dug were a couple of feet deep, usually with damp dirt to graze through by thin layers. In Saltville, the areas to dig were 15 feet deep pits and contained thick, goopy clay that was sorted through by the handful. These were two very different environments, but the commonality was my love for the clay that I was working in to find the fossils. On breaks, I would play with the discarded clay making pinch pots to get a feeling of its workability in hopes that it could be used for my research.

In order to test the clay from the Gray Fossil Site, it first had to go through a water screening process at the site. This was to ensure that all viable fossils, even the microscopic specimens, were retrieved. The clay came to me in a dry, crumbly state. My

intent was to reconstitute it to a point of workability, but after being processed at the site, the clay lost the fine particles it needed to make it plastic enough to work with. Fortunately, I was able to add other clay ingredients to bring it to a semi-workable state. With this small batch I used the clay to create tiles for testing shrinkage, porosity and temperature range. But adding this commercial ingredient took the clay away from its pure, original form and color and was not sufficient to make it practical clay to work with.

The site in Saltville, Virginia allowed me much easier access to the clay. I obtained the clay in its original form which contained small chunks of fossils and rock that had to be removed. I made tiles, as with the previous batch of clay, for testing the shrinkage, porosity, and temperature range. This clay began to melt at a temperature lower than I wanted to work with, 2100°F/Δ4.

Unfortunately, after processing and extensive testing, neither clay body worked for my applications, though they were viable for other purposes. In the process, however, I did discover how much I enjoyed the dark, iron-saturated color of the clay bodies. It was a wholesome, rich hue I felt would work best for my structures.

As a solution, I found a clay body from Highwater Clay called Speckled Brownstone. It is coffee colored clay with black speckles. Though the colored slips I use do not have as much brilliance as when used on the whiteware, they do have a rich, toasty hue that accentuates the brown clay. The clay body is high in iron content and contains granular manganese. Though the manganese cannot be seen in the clay during its wet state, it becomes visible when the clay is fired to about 2200°F in the form of multiple black specks throughout the surface. The texture of the clay in its workable wet state is very groggy. Grog is a large particle of highly refractory clay that is added to a clay body

in order to give strength by minimizing shrinkage while the clay is drying and being fired. Grog also helps the clay dry out evenly by wicking moisture. Speckled Brownstone has a buttery, almost oily surface that is nice to work with, and is not often found in a groggy clay body. I also chose this clay because no matter what colored slip or oxide I put on my sculpture, the manganese particles in the clay show on the surface as if it burns through any layer put on it.

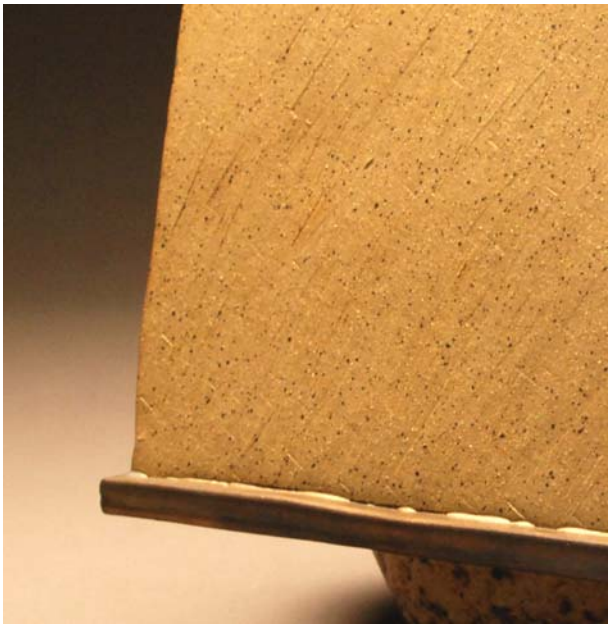

Figure 2: ***Tiffany Terrace*** **(detail). 2007**
This detail shows the raw clay body fired at the mature temperature of 2200°F. The diagonal striations are applied texture. The black specks are granular manganese embedded in the clay body.

CHAPTER 4

COMMUNICATION WITH FORM

As I was searching for a desirable clay body I was also exploring methods of construction for these sculptures. I began by reading manuals and articles on masonry (The Complete Guide to Masonry and Stonework and Masonry and Concrete). The first technique I undertook stemmed from trying to replicate how an authentic brick structure would be formed. Though I have always been fascinated with how things are built, this was a large learning step. I was not sure how to start and I put a lot of unnecessary pressure on myself to learn how to do it correctly, so I could then do it my own way. I felt that following the appropriate methods for masonry, done on a miniature scale, would give direction and boundaries that could, in turn, make it easier to be creative in the design of the structures.

My original plan was to make hundreds of miniature bricks. These started about 1"x ½"x ¼". I made a slab of clay about ¼" thick, then cut out the bricks as a grid, usually about 50 at a time. I then took each brick, rounded off the edges, gave a brick-like texture to 4 of the sides, then set it aside to dry. After I thought I had enough to make a maquette 5" tall, I fired them. Then I began to mortar them together. When I realized that I would need about 500 more bricks just to finish a 5"x 5" maquette of the actual 15"x 15" piece, I decided to take a different approach. I had admired art that focused on the industrially inspired approach, but it was not where I wanted to concentrate my energy.

Next, I tried making alternative shaped 'bricks' such as donuts, octagons, and planks. I liked the way these odd shaped bricks came together. Though they mimicked architecture, they had the potential to be more important components in my designs. They

were just as tedious to work with as the regular bricks but were beginning to bring about forms that I was more excited about. The next step was to eliminate the tedium.

I realized the tedium came from needing to anticipate every small shape that would be necessary to fit into the larger piece. This required making the components, drying and firing them, then assembling them into the desired form, all of which required patience. I discovered that keeping the clay in a wet state when attaching the pieces allowed more freedom for change. More organic and non-symmetrical forms that could also be larger structures up to 23 inches high became possible.

In using the wet-attach technique I also felt the most potential could come from the clay being shaped like planks of wood rather than bricks. At first, the planks were made just as the original bricks. I would cut them from a slab, trying to make them all the same dimensions, except I did eliminate one step by pre-texturing the entire slab with a variety of sources of textures (that I will later discuss) before cutting the planks. I rounded the edges as before and stored them in a humidor until I made enough to start building a structure. A humidor is used to keep consistent moisture content to the clay and can be any container that has an air-tight seal.

When beginning to make an edifice I started with a new, smooth slab foundation that dictated how the form would be shaped from the bottom. The first structures were based on elliptical shapes. Then, one row after another, I added planks to the perimeter with slip made from the same clay body as the bricks. (Slip is clay that when enough water is added becomes viscous and is used much like glue). Then I scored the clay (scratched it with multiple strokes) which allowed the applied slip to get in the cracks and help adhere the planks of clay together. I cleaned up every joint making sure that each

plank was attached well and no slip pushed out of the joints. I wanted crisp lines and to erase the evidence of the construction method.

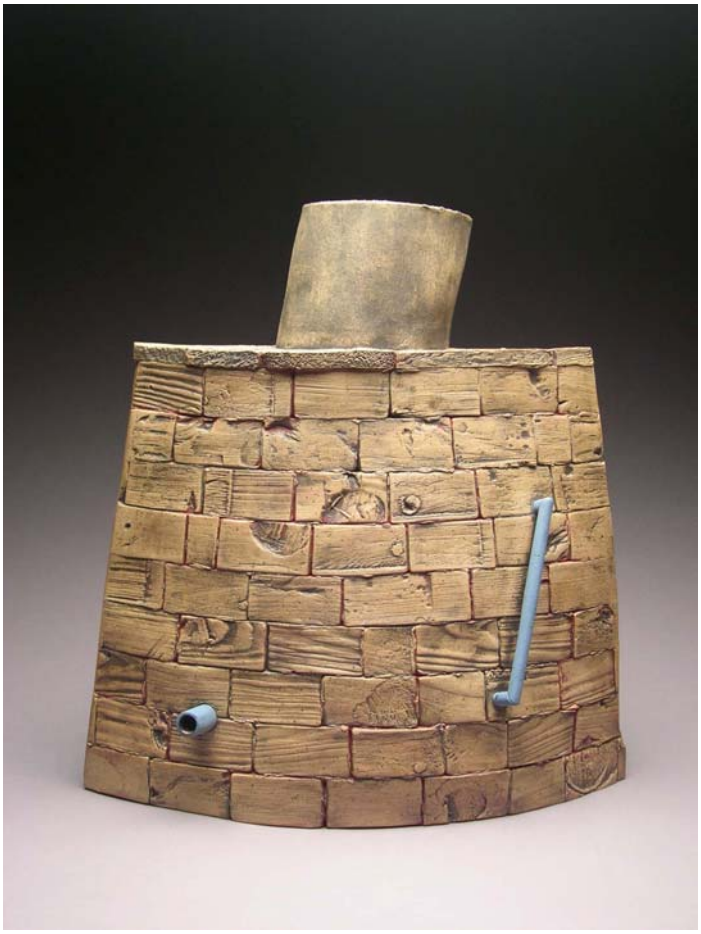

Figure 3*: sucking them in, spitting them out.* 14 x 13 x 5.5. 2007

As seen in "sucking them in, spitting them out" the planks have a wood texture but are still brick shaped. The joints between the planks are smooth and are darker which defines the shape of the planks.

As I became more confident at building edifices, I was able to relax my compulsion to be perfect. Not only was I able to make a sculpture that more closely resembled what I had envisioned, but I was also able to loosen up my technique. This looser technique is how the most recent structures are built. I felt free to include more

elements that were not planks, such as solid, flat walls or sphere-shaped additions that cumulated dimension.

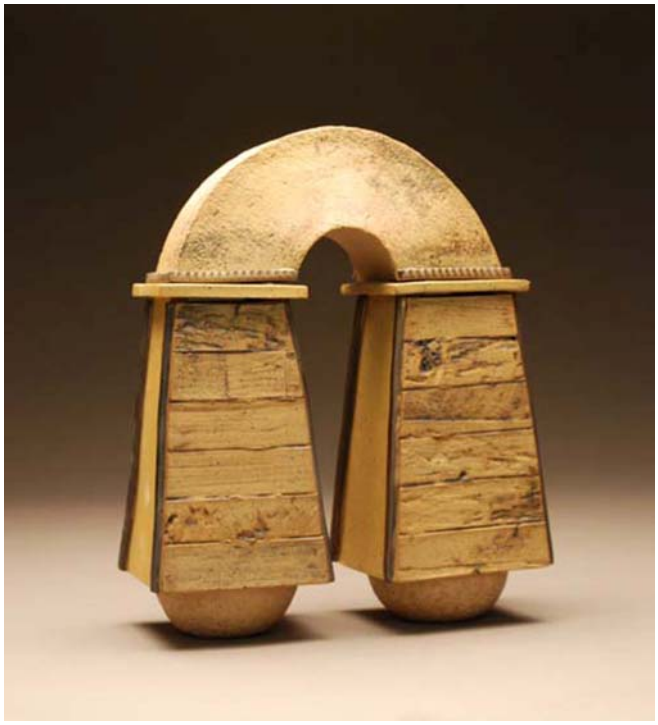

Figure 4: ***planned, conceived, contracted, flourished*****. 12 x 10 x 4.5. 2007**

The above sculpture shows the incorporation of multi-dimensional surfaces that include planks, solid slabs, and half-sphere forms.

In my most recent work, I rolled out the slabs as before, but the precise thickness was less important. I then gave texture to the clay. This became an important step in my work. It is not only fun, but also, I felt it gave the illusion of age to the structures. I used a variety of textures. The objects I have collected for texture include melted tarp chunks, old toys, bones, planks of 100-year-old barn wood, and stamps that I have made from actual objects such as sticks and driftwood. In the past I obsessed about getting a good mark from these objects, but I have come to appreciate deep impressions as well as shallow impressions. I learned that creating texture from organic forms has the potential to look unnatural and overworked. If the organic feeling is desired, then I have to be

mindful not to be repetitive or rigid when replicating the texture on the clay's surface. Creating organic-looking texture is much like keeping rhythm in music. By using a continual flow with my hands and not getting hung up on small mistakes, the marks I make become natural and asymmetrical.

After texturing the slabs, I cut them into strips approximately 18" long and 1" wide. Again, I stored them in a humidor that accommodated this bigger size. When building with these planks, I still used a clay base that set the shape, but I allowed this to develop into a less organized shape by the time I reached the top of the piece. Once again, I added the planks to the perimeter of the base, but the bases varied by being slumped or humped over molds to give interest. The molds varied in height and width and were based off a 'U', with the hump going upward or downward. Using these molds gave a sense of being off-balance and helped to create mass. I also allowed the connecting slip to squish out of the joints in whatever manner it happened. I liked the way this became unpredictable and unconfined. I did not consider it a sign of sloppy craftsmanship but of evidence of connection.

Another approach I used in order to achieve more complicated edifices was a deconstructive/reconstructive method. With this method I created the long strips as before, but then I reattached them back into a slab form. I then let it set up to become more firm. This permitted me to create in a vertical, rather than horizontal, manner. I was also able to get more height and create pillow-like shapes. Essentially it allowed me to explore boundaries of the clay; to see how far I could stretch the shape before the clay would weaken and crack.

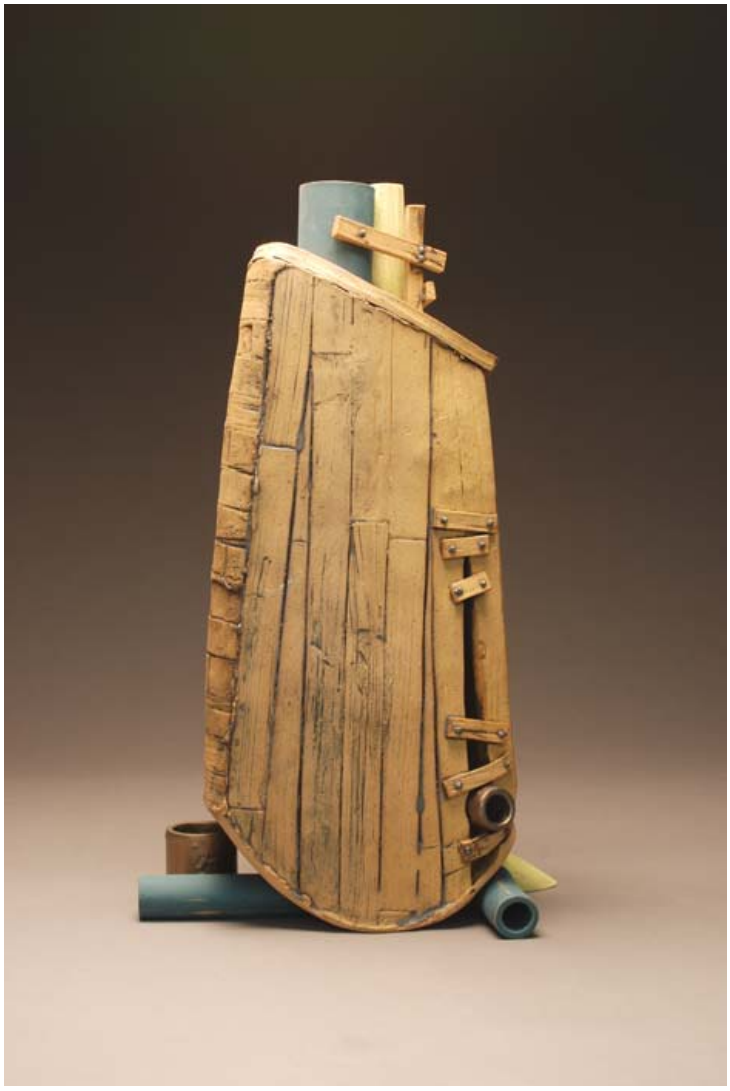

Figure 5: ***125 Maden Drive*****. 23 x 9 x 7. 2008**

I used a deconstructed/reconstructed slab on the sculpture above to build both vertical sides. They remained stiff enough to add the horizontal planks on the opposite walls to connect the structure. This piece is also made on a slump mold; therefore, it rocks on its base. It is balanced upright by the pipes at its base.

After the edifice's main body is built I assess whether to add or remove conspicuous elements. The inclusion or removal of these elements helps the structure gain a sense of story, presence, and visual interest. Extra planks are added over intentional cracks, gaps, and holes for perceptual stability. Ladders, footholds, roofing,

windows, pipes, and trim are just some of the other accoutrements I consider. One of the last steps is to press steel or brass brads into the clay. This is done when the clay is stiffened due to releasing moisture, but it is still pliable enough to move slightly without cracking or breaking. Clay at this state of moisture content is called *leather hard*. I put the brads at junctions where two planks cross or where the illusion of connection needs to be added. When the brads reach over 2000°F they bubble and melt giving the piece a ramshackle appearance.

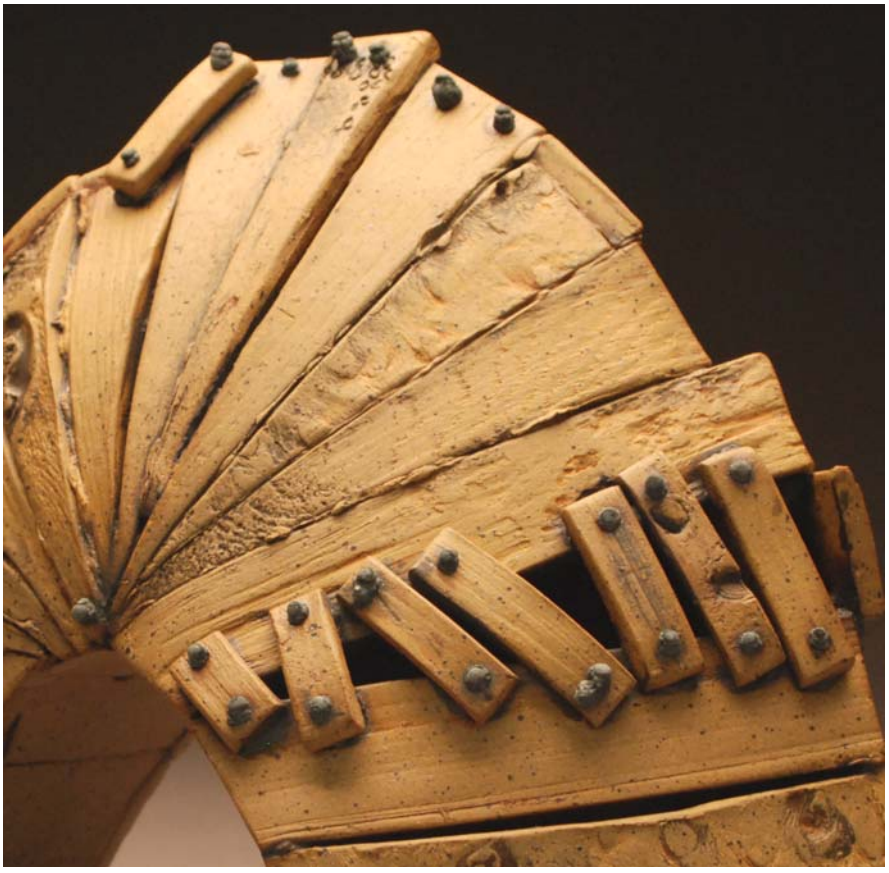

Figure 6: ***conceived, contracted, flourished.*** **(detail) 2007**
This detail shows the intentional gaps and added planks and brads. Also, the clay slip can be seen coming out between the joints. This structure was built on a hump mold, as were other arch-type forms, in order to achieve a strong negative space.

CHAPTER 5

COMMUNICATION WITH COLOR

The finished exterior of my structures gives an aged appearance that adds the final element to my work. At first, I used only a wash of oxides that were brushed on to reach the recesses of the texture. Oxides are pure minerals, such as iron or cobalt, combined with a flux and water. I then removed the oxides that remained on the relief of the surface with a damp sponge. Though oxides are slightly translucent, they are substantial enough to give visual depth to texture in the clay. All of my structures have oxides to accentuate texture, but I found that in order to broaden the range of colors, I needed to use an additional surface treatment.

After taking a workshop with Michael Sherrill I learned more about using colored slips. Colored slip is made from a recipe of powdered clay (the base ingredient), an addition of 10 -15% colorant (depending on the darkness of the color desired), and water. Colorants are bought prepared with an approximate color expectation. Some of the prepared colors reacted differently than expected with my clay body and had to be combined with other colorants or minerals to achieve the desired hue. Overall, the colorants satisfied the color palette I was trying to achieve.

I applied the colored slips much like I do oxides, brushing on the mixture while making sure to get the material into the recesses. In order not to lose the highlight of the texture and still keep the color, I sponged off just the highest points of the surface. On some of the pieces I let the color of the clay body be the overall tone, and on others I allow the colors to clash. The colors are intended to accentuate the feeling of whimsy in the structures.

Figure 7: *rapture?*. (detail) 2008

The above detail shows the incorporation of all the colors in my available palette. This sculpture is based on the idea of a traditional quilting pattern called 'crazy quilt'.

CHAPTER 6

VERNACULAR INSPIRATION

The ideas for my edifices and structures come from a number of places. I believe they mostly stem from my fascination with architecture. Driving through the countryside with my family as a child, I remember my parents picking out their favorite Victorian houses. My extended family lives in a rural area that differs from my home in East Tennessee. Their homes, though destitute, are well kempt, displaying their strong sense of pride. The buildings in the small mining towns we traveled through captured my attention with their simple but ramshackle condition.

Most of the architecture that inspires me is captured by the term "vernacular architecture." The American Heritage Dictionary defines *vernacular* as: "of or being an indigenous building style using local materials and traditional methods of construction and ornament, especially as distinguished from academic or historical architectural styles".

What I appreciate most about this style is that the buildings are usually unassuming, modest, and unpretentious. Their character comes from being owner-built, using local materials, and can be a hybrid of many styles, much like my own structures.

I am not influenced by contemporary artists as much as I am by historical architects. From Filippo Brunelleschi in the Italian Renaissance to Le Corbusier in Modern architecture to farmers building barns for necessity, I am interested and inspired by all forms of structural design. My first technical exposure to architecture was in Art History classes during undergraduate school. The specifics were talked about in the most basic terms, but I was interested enough to do my own research into the flying buttresses,

transepts, and apses of Cathedrals and political buildings. Architecture is a form of art, but I also believe there is a lot more to a building than just its existence as a structure.

I also think about how important buildings are to us as humans. The convenience of having domiciles means we no longer have to be nomadic. They can also mark a place in our psyche. A building can be an identifier of a situational recall connected to memory. Edifices can cause us to be comfortable in them or prompt us to avoid them with the experiences our mind may connect with place.

The structures I create are fun for me. From the inception to the final stage of the piece I feel like I am playing, not merely working. I create stories in my mind for each one. For me, they connect a memory with a place.

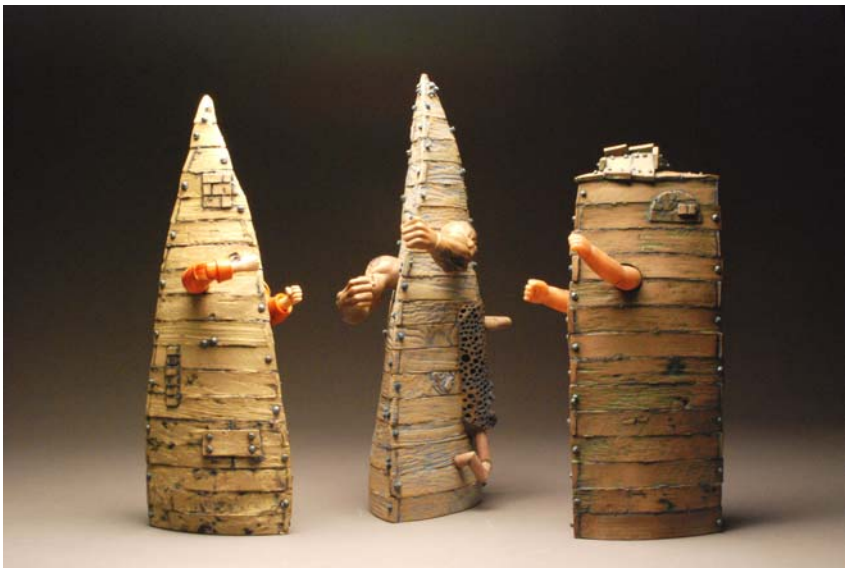

Figure 8: *siblings*. largest- 21.5 x 9 x 6. 2007-2008

For example, these three sculptures represent my brothers and me. The colors, shapes, and plastic toy arms are representational of our personalities and how we thrived on conflict as children.

The *idea* of a building, other than for its physical, intentional purposes, is another influence. It is important to find a deeper meaning to what buildings- such as homes,

barns, and shelters- really provide for their creators. Buildings have signified a place of safety, security, and comfort since humans first attempted to construct them.

Structures can do more than connect us to memory or be pleasing to the eye. They can mark a place and time, just as Grundberg's book exemplifies with the photographic work of William Christenberry. Christenberry's photos express the history of buildings and the story of place. Time can be measured by the state that the building is in, as in its age and upkeep. Time can also be measured by the style of the architecture. It could be said that time is measured even with a building's disappearance in order to make room for new construction.

In "distraction and focus" (below) the intent was to mimic the superannuated barns that I pass every day in my commute to my studio.

Figure 9: ***distraction and focus*** **(detail) 2008**

CHAPTER 7

STRUCTURALLY SPEAKING

No matter my connection with an actual building, the edifices I create are metaphorical. At first, I felt like they symbolized building emotional walls or defensive armor. As I built wall after wall, I continued to attach that significance to the works and I began to think that my subconscious was an unforgiving place. Many emotional events have happened during my graduate school years, and I wondered if I was expressing them (through my art) to release them. Even so, I continued to enjoy creating the structures and did not feel emotionally drained from the effort. A conversation with a friend helped me realize that the walls may not be a negative representation of my inner self. They may be helping me to release inner walls. Their construction may have been a positive and strengthening device. After deep reflection, I realized they were about building self-esteem and becoming stronger.

As I designed these structures I found myself making the overall forms metaphorical, including the accoutrements. For example, in "Siblings" (page 24) I created windows and entry points, but then bricked them up. This represented open channels of communication that had been shut permanently.

In "distraction and focus," "224 Ridgeview Drive," and "filtering" I used ladders to represent rising to a higher level in maturity and knowledge. The cracks, crevices, and gaps in all the pieces represent the beauty of not being perfect.

As a body of work, these structures all represent either important stages in my life or actual places to which I have personally attached meaning. The stages symbolize: childhood, relationship, children, beliefs, college, death, figuring out life, and the future.

The buildings entitled with proper names are different places I have lived, places where I heard life-changing information, or where I experienced heartache.

I want my structures to appear familiar to viewers; to remind them of an existing story or place from their experiences or to allow their imagination to create their own story. When I make each building my imagination pulls from personal experiences, images I have come across during research, and memories from childhood. Sometimes I become engulfed with the many ideas one source provides and flow with those inspirations. Other times I use small ideas from many sources and combine them into one structure. I strive to develop fresh ideas and avoid becoming stale. I have been told to keep from being so egocentric that no one can relate to the work (Joerling interview).

I want to create objects that jump-start the imagination and bring the viewer in for a closer look. Some edifices have a feeling of security and stability; some have an uneasy sense of being askew. Some represent structures of the past and others of the non-existent. I believe that every pipe, board, or nail I attach either adds to the piece or takes away from it; but it is never a neutral decision. Unlike at first, I now want there to be evidence of the hand-made process.

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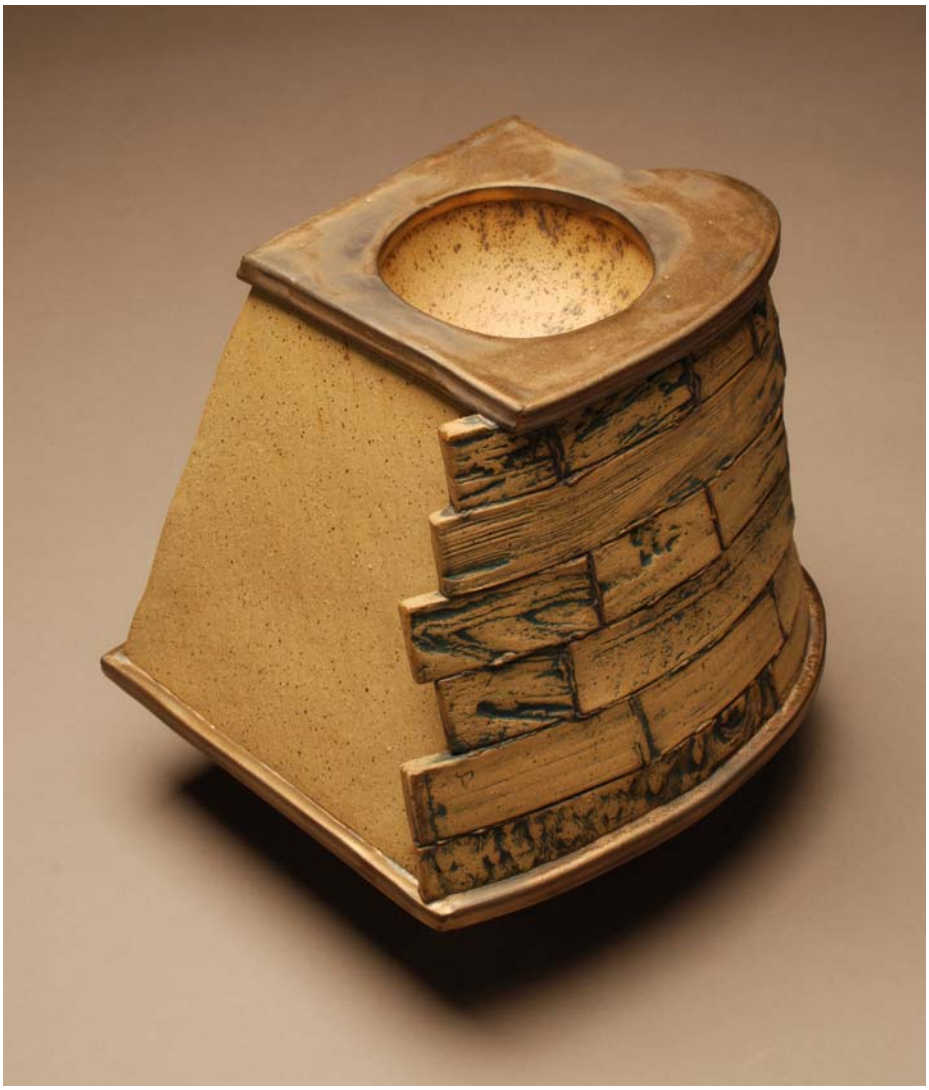
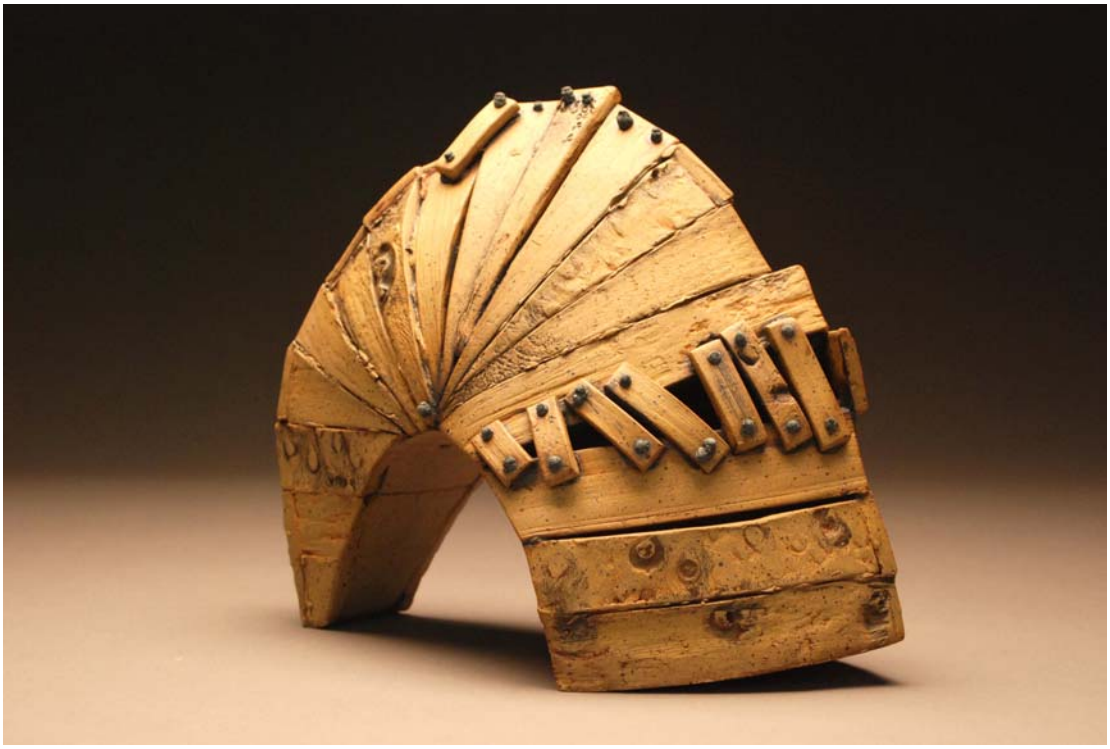
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

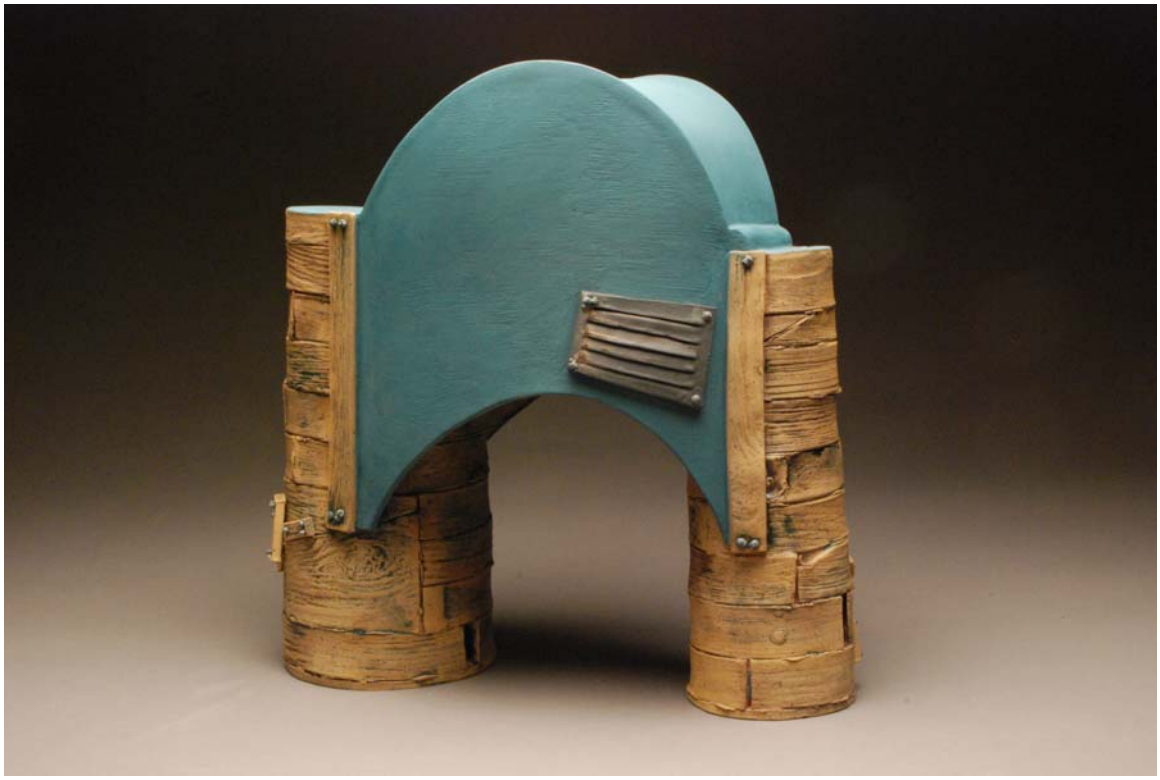
Catalog of Exhibition



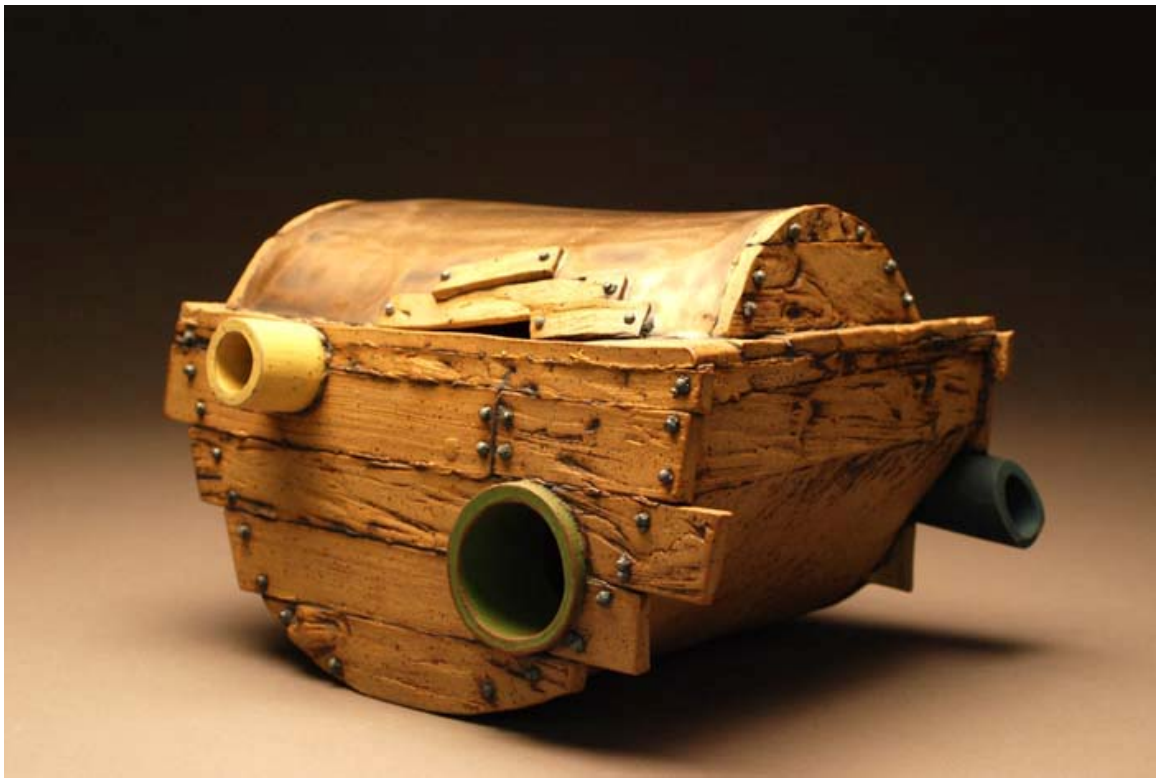
***Tiffany Terrace*. 10 x 9 x 9. 2007**



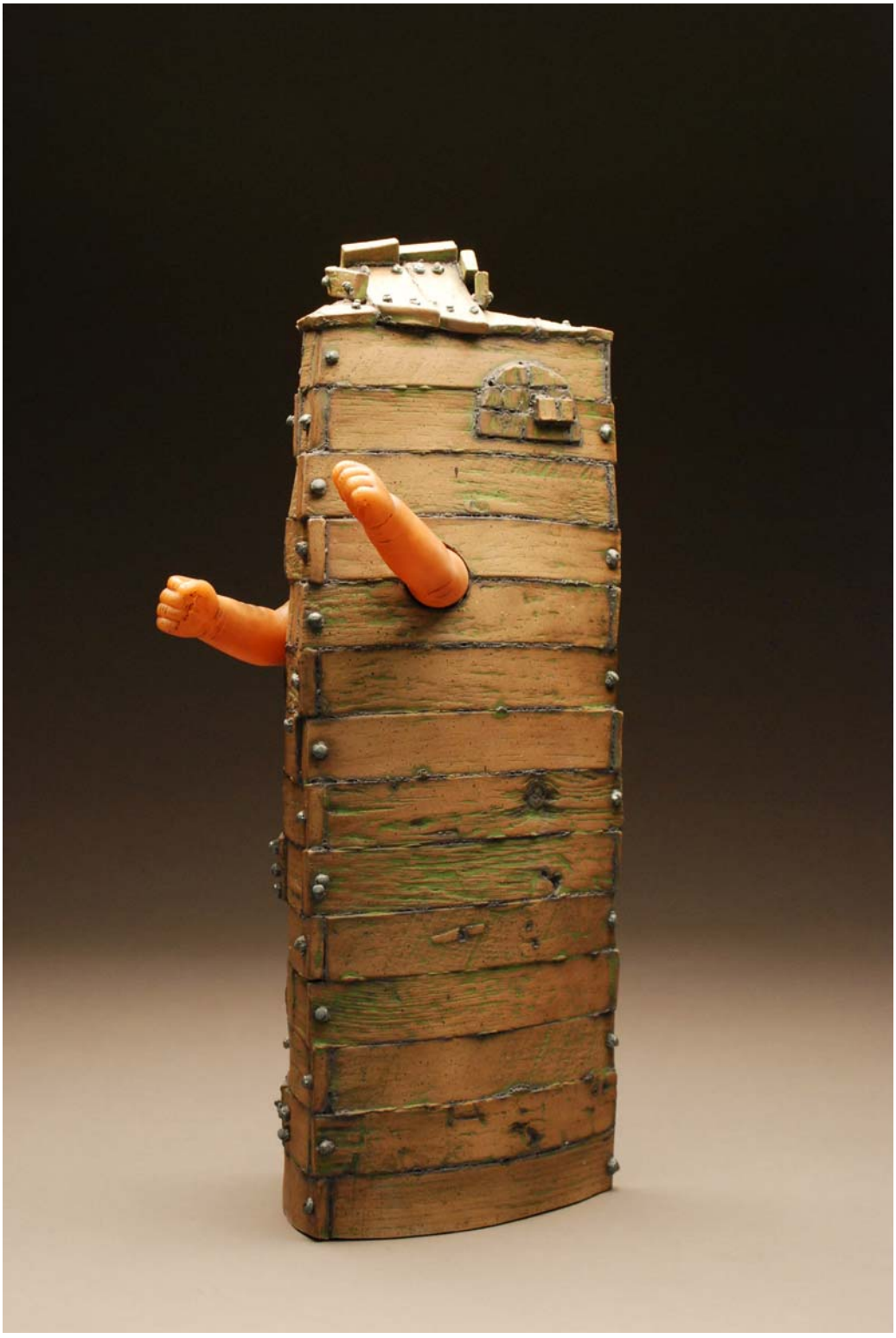
***conceived, contracted flourished*. 7.5 x 10 x 5. 2007**



***study and drown*. 14 x 14 x 7.5. 2007**



***solidification*. 7 x 12 x 9. 2007**



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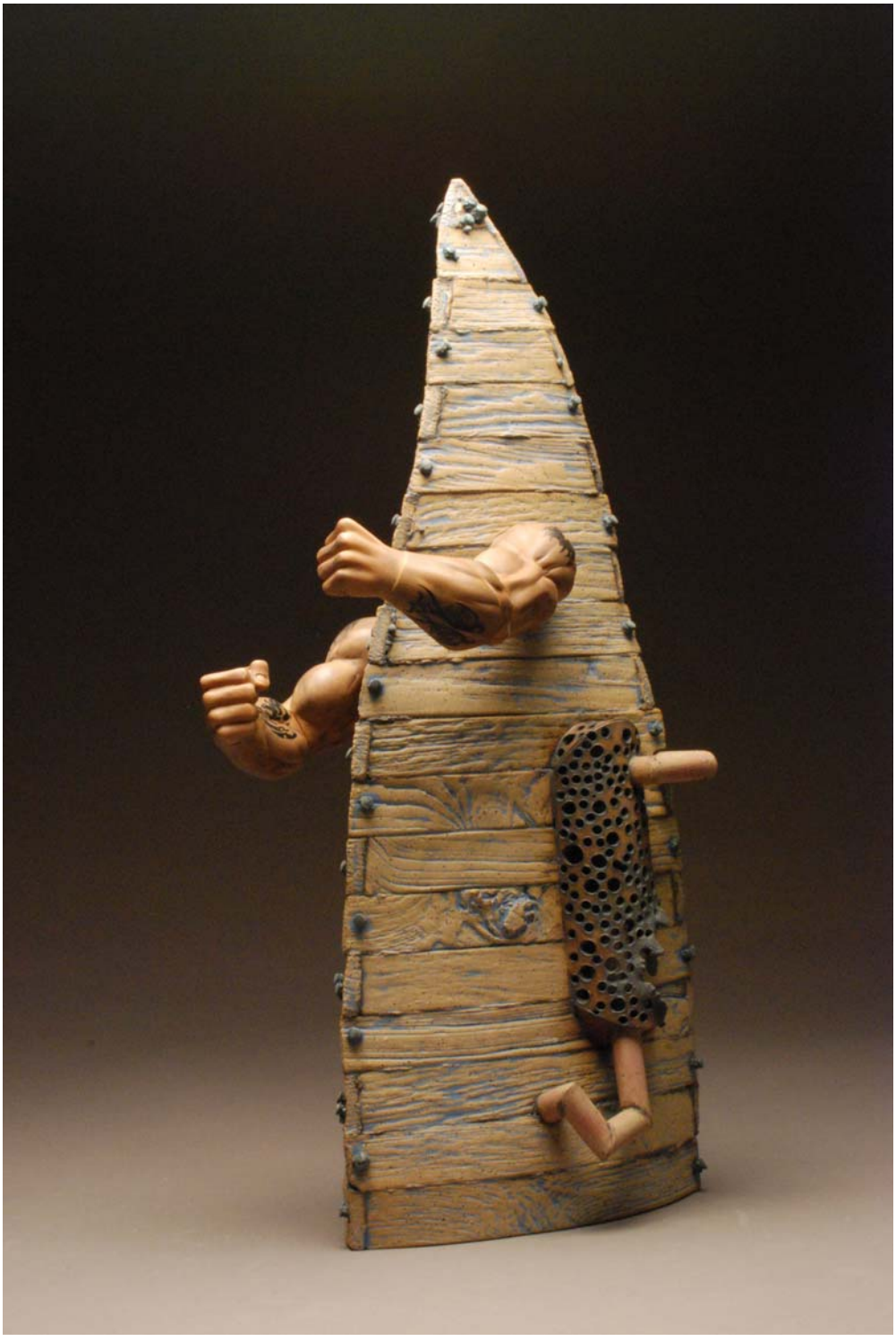

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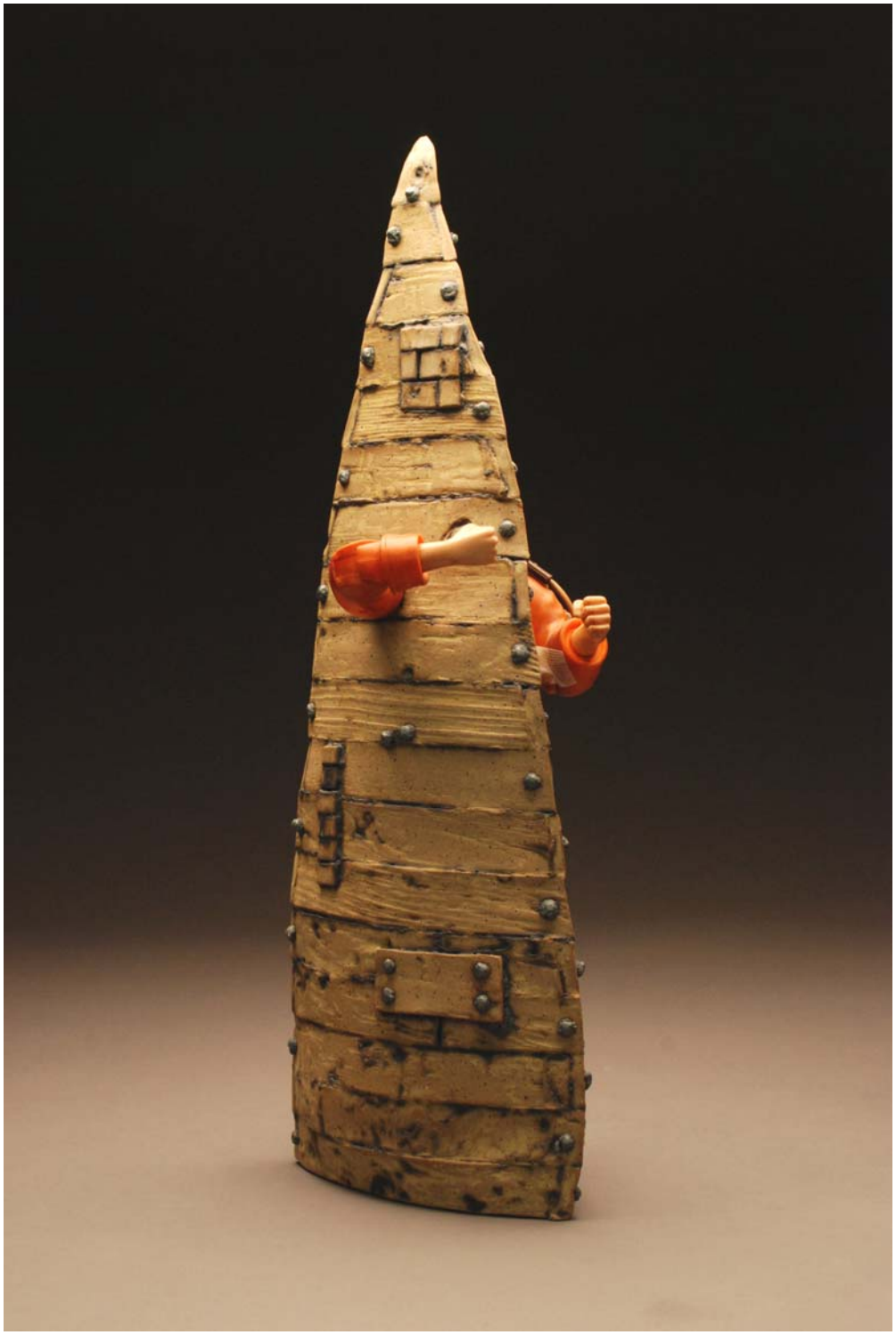
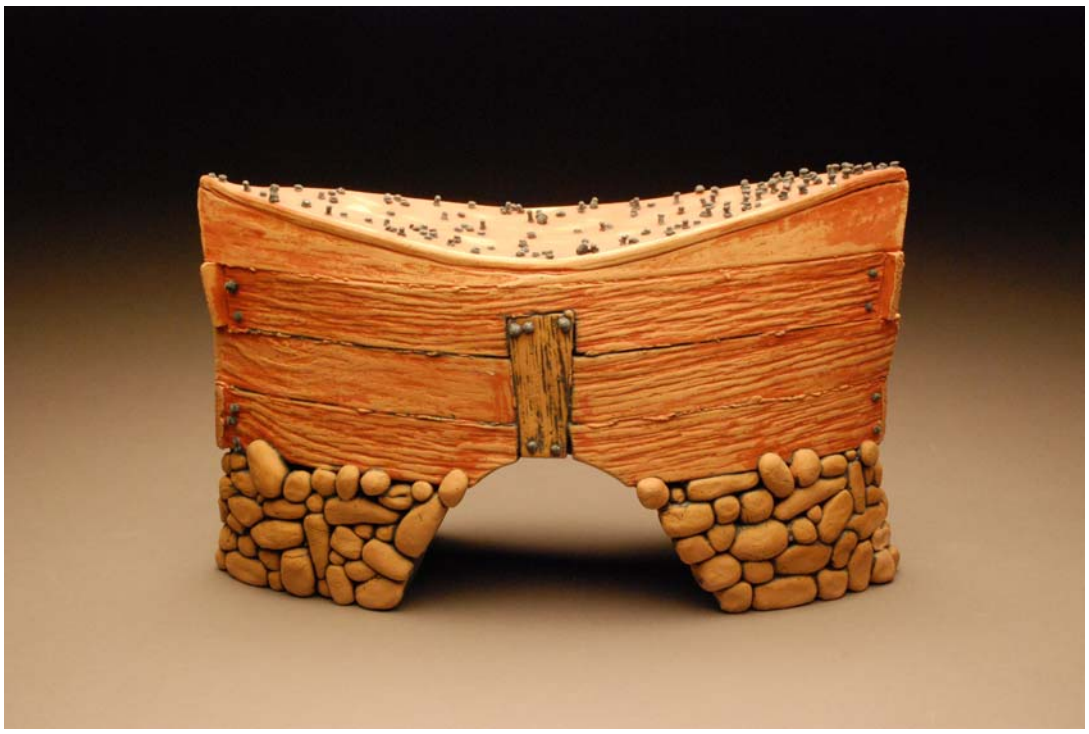
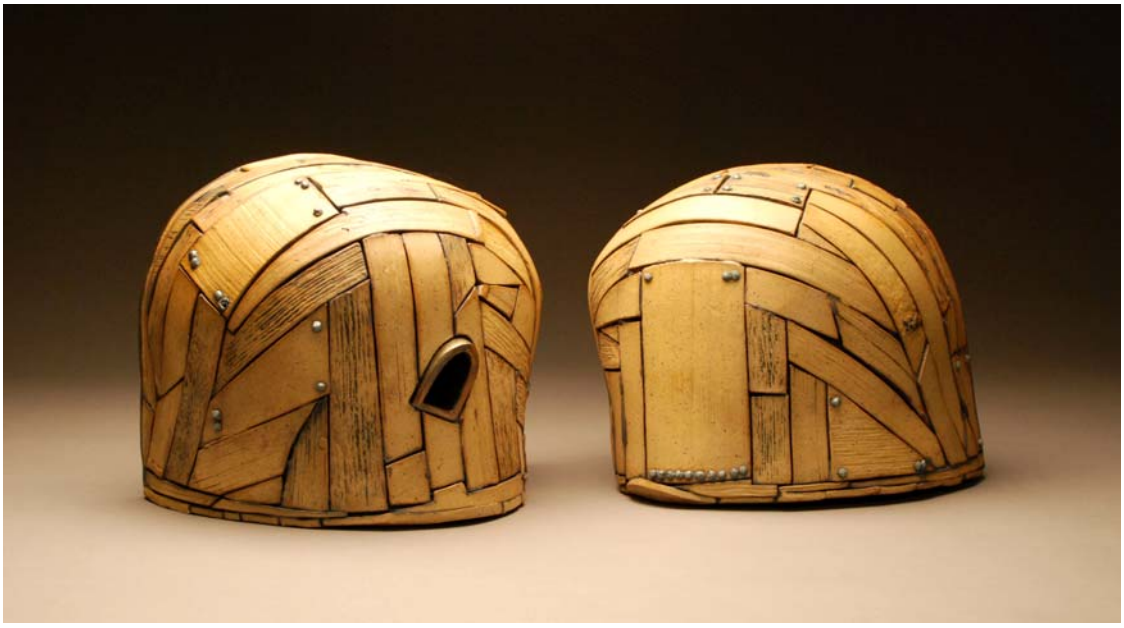


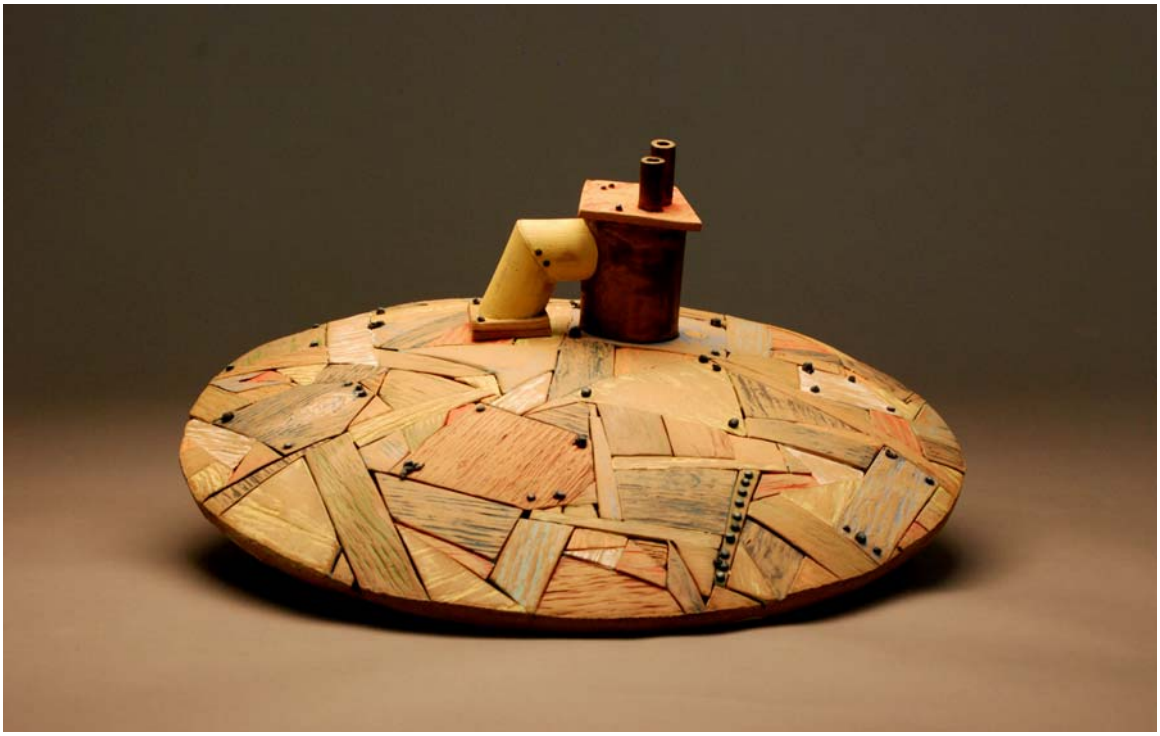
***Chris* from *siblings*. 20 x 7 x 4.5. 2007**



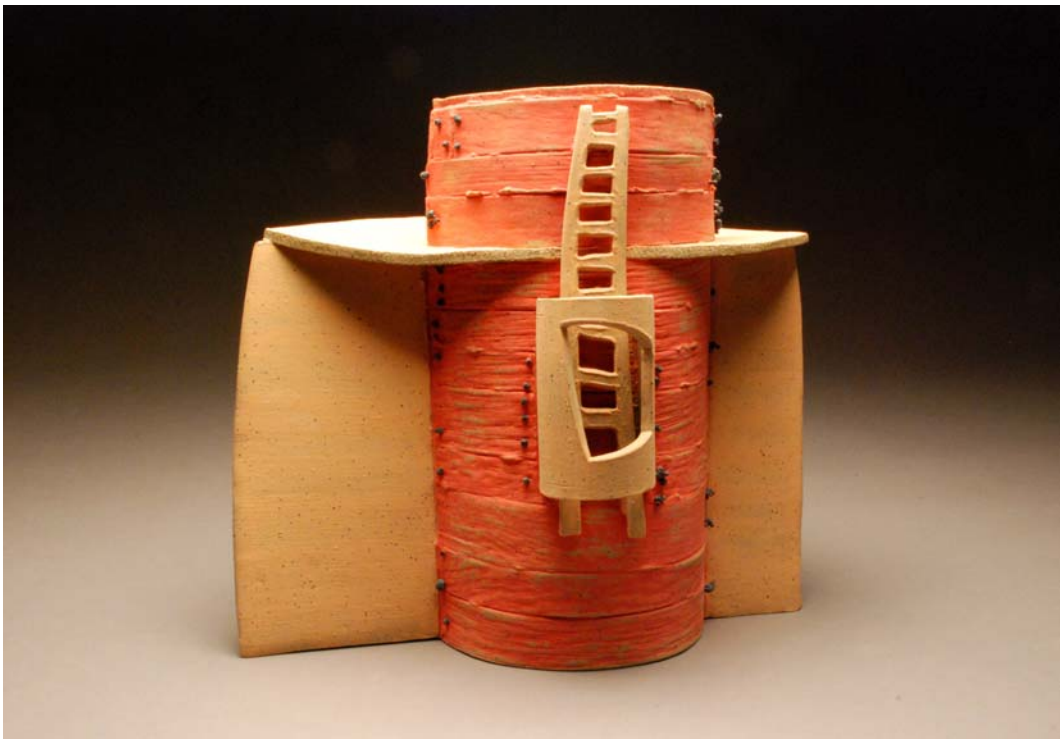
***future*. 7.5 x 13 x 4. 2008**



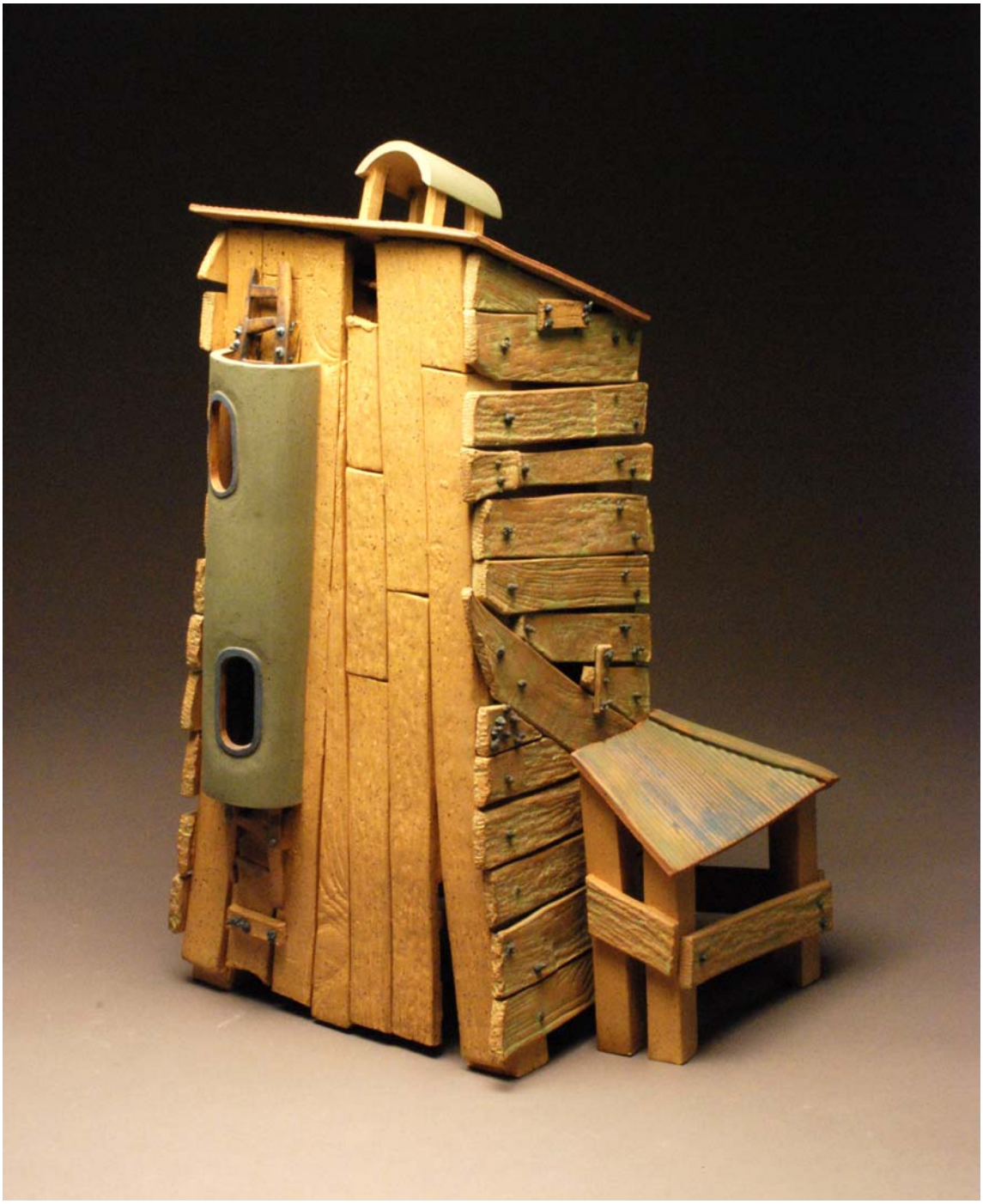
***I do*. 10 x 17.5 x 12. 2008**



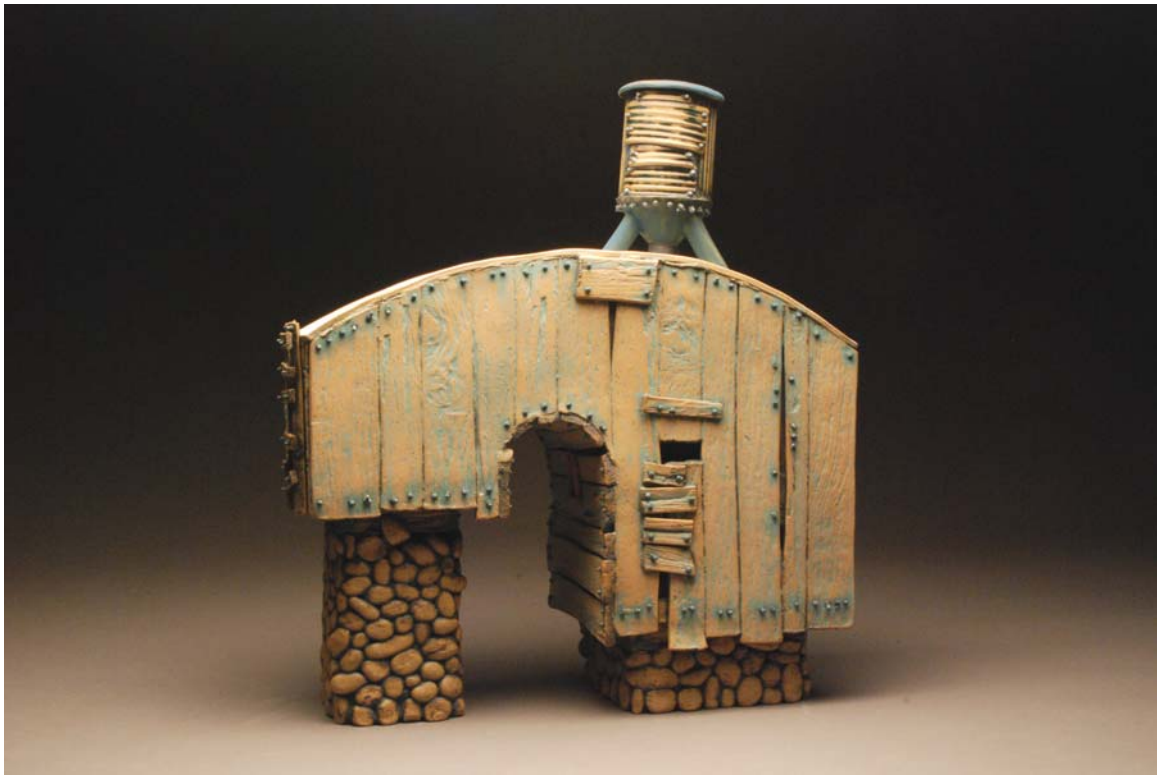
rapture? **7.5 x 19 x 19. 2008**



224 Ridgeview Drive**. 12 x 12 x 9. 2008**



***distraction and focus*. 20 x 12 x 6.5. 2008**



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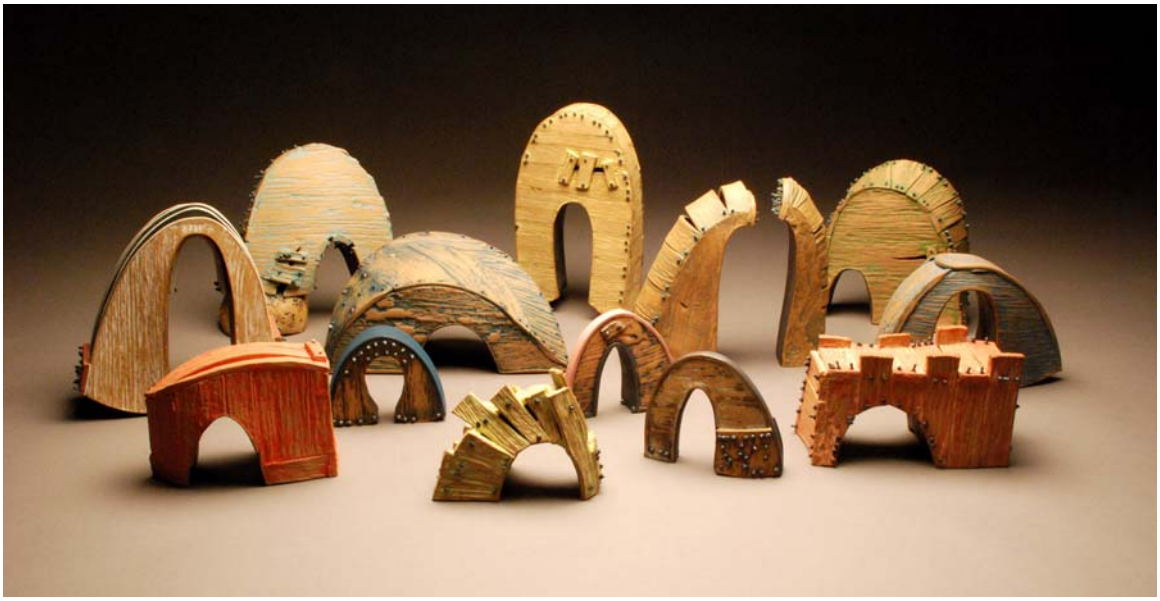

***conquering one at a time*. dimensions vary within 8". 2008**

APPENDIX B

Influential References

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	"Vernacular Whimsy" Reece Museum, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2008/2009
	“Marks: A Graduate Student Exhibition” Reece Museum, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2008
	"Evening with the Arts" Downtown Kingsport Association Gallery, Kingsport, Tennessee, 2005-2008
	"Fire and Memory" Johnson City Area Arts Council, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2007
	“Adjunxtaposition” Slocumb Galleries, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2007
	"Forms and Shapes: Inspired by Architecture" AKAR, Iowa City, Iowa, 2007
	"Marge Brown Kalodner Graduate Show" The Clay Studio, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, 2006

"An Exhibition of Contemporary Ceramic Art" Gallery 411, Greenville, Tennessee, 2007

"An Exhibition of New Work by ETSU Art and Design Graduate Students" Reece Museum, Johnson City, Tennessee, 2006

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Work Study Scholarships. Shakerag Workshops, Sewanee, Tennessee, 2007-2008

Professional Organizations: National Council on Education in the Ceramic Arts

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