

Garden of the Forebearer

By

Geoffrey Steven Kunkler

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Chairperson

Associate Professor David Brackett

Professor Jon Keith Swindell

Associate Professor David Vertacnik

Associate Professor Matthew Burke

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The Thesis Committee for Geoffrey Steven Kunkler

certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

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Chairperson Associate Professor David Brackett

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Abstract

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Ideas about life and death have been a major source for my work since the death of my father. His loss made me question my role in life and the role of a god-creator. I chose to make a garden to set up circumstances for the contemplation of the role of god, the creator, and the cyclical nature of life and death. There is nothing more beautiful and bittersweet than being alive and loving. In my garden, I seek to understand why I was placed in this wondrous life only to suffer the inevitability of death and pain and the loss of those that I care for. I want to understand that if god has a choice, then why did he choose to put his creations through so much. In placing them, does he do so with respect, ambiguity, or detachment and to what purpose?

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I come from a long line of gardeners, though I am not one myself. For generations, members of my family have created elaborate fruit and vegetable gardens from which they harvest to give to family and friends. They work to create large spaces to cultivate and generate food to feed the people they care about. I grew up around these spaces and with the people who worked these spaces. As a result, I feel connected to my ancestors when I am in a garden. I made a garden to honor my mother, father, and those who came before me. In doing so I sought to make a sacred space, a graveyard, and a place for healing.

My garden is made from hollow clay extrusions, which are individually placed to create a larger pattern. Each shape is a monolith or tombstone that stands on its own, though precarious and brittle. The hollow forms refer to shells, or bones, that have aged though time and process. I chose three forms due to the possible symbolic and metaphoric meanings inherent in these patterns. The first is the cross or star shape. The second is the seed form, or water droplet. The third is the maple leaf that was stretched and elongated, and is also a reference to man. The seed is the beginning of life, while the water droplet sustains it. The leaf/man represents life in

process, and the cross or star refers to death and/or the majesty of the unknown or untouchable.

I worked with repetitious processes to create over one thousand pieces. At first with each attempt, I sought to produce perfect extrusions. As my process evolved, I learned that the chance breakage and imperfections made the individual unit more interesting. It made them unique. I started keeping each one that could stand on its own, regardless of the inherent faults created through the process. They were shaped by pressure and friction, and solidified by fire. The color of each unit is determined by the amount of iron in the clay body and the ratio of oxygen to carbon within the kiln. I control color using placement, atmosphere, and environment. I can choke my pieces with carbon or let them breathe. The result of either is a physical change that comes from within as a result of external forces.

The placement of each unit, and the understanding of why it should reside in that position, is critical to my overall pattern. Each is placed with a sense of urgency, then placed again, while searching for meaning in the process. Sometimes pieces would fall and need to be picked up again. Other times, they would break and were used as shards of information in other sections of the piece. Occasionally, I would break them on purpose and use them to create a harmonious gradation of color.

The overall layout of the installation is of a fenced garden. The outer perimeter of the piece is marked by the cross, or death forms, because death is all around us and can take us at anytime. The fence has an entrance, a path, and an exit. It refers to our own metaphorical journey through life, as we pass toward death, encountering experiences along the way. The fence surrounds the three main forms within the piece. Three main forms reside within the piece. These forms are the only ones with direct lighting, drawing the viewer's attention to what I find important. The remainder of the piece is veiled in darkness and shadow.

Of the three main sections, the central piece is *Life*. It is in the form of a large seed made of

shards of broken individuals. It is surrounded by the leaf/man monoliths, which are arranged into a larger seed-form. This represents individuals dealing with the loss of others, trying to organize the shards. The shards must be put in their place and arranged in an organized color gradation so healing and understanding may occur. Next to *Life* is a new seed beginning to form, which is also created from the leaf/man extrusions. They are all colors of the gradation and are my hybrids.

To the side of the central *Life* piece is the *Circle of the Creator*. I take the role of the creator, and in it is my seat, my gloves, tools, and dust and shards. The tools are extruder die patterns, which I used to create my forms. The act of putting on my gloves, to create and arrange my forms, became a ritual during the time this work was on exhibition. The seat became my place of rest and contemplation. The dust and shards were from the breaking of my pieces. They were placed within the circle in order to allude to a new beginning for my form.

The Creator's Circle is closed off away from life because it is untouchable. It is surrounded by the crosses and stars. Next to this is *Catalyst*, it serves as the reason I made the work. It contains the only pieces that were broken and not tended to or swept away. It refers to my feelings on the loss of my father and others in my family. It refers to the feeling of being broken and the helplessness that death brings. In the *Catalyst* and *Circle of the Creator*, I placed a small amount of my father's ashes in an effort to give him life again in my work.

In my garden, I placed myself, as the creator, in situations where I had to break some of my pieces. In doing so, with purpose or ambivalence, I tried to understand why god, if he exists, would do this to his creations. I placed over one hundred pieces in a domino pattern, which with the slightest bump mass destruction would occur. At times, during the installation, I wanted to cause the domino effect with the flip of my wrist. I found that as much as I wanted to, I just could not do it.

My goal with this exhibition was to clarify my understanding of the nature of god and his choices. Prior to the making of my units, I hadn't the notion of the responsibility that is required by the creating and the placement of my pieces. I made over one thousand units. I found that I cared for each of my creations and was overwhelmed by the beauty of the individual and of their overall pattern. I wanted them to keep them safe in their environment but found that it was impossible to do so. When they occasionally fell, I took pity and picked them up and placed them once more. When they broke, I felt pain and anguish over the loss and was forced to deal with the leftover fragments of the individual. Those fragments were not lost but became a part of the larger pattern once more. During this process, I found was that we have a choice in matters. Even so, the cyclical nature of life and death does not change. The passing of any life is not necessarily the fault of the living or the creator if he exists. Through contemplation, I came to understand my father's death was not my fault. Our choices have the potential to crush us each day, and there is nothing that I can do about it except live each day to its fullest and to continue to create. Because, in the end, each day is a new creation.