

# Human by Nature by Human

By

© 2019

Shantel Wright

Submitted to the graduate degree program in the Visual Arts and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

---

Chairperson Matthew Burke

---

Sarah Gross

---

Shawn Bitters

---

Gina Westergard

Date Defended: March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2019

The Thesis Committee for Shantel Wright  
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

**Human by Nature by Human**

---

Chairperson Matthew Burke

Date Approved: May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2019

## Abstract

My studio practice is based in ceramic and mixed media practices, and blurs the lines between sculpture and installation. It is strongly inspired by the remains of the current world around the human existence. I am interested in where human and nature intersect and diverge and am drawn to “natural” objects and beings that address similarities, differences and ironies present in the notion of being human. Through this writing I explain my thoughts on this as well as how my practice works to present related questions to the viewers of my work. I will discuss how these ideas informed the Master of Fine Arts thesis exhibition *Human by Nature by Human*, and how the work brought to light some of my own human tendencies.

## **Acknowledgements**

Thank you, to my wild and creatively spirited Mother who continuously supports and contributes to my strange ideas, and who taught me that it is a gift to be able to see the weirdness in the world as beauty.

To my wonderfully supportive Thesis committee: Matthew Burke, Sarah Gross, Gina Westergard and Shawn Bitters who went out of their ways to inspire, coach and pick me back up during one of the most physically and mentally challenging years of my life.

To my partner Tylur for being the stability and encouragement I have relied on throughout my education, and as I embark on a studio driven path.

To my amazing collection of friends, students, volunteers, and family that donated so much of their time to assist me in finishing, installing, and packing up this exhibition. This became a group effort I never would have accomplished alone.

## Table of Contents

I.	Introduction.....	2
II.	A History of Collecting, Memories, and Searching.....	4
III.	Themes and processes, processes and themes.....	7
IV.	On the Exhibition.....	14
V.	Works Cited.....	16
VI.	Additional Images.....	17

### **The Self as Menagerie**

*We are Mosaics, forgive me, I think this wiser  
Than the emulation of Zeus, or the harsh-axed  
Vikings in their Valhalla.*

*I have found animals in me when I stroll in the forest.  
I hesitate before a large dragonfly, I step  
Like a cat in the night, I have felt something  
Lift along my neck  
When a wolf howls . . .*

Loren Einseley (1)

## I. Introduction

*Human by Nature by Human* is an exhibition that explores the concepts of abundance and over-population by positioning the body in relation to artworks that concern themselves with ideas and interpretations of objects perceived as threatening to the human species. These inconvenient ideas confront the way humans view themselves, in relation to other species and the evidence of our own invasiveness as a species. The exhibition offers moments of reflection on our connectivity with and effect on beings considered “other” than ourselves.

The human colonization of environments can be seen as a series of repetitive behavior. As a species, we loop continuously between taking over, disrupting, and attempting to repair spaces and environments to suit our preferences. Species are introduced, relocated, sterilized and eradicated as we see fit, without taking into consideration our own implication in the original infestation. Through creating the works in *Human by Nature by Human* (discussed individually later in this document) I have altered my studio practice to mimic the repetitive, cyclical nature of the human life, and to what we consider the natural world. I used materials and methods that allowed me to replicate the same form in large amounts, build both additively and reductively, and amass large numbers of small “insignificant” objects.

“To be urban – to live in mass society at a distance from wild diversity – is to share a heightened angst about the pronominal enigma: the identity of I, we, you, it, and they. As if to deny our poverty of wild things, we declare a cultural superiority over such “primitive” reference.” (1)

As a species, we have drawn a distinction between what we consider to be “human” and what we still consider to be “natural”. While we begin the same as other organisms we claim a superiority over those, and a freedom to customize the world around us without considering our relation to those that we grow from or rely on. The majority of what we picture today as the natural landscape has been shaped and tamed by a history of carving out the excess and leaving or replacing it with what we consider more beautiful. Much of what we consider native to a place is only a representation of what has been native since the introduction of humans to that area. Lawns and backyard “landscapes” are kept up through hours of labor, forests and plains are manipulated or used while changing the ecology of every being in them, farmland is overworked and kept on a constant cycle to be the most efficient for our own purposes and hiking trails exist to make our experiences more accessible. There are extremely rare instances where “being in nature” does not have traces, subtle or obvious, of human presence or manipulation. Through this work, I seek to create a conversation about how we view and curate what we see as acceptable “nature”, and what we find as inconvenient or invasive of our ways of living. This work also offers moments of contemplation of forms that are often overlooked or taken for granted. It hopes to promote closer observation of the world outside of the human existence.



## II. A History of Collecting, Memories, and Searching

I grew up between Wyoming and Utah, moving several times with my mother when my parents separated. Due to a lack of consistent friends and surroundings I grew accustomed to being outside by myself. I became an observer of my surroundings and of other humans, and started noticing behaviors that made me much less trusting of our own species. I developed a strong empathy for non-human things and an attraction to the overlooked, unnoticed details of everyday life.

The male members of my family were blue-collar “providers”. My father, and grandfather were adamant hunters. My mother’s experience working in hospice and my own years of working with her in a tannery, has provided me a strange relationship with the idea of death, purpose and worth. Like so many other aspects of life, I find the death of a being to be disturbing, sad, and beautiful all at the same time. I think about the dualities and contrasting elements present in my upbringing in almost every aspect of my life now; in the way that we humans treat ourselves, each other, and other beings, as well as how we seem to define ourselves in terms of those other species. I am interested in our connectedness and similarity to other beings in contrast to everything we do to prove otherwise, and in the complex interrelations between these beings.

I am a collector of objects. I make my work in an environment riddled with bowls, Ziplocs, and pencil boxes filled with sweet gum and milkweed pods, burr oak and acorn caps, and any variety of nests and hives. This habit began with my mother, who has a fondness for rocks, fungi, and random vegetables that resembled things they are not. I inherited the urge to look closely at things that were either overlooked, abandoned, or taken for granted. My time between Wyoming

and Utah made me fond of the diversity of creatures, immensity of mountain ranges, and the persevering quality of species from season to extremely varied season. It also exposed me to few, but hardy families of vegetation. When I moved from Wyoming where I had spent most of my remembered life to Kansas for graduate school, I rediscovered a childlike excitement for various things that I had not previously experienced physically. Kansas was a severe change to my accustomed way of being outside. I was saddened by the lack of some previously mentioned aspects, but soon became conscious of the abundance of variety of species, both plant and animal, that I had only seen in passing or in images. I held and then collected my first pocket full of acorns and caps, Kentucky Coffee Beans (*Gymnocladus dioica*), and subsequently became overwhelmed and fascinated by the amounts of seed pods and plants I had previously had little knowledge of.

Throughout my study at the University of Kansas, I continued this practice of collecting, observing, and investigating the objects around me, and began to investigate my own interest in them as a way to further my introspection as an artist. I think of these forms as related and similar to the human body in terms of our own skin as a husk we eventually leave behind, and seek to draw a contrast between the external and the either present, implied, or vacated interior object. I find a sadness and a beauty in defeated objects – the extra, broken, lost, and empty pieces - the husk that is left once its original purpose has been served. This for me becomes a metaphor for our own fragility, as well as our impact on the world around us. This also informs the natural references from which I work. These collections are made up of objects with the potential of creating, or sustaining life, or the empty shells left after.

Based on this history, my work for the past several years has moved between comparing human and animal relations, investigating human mental states, and referencing the “natural” world in contrast to these.

### III. Themes and processes, processes and themes

*Human by Nature by Human* is composed of three separate pieces that functioned visually on their own, but similarly in terms of concept, process, and practice. Each work was created using repetitive forms and actions, and are capable of being disassembled, rearranged, relocated, or built upon further in a way of growth. Nothing has a permanent placement or orientation and no object is singular. This for me mimics the cyclical nature of the human life and the small actions often taken without thought for the larger repercussions that may build to become overwhelmingly detrimental and irreversible. Clay as a medium is important in my practice because of its long history of being touchable, accessible, and comfortable as a viewing platform for functional and sculptural objects, but it also allows for the repetitive modes of production that I adopted for the purpose of these works.

One piece was inspired by a series of collected paper wasp nests, one by the miniscule black seed of a Daylily pod, and the last by the dry pods of a Royal Empress Tree (Paulownia Tree). These pieces remain officially untitled for the time being, I will refer to them in the context of this writing as *Hive*, *Midden*, and *Shift* respectfully.

As humans, we view the rest of the world as if we were superior and all other beings become “pests” or “tools” for our own development, although we are more often the troublesome species disrupting a balance that would have previously existed. My interest in the empty paper wasp nests stem from the idea that everything non-human can be, and is dangerous. While some species of wasp can be aggressive, we tend to label all of them as problematic and expendable in order to keep our own lives simple. *Hive* references forms that,

even while abandoned, most would caution approaching either out of fear, disgust, or disinterest. With this piece, I sought to play on these reactions by simplifying and enlarging the scale of the wasp nest form to a size more closely associated with the human body. The installation of the piece offers a space to walk around it, and peer into cavities that an infant could lay inside. It was my hope that with this relationship to the human body and dwelling, *Hive* would provide reflections on ideas of “self as pest” and draw comparisons between actual behavior and imagined threat. I am interested in convincing the viewer to see these objects in a closer-than-normal manner similar to my own observation during and after collecting. I hope the viewer notices of the simultaneous strength and fragility of the form and the reference; the beauty and functionality, the presence and vacancy.

I allowed my hand to be the most present in this piece as a transitioning and undulating texture with the intent of drawing the viewer in and moving them through this work. *Hive* is built of the repetition, connection, and stacking of cylindrical forms, each individually coil built and then carved away to accentuate either the tool markings or the markings of my hands. It is supported by its own weight and the way in which the forms nestle together and can be rearranged, made shorter, or combined to take up larger amounts of space. There are multiple areas where less clay was removed, leaving fewer tool marks as my hand motions became stronger and more of a visual element. A strong emphasis is placed on the thin, fragile edges that were carved back and the interior of each form where most of the textures and interest remain, inviting the viewer to look deeper into the cavities and negative space within the piece.

*Hive* was the first piece began and last finished for this exhibition. It is a form and scale that challenged me, and forced me to problem-solve every step along the way. Through the

extensive process of building sections of this piece I experienced multiple moments of the piece collapsing, moving or reacting in ways that were hard for me to predict or control. I became accustomed to the “failure” and rebuilding of the work, adapting each time to the most recent set of problems. I found this struggle ironic and at times futile given my thoughts and perseverance of the insects that inspire it, but was consistently asked by the work to allow the clay to do what clay does. This for me became a conversation and a collaboration between myself, the paper wasp nest form and the material, and gave me insights into myself and my practice that I was previously overlooking.



*Hive, Earthenware. 2019*

Both *Midden*<sup>1</sup> and *Shift* were made up primarily of slip-cast porcelain. As an avid mold maker, I saw these pieces as a way to push my use of replication to create larger works from many smaller repeated forms. Porcelain has an inherited value associated with it, and raises the expectations of importance for forms that would otherwise be trampled over in their normal context. It also carries a kind of visual softness that feels very approachable. These works with my facilitation reproduce, spread, and overpopulate a given space. Colors were chosen from palettes that were visible in the natural reference, and in different areas of the human body. I worked to apply or directly cast surfaces that mimicked and blended moss, bark, husk, sheath, skin, veins, lichen and decay.

*Midden* is a collection of 287 enlarged porcelain seed pods modeled from life and slip-cast, in a range of colors and surfaces; matte and iridescent, between the waxy black of the original reference and the fleshiness of skin; piled together on top of tessellating pedestals. The pods are made of 6 repeated forms, shifting from simplest and darkest in color on the bottom of mounds – of dyed saw dust and refuse clay from *Hive* - to having slight human characteristics at the top, nestled upon the detritus of other species. These forms were visually inspired by one seed, which I liberally “mutated” to resemble forms that could be “natural”, human, alien, other, but that could begin to call up empathy and interest from a human viewer. We have built our empires on the waste we’ve created of our fellow beings, and consider ourselves to be different

---

<sup>1</sup> late Middle English *myddyng*, of Scandinavian origin; compare with Danish *mødding* ‘muck heap’: A midden is an old dump for domestic waste which may consist of animal bone, human excrement, botanical material, mollusc shells, sherds, lithics, and other artifacts and ecofacts associated with past human occupation

from those we use. I hope to promote the idea that we are all formed from the same base, and all return to the same soil.

With *Midden*, which has the most color variation among the three, I was captivated with the simple beauty of the ridges present on a single dry daylily seed. While this is not an invasive species, it is cultivated and kept in innumerable amounts for the flower it produces. I saw this as a metaphor for the current overpopulation of most of our planet by a single species. I was most interested in adding recognizable but subtle details, which turned into multiple forms being created with folds that might otherwise be found on the abdomen, the interior of the elbow, etc. Each pod was slip cast, sanded, glazed or painted as an individual before being placed onto the mounds made up of numerous similar forms. Placing them on repeating, tessellating pedestals, I was hoping to raise the level of visual “preciousness” of the forms while also giving them a border to push against and spill over, implying an outgrowing of space.



*Midden*, Porcelain, saw dust, ink, varnish. 2019



*Shift* spans the area above and in front of the average viewer's head. It is made of a grouping of multi-species tree branches that are connected at different joints by small eyelets. This allows the branches to move based on the airflow and viewer interaction within the space. The branches support clusters of slightly oversized porcelain Empress Tree pods. This is largest of the three works while also being the most intimate in that it requires the viewer to approach the pods closely to notice the subtle changes in color, texture and shape, while restricting most of the clear visibility to those branches low enough to be seen at eye level. The Empress Tree is a species that was introduced to many areas for its floral presentation and its ability to provide large amounts of shade. In response to its fast invasiveness and commercial value dichotomy, scientists have begun engineering non-reproducing strains, officially sterilizing a "problem" that we alone perpetuated. In this piece, the pods farthest from human reach are rich greens and browns with the pods remaining closed. They still might hold the hope of containing seeds.

Those closest to the eye and inhabiting the space nearest our own are cream, pink, white, and opened up so that the interior is visible. They sometimes resemble mouths, but most importantly are vacant, sterile, peeling and fleshy. The inclusion of multiple tree species in the branches speaks back to the idea that nothing is individual, and that everything is built up from numerous other beings. It also makes it more difficult for the viewer to pinpoint the "type" of tree they are meant to be seeing. While the branches are an important aspect of *Shift*, the focus of the piece rests on the changes and duplication happening amongst the pods. The branches are painted to resemble the color present underneath the bark so that they are more neutral and raw, also reading as possibly fabricated up-close due to the waxy look of the paint. I wanted to

explore the idea of curated, domesticated nature, questioning what is “natural”, what is “human”, and where these merge within the gallery.



*Shift (Detail)* Porcelain, wood. 2019



*Shift (Detail)* Porcelain, wood. 2019

#### IV. On the Exhibition (some reflections)

Due to the nature of the processes that I chose in the production of *Human by Nature by Human* as an exhibition, my first time truly seeing and experiencing the pieces was the same as the first few viewers. I was informed of and drawn to the different pathways each piece could take throughout the installation. I became almost overly aware of my human tendencies in relation to the process of curating natural space. I had considered this previously due to my use of mixed found and fabricated materials, all altered to suit the visual I had in mind. I quickly realized that as a human I can only view a space from the perspective of a human. Curating and arranging this environment, deciding what the viewer sees as natural reminded me of how inseparable hands are within the process and how differently “nature” or other species might arrange and interact with it. This made me reconsider and contemplate further my role within the works as artist, curator and manipulator.

The interaction of the lighting within the gallery became a large component of my consideration during the installation, as each piece ultimately held a different presence than I had originally envisioned. While I had the goal of the works taking up specific areas of the space, the shadows and ability to direct the human presence through distinct areas allowed each to expand upon the others, creating flux spaces between where shadows mingled and boundaries began to interact. This was a moment of excitement for me in thinking about future possibilities for each work together and separately. Observing the exhibition from multiple different viewpoints had this same effect in that *Midden* became much more overwhelming while approaching it from the main entrance, a half-flight of stairs lower than the gallery, and *Shift*

more ethereal from a distance. Looking forward, this knowledge expands the possibilities I have already begun considering for these works.

## V. Works Cited

1. Shepard, Paul. (1996). *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press/ Corvelo, CA: Shearwater Books.
2. Midden. (2014, June 4). *New World Encyclopedia*, Retrieved from <http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Midden&oldid=982204>.

## VI. Additional Images











