

# Memories to Objects: Taking Inspiration from Family Tradition

By

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## Memories to Objects: Taking Inspiration from Family Tradition

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## Abstract

The work of Alexander Thierry uses clay as the material to illustrate his feelings of the loss of family traditions. His memories are tied to furniture pieces from his grandparents' home. By telling stories, this thesis describes traditions, people, and material to depict emotion, and his thoughts on loss. This thesis directly describes his thesis exhibition that took place in April 2017 and how his current work was situated in the space. His thoughts on material choices and future projects are explored along with a brief look at past work leading up to the exhibition.

## Table of Contents

Title Page .....	i
Acceptance Page .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Introduction .....	1
<i>We, Us, You, Me</i> .....	3
<i>Preservation of Decay</i> .....	6
<i>A Tall Drink</i> .....	8
<i>Remnants of Sunday Meals</i> .....	9
<i>Moving On, Separately</i> .....	10
<i>No Need to Look Up</i> .....	12
The Stories to the Viewer .....	13
Clay as a Material .....	14
Ideas of Future Work .....	16
Works Included in the Exhibition .....	18

## Introduction

The gatherings at my grandparents' home were large with close and distant relatives, friends, and people who claimed to be related but you were never sure how. With that many people in such a small house, it was always too warm. There was no escape from the crowd or the conversation. You had to be telling a story or listening to one. The layers of story grew louder as the nights went on. This is what I remember; this is what is gone.

Throughout my time in graduate school a common thread has emerged from within my work. The first body of work I made was a collection of whiskey vessels (Fig.1). They had a tree bark texture with deep grooves that connected them to the forests in the Pacific Northwest, where I lived after undergraduate school. Being far away from that environment and leading a new life in Kansas, I immediately missed hiking in those forests in which a gathering of my friends would share conversation, communal drinking, and a sense of togetherness. I wanted to share this memory with people in Kansas and make them feel the same connection I had with the



*Figure 1: Tall Whiskey Decanter, porcelain, slip, glaze, 2014*

forest. However, the story was not strong enough. The story needed to be more deeply embedded in the work which, in turn, required me to go deeper into my own memory.



Figure 1: *Tea Landscape*, stoneware, porcelain, gold leaf, 2015

Looking back at pieces like *Tea Landscape* (Fig. 2) and *Stacked Soup Landscape* (Fig. 3), I was trying so hard to talk about nature and to make the viewer see or feel a connection to nature that I was missing the most important part, the sense of togetherness I experienced in the

company of others. These gatherings are how stories are shared and memories are made. These gatherings were what I was missing, and what I was trying to evoke. In order to share these feelings and to find out what was really driving this work, diving deeper into my memories necessitated risking vulnerability. I needed to express personal feelings that I had never let come into my work. I needed to show what I cared about and how that made me feel. Allowing for this kind



Figure 2: *Stacked Soup Landscape*, stoneware, porcelain, glaze, 2016

of vulnerability to be expressed in my work was a big turning point in my concepts and how I think about the use of material.

The work for my thesis is inspired by my fondest memories. Making the work took me through a wide variety of emotion, from those of grief surrounding the health struggles of my grandparents, to those of mourning the loss of tradition when elders die or become too unhealthy to continue to be the leaders of tradition. I am fighting to hold onto those memories. To do this, I am using each piece of furniture as a vehicle to tell a story, so that I will not forget. I am using them as a vehicle to share that story, but more as a way to share the feeling of the story. The furniture from my grandparents' house sparks my memories and my stories but these stories could also be like yours.

### *We, Us, You Me*

Chairs are a major memory trigger for me because of the many gatherings at my grandparents' house. There would be so many people at these gathering that chairs from all over the house would be brought into the living room. Having a place to sit became the game for the rest of the evening. If you were to get up and move to do anything, most often than not, when you returned, your spot was taken. This constant shuffle made for the sharing of many stories and spending time with a great deal of people.

When choosing the type of chair to make, one particular type came to mind. I can remember this old chair in the middle room of the upstairs of my grandparents' house. It was kind of unstable but it was always free to use. By choosing this one chair, I could explore the instability of what that chair could represent, as well as the physical instability of the object.



Figure 4: *We, Us, You, Me 6*, earthenware, slip, glaze, 2017

Using the wobbly state of that chair as a start, I built chairs in various degrees of deconstruction. By titling the works *We, Us, You, Me*, I allow the viewer to see the chair as a non-specific portrait. The chair represents the summary of all the people that I have encountered. Every chair has its flaws, twists, contortions, or breaks, but each one has a different way of dealing with them, whether it is covering it up or putting it on display. In addition to the flaws, the stance of each chair is changed to project a feeling of separation from the object in relation to a human. This is a metaphor for the person.

There is one chair that I made specifically for a person. *We, Us, You, Me: Linda* (Fig. 5) is a specific portrait. My Aunt Linda died in October 2016. She was my “crazy” aunt. She struggled to hold down a job due to being bipolar and had problems interacting in a socially acceptable manner. Aside from her mental and social issues, she was nice, caring, and very eager to be a part of the conversation. Many times, she had asked me to make something for her; a drawing so she would make it into a t-shirt or hang it on the wall. I would always tell her to send me an idea of what she wanted, but she never did. The next time I would see her, she would ask again. I never really knew if she was serious or if she even remembered asking me the



Figure 5: *We, Us, You, Me: Linda*, earthenware, slip, glaze, 2017



last time. I never made her anything. When she died, I did not know how to feel about it and I still do not know how to feel about it. I thought it was finally time to make her something, however. It is both about her and for her. The two chair backs intertwined reference Linda's struggles with herself mentally, a struggle that cost her jobs, relationships, and ultimately made her an outcast in the family. With *We, Us, You, Me: Linda* being the only chair with a name and the only chair with two backs, the viewer gets a sense of the outcast, and make connections to any similar situation they are faced with.

In addition to the two different ways I used the chair as a symbol for people, the number of chairs selected to be in the space was done to create a feeling of being on the edge of clutter. This is how the gatherings felt at their peak. There were almost too many people to move freely. At times, it felt like there were too many people all together. When I was younger, it was sometimes aggravating, but now that crowded house is something that I truly miss. To keep this feeling throughout the space, I placed the chairs around the gallery to spread the chairs out but also to allow for the viewer to walk around freely. In one corner (Fig. 6) of the gallery, the line of chairs bends as it gets to the adjacent wall and the feeling of "almost clutter" comes forward.



Figure 6: *We, Us, You, Me* at the White Schoolhouse in Lawrence, Kansas, 2017

## *Preservation of Decay*

I continue to use a chair to symbolize people and memory with, *Preservation of Decay* (Fig.7). *Preservation of Decay* displays the past, present, and future of a chair slaking<sup>1</sup> into a vat of slip<sup>2</sup>. As I use the chair to talk about a strong memory of people in my life, I use the vat of slip to talk about the decay of those people and the decay of those memories, while showing that I am trying to hold onto to those things in a couple ways. At first, the chair decays slowly as it soaks up water. When the legs soften enough the weight from the rest of the chair



*Figure 7: Preservation of Decay, earthenware, slip, video, 2017*

becomes too much and it crashes into the slip. This process is much like the health of many people in my life. Each person has started to decline in health slowly, only to fall fast when they reach the end of their time. The video displayed, shows what will and has

happened to previous chairs in a continuous loop of a slaked chair. The chair always crashes. It may fall differently than the chairs before it or after it, but it always loses its foundation and crashes into the slip.

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<sup>1</sup> Slaking refers to a process in ceramics where clay is placed into water or a substance that has a higher water content. The clay is then rehydrated and falls apart, becoming structurally weak. This process is most commonly used to recycle clay that has not been fired.

<sup>2</sup> Slip, in this context, is clay that has a high percentage of water. The clay is fluid and moves much like water.

The vat of slip is bubbling, inspired by the Artist Paintpots Trail in Yellowstone National Park<sup>3</sup>. During my travels in the summer of 2016, I visited the Painted Pots and was told about how they change with the length of seasons. At first, they are extremely fluid and large but as the summer goes longer and the temperature rises, they start to dry out and become thick and the bubbling slows. The characteristics of slip are similar, except I had to make it bubble. As the bubbling slip vat in the exhibition becomes a new memory, it replaces, or pushes another memory back. Thus, deteriorating a previous memory.



*Figure 8:* Artist Paintpots in Yellowstone National Park, August 2016

As much as this deterioration happens, I try to hold on to memories by recalling them often. To show that visually, I allowed the slip tank to dry completely, took the dry pieces, fired them, glazed them, and framed them for preservation. In doing that, not only are they preserved memories, but they also become portraits on the wall of the people represented by each chair, allowing *Preservation of Decay* to show the past, present, and future of memory, and physical object.

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<sup>3</sup> The Artist Paintpots Trail in Yellowstone National Park consists of a hiking trail that leads up to hydrothermal mudpots. Various gasses bubble up through the mud. If these mudpots become dry, they change into geothermal steam vents.

## *A Tall Drink*

Another piece that uses the slaking qualities of clay is *A Tall Drink* (Fig. 9). My uncle wasn't around much when I was younger and when he was, it was at family gatherings. The one thing I could always count on was that my uncle would be drunk. Now, times have



*Figure 9: A Tall Drink, stoneware, porcelain, 2017*

changed a bit and this tall man is a much soberer person but I don't think anything can change my memory of him as being my tall, drunk uncle. He was never an angry drunk or a sad drunk he was always very happy. I was never afraid to be around him. I even enjoyed being around him. He was just so much taller than everyone and watching him drunk waddle around the house and to the front porch to smoke was always entertaining.

Currently he lives in the city close to my grandparents and is the closest caretaker.

I think the current state of my grandparents has made him stop drinking around them. Just

as much as everyone else, he values his time with his parents and being drunk impedes on that precious time. I created *A Tall Drink* to capture the qualities I see most in him. The bar table legs are long and skinny just like the legs of my uncle. The drawer contains the unknown much like my knowledge of the details of his life. I know him as my uncle but I really know nothing

more than that. In making this piece, I discovered that I really don't know that much about him that pushes me to find out more.

On top of the bar table are liquor bottles. They are made of unfired porcelain filed with water to represent the soberness that is the current state in which I know my uncle. As the bottles slake with the water inside, the integrity of each bottle subsides presenting an object that is the memory of what it was before. The bottles decompose (Fig. 10) onto the top of the bar table leaving mushy clay and water rings as evidence of the process. I want this piece to

show the passage of time between a man I called my tall, drunk, uncle to just, my uncle. I also placed this table in a position in the exhibition space that was at a distance but still in reach of the other furniture pieces, to show the new caretaker duties he has grown into. Another table present in the exhibition shows the remnants of a memory in a different way. Influenced by an event and not a person, *Remnants of Sunday Meals*, speaks about another lost tradition.



Figure 10: A Tall Drink, detail, 2017

### *Remnants of Sunday Meals*

Sunday meals were once something I looked forward to every week. All my close family members would converge onto my grandparents' home and share stories of the week. The food would change but there are always a few standards; food that certain people had denoted

as their favorite. Plates would move around the table both to be dished onto or to serve food. There was a clatter of sounds and then silence. It was time to say grace. Each time, exactly the same. Each time, until now.

The loss of this family tradition was one of the firsts. The kids grew older. The cousins grew apart. We moved on. It was a sign of what was to come with all our traditions and there was nothing new to take its place. I want to hold on to its memory, but there is less and less that I can remember every year. There is less and less to grasp before the memory vanishes. Making a piece about this loss was something that I had to do.



Figure 11: *Remnants of Sunday Meals*, stoneware, porcelain, 2017

The form of *Remnants of Sunday Meals* (Fig. 10) is of a table that is being stressed under the weight of the dishes it holds. Cracks and tears are present in the table top. The table appears to be worn. The table is tired.

The dishes that sit atop the table are placeholders for the people and ideas shared around the dinner table. No longer organized, they merely weigh down the table as it is “frozen” in its deteriorated state. The function of the table is in its last breaths, “frozen” just before it is gone.

### *Moving On, Separately*

Accompanying the table in the dining room, is a china cabinet with a fine set of china. The china was only brought out for special occasions, which was really only Thanksgiving. The

china and the cabinet were inseparable. There was always talk about when my grandparents would die, the cabinet would go to one person and the china would go to someone else. As much as we talked about it, I never thought that it would happen. As their health declines, I see it happening in the coming months. The china cabinet will go one way and the china another. My connection with these two objects will never be the same.

When I created *Moving On, Separately*, I wanted to show growth. As the china cabinet would stay stagnant and would probably deteriorate, not to be used in its new home, the china is going to have a new story to tell. The new owner of the china will use it, or at least that is what they always say. To show this growth or change, I used seed in clay, encouraging grass to grow from the plates, bowls, and cups I created as a stylized representation of the original china. I chose grass because it does a decent job of preventing erosion, like how I wish to prevent the erosion of this memory. The root system created in the now dry clay holds the forms together. If these plates, bowls, and cups were to be placed outside in new environment however, they would flourish and become part of that environment. This is the same as the china moving to its new home, soon.



*Figure 11: Moving On, Separately*, stoneware, porcelain, grass seed, 2017

## *No Need to Look Up*

To light the dining room in my grandparents' house is a beautiful chandelier. The crystal would glisten as long as it was clean. As a joke, my grandmother would tell us if we could look up based on if she had cleaned the chandelier before our visit. More often than not it was clean, and she used this comment to make us pay attention to the fact that she had cleaned it. I always thought that she just wanted us to notice this chandelier because she was proud to own it. As a nod to the joke, I recreated the chandelier in slip casted porcelain and displayed it on the ground.

*No Need to Look Up* (Fig. 12) was slip casted<sup>4</sup> and assembled so that it would be hollow to allow for LED lights to be placed inside the whole piece. When the main lights in the room are low, the whole chandelier glows bright. The glowing relates to the preciousness my



*Figure 12: No Need to Look Up, slip cast porcelain, LED lights, 2017*

grandmother would display by cleaning, and the way she talked about the chandelier. If it were her way, the room would be dark and the only thing you would be able to see would be the chandelier glowing in all its glory. The glow is important in this piece and

using clay allowed me to make a warm glow an actuality.

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<sup>4</sup> Slip casting is a process that takes casting slip and by pouring it into a mold made of plaster, creates a thin version of the whatever the mold was shaped. In this case, parts of a chandelier.



## The Stories to the Viewer

The stories and motivations for these works are important to their creation. However, I want the viewer to get the sense of loss. The viewer can see the decomposition of structure in *Preservation of Decay* and *A Tall Drink* and make the connection to something that once was but is no longer. The same can be said for *Remnants of Sunday Meals*, as a disorganized pile of dishes and the tired table suggest the end of an event or, in this case, a Sunday meal.

As much as there is loss illustrated, there is also a struggle to hold on to things. Just as people get rid of things that are broken or replace things that show signs of age, there is always a fight to hold on to things that have sentimental value. I created a whole exhibition of sentimentally valuable items that are only available as monuments to remember. They have no other use than to be vehicles of emotion and memory. As the viewer sees them I want them to make a connection to that loss whether they see it as a loss of mine or they make a connection to a loss that they have. We all have some tradition, be it large or small, and the connection to the potential loss of that tradition is the biggest concept in this work.



Figure 13: *Moving On, Separately*, detail, 2017

Visible in this work is also the potential growth of something new. By using a living plant in *Moving On, Separately*, I wanted to show that even in loss, there is growth (Fig. 13). That we as people must move on and that the history of something grows even after we have lost our connection with it. We can dwell

on the past but that does not stop the future from happening. To make these connections and to present these concepts, I found that I could use clay to speak the narrative and the emotion that I wanted to evoke.

### Clay as a Material

The wide usage of clay in this exhibition was a decision made due to the versatility and characteristics of the material. Clay, when wet, can move and be formed into any shape, can stiffen up and be carved or used to build, and then can be fired, to become permanent. The material can also move, by melting and warping, in the kiln. It can crack and warp and then be cooled to “freeze” it in place. I have spent all three years of my research exploring clay to figure out why I choose it as my primary medium. The answers can be seen in the exhibition. By using the same material, I can have a bubbling tank of slip, bone-dry clay slaking, grass growing with clay as the binding material, light making clay glow, and clay in various states of warping and cracking. The material can also show, as evidence of the processes, my thumb indentations, tool marks, and seams where I have pressed it into a mold.



*Figure 14: Remnants of Sunday Meals, detail of tool marks and thumbprints, 2017*

The decisions I make regarding what type of clay to use revolve around what I need the clay to do. Color is a big decision for the piece. If I want the clay to be a certain color, I must decide which clay body to use. For the larger pieces of furniture, I chose a dark brown clay

body that would put the color in the same realm as wood. I did not do this in a way to trick the viewer but to hint at the material of the original piece of furniture. The color of the clay works well in contrast to the porcelain white clay used to make the vessels on top of or inside the dark clay pieces. This dark clay body also warps and cracks easily, allowing me to get a big warp in the table, and make the china cabinet look distressed. These characteristics relate to the drying speed of the clay and how they are positioned in the kiln during the final firing.

Positioning of the work in the kiln was considered for all the pieces, especially the chairs. Even though I used a terra cotta clay to be able to get bright colors in the chairs, I still positioned each chair in the kiln and fired them hotter to get the clay to melt and warp. The same is true with the dark brown clay. I heavily encouraged a dip. To get the warp in the table, I build an arch in the kiln and balanced the table on it, upside down. As the kiln got hotter, the clay relaxed and fell to the shape of the arch. As much as I used the kiln to bring out the qualities I wanted, not all the pieces in this show were transformed in the firing process, or fired at all.

By using unfired clay and water, I can take something from a structured form back to its original state. In ceramics, the process of slaking is usually used to recycle clay material. If a pot or sculpture is not right or breaks before firing, the clay can be put in water to rehydrate the clay and processed back in to wet clay again. In *Preservation of Decay* the slaking chair was created by placing a dry clay chair into wet slip. As the dry clay became wet again from the moisture in the slip, the clay softened and sank into the slip. At a point in the slaking process, the clay gets too wet to support weight and falls into the slip tank. The slip continues to hydrate the clay until the water content of the slip dries naturally. The dry material formed by

the slip and chair is then taken out of the tank, fired, and glazed to create the pieces that hang on the wall.

In *A Tall Drink*, the liquor bottles on the top are made of unfired porcelain. By putting water into the bottles, the clay gets soft and starts to look like it is melting. As it softens, the structure of the bottle is compromised and the bottle gets a hole in it and the clay become wet and morphed on the top of the bar table.

Another way that I used wet unfired clay was in *Moving On, Separately*. To grow grass, I needed a wet clay with a little bit of sawdust in it. The sawdust helps keep moisture in the clay. By keeping the clay wet and putting seed inside the clay, I created an environment that allowed the seed to sprout and grow. The root system of the grass then became the support structure for the pieces as the clay became dry and brittle.

#### Ideas of Future Work

By using clay in its various stages from wet, to dry, to fired, I am, and was able to use the characteristics of clay to translate my ideas of memory, loss, and preservation. As I move on to work on new ideas or expand on the ideas of this thesis, I will be thinking about material even more. For this body of work, clay was a material that could do what I needed it to do to express emotion and memory. As I look to the future, I will always work with clay but the incorporation of other material based on the material characteristics will play a role. I plan to continue working in a similar fashion but as I move my work to be displayed in different locations, clay may not always be the best material. I will need to consider the strengths of other materials and how clay can interact with them.

Thematically, I would like to investigate the future just as much as I have investigated the past. I would also like to take time to think more of others' experiences and how I can connect my work to the viewer more specifically. I would like to hear the stories of others and translate them using furniture connected to those stories. This would allow me to start thinking specifically about creating furniture that is a caricature of the story. Having those ideas of working, I think the possibilities of using furniture as the subject can remain. The furniture is my treat, my connection to the work. The concept that comes from it can be someone else's.

Memory is still something that fascinates me. As I do more research about memory as a brain function, to share information, and as a vital part of a human's personality, I am excited to see where my work goes. I took some risks and experimented with clay in this body of work, along with thinking about material to make an idea. If I continue to work with other materials and the spaces I choose to exhibit in the same way, I can only see my work getting stronger. This is exciting to think about and I am anxious to continue making wherever my path takes me.

Works Included in the Exhibition



*Figure 15: We, Us, You, Me 1, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 14" x 35", 2017*



*Figure 16: We, Us, You, Me 2, earthenware, slip, glaze, 34" x 34" x 5", 2017*



*Figure 17: We, Us, You, Me 3, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 14" x 35", 2017*





**Figure 18:** *We, Us, You, Me 4*, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 14" x 35", 2017



**Figure 19:** *We, Us, You, Me 5*, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 14" x 35", 2017



**Figure 20:** *We, Us, You, Me 6*, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 14" x 35", 2017



**Figure 21:** *We, Us, You, Me 7*, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 20" x 35", 2017



*Figure 22: We, Us, You, Me 8, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 14" x 35", 2017*



**Figure 23:** *We, Us, You, Me 9*, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 14" x 35", 2017



*Figure 24: We, Us, You, Me 10, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 21" x 33", 2017*



*Figure 25: We, Us, You, Me 11, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 14" x 35", 2017*





*Figure 26: We, Us, You, Me 12, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 14" x 35", 2017*



**Figure 27:** *We, Us, You, Me: Linda*, earthenware, slip, glaze, 12" x 14" x 35", 2017



**Figure 28:** *Preservation of Decay*, earthenware, slip, video, 2017



**Figure 29:** *A Tall Drink*, stoneware, porcelain, water, 36" x 14" x 66", 2017



**Figure 30:** *Remnants of Sunday Meals*, stoneware, porcelains, steel, 64" x 24" x 32", 2017



**Figure 31:** *Moving On, Separately*, stoneware, porcelain, grass seed, steel, wood, 29" x 10" x 72", 2017



**Figure 32:** *No Need to Look Up*, slip cast porcelain, LED lights, 30" x 30" x 24", 2017