

Mutants: Ceramic Objects

By

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Abstract

The following paper details the conceptual underpinnings, art historical references, and vital-materialistic philosophy of the exhibition titled *Mutants*, installed in the Edgar Heap of Birds Family Gallery February 25, 2023. This exhibition consists of eleven ceramic objects that encompass a representative range between figurative sculpture, classical ornamentation and abstract gesture. By combining traditional ornamental motifs and representational figuration from western art history with intuitive, material based abstraction this exhibition explores how ontological certainties of the past mutate as they are appropriated across time, evolving to become increasingly alien.

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Introduction

Like an invasive species, Western ornament perpetuates itself into a consumeristic monstrosity and metastasized colonial relic. It is also the visual language that I have inherited. The formal seduction of the baroque is a basis to my muscle memory, influencing my fundamental approach to object making through the classical forms I internalized while a child as being beautiful. The uniform foliage articulated upon Corinthian capitols, precise symmetry of gilded filigrees in Rococo friezes, fantastical imagery of grotesque cartouches, and naturalistic musculature rippling across the marble bodies of Greco-Roman heroes have inspired awe upon me as an aspirational craftsman. The technical aspect of my art practice has been oriented around teaching myself how to design and create objects that evoke a semblance of this wonder. However, a disconnect between myself and the world of more-than-human nature is exposed when comparing the artificially ordered structures present in classical western ornament to structures that have developed outside the confines of human consideration such as coral, geologic formations, and termite mounds. The idealized vegetation and physiology depicted by ornamental objects from western art history suggest an attitude of assuredness regarding humanity's position to nature that rejects the potential for chaos and bewilderment. The classical western principles of balance, harmony, and formal scrutability reflect a human-centric vision of a more-than-human world that is controlled and understandable. *Mutants* (2023) explores the uncomfortable space that exists between the incalculable complexity of the postmodern world and the formal language of idealized figuration that I have inherited and developed under as a western object maker. By incorporating illustrative forms that I control into material amalgamations created separately from my hand in the heat of a kiln, a metaphor is enacted relaying the ouroboric translation that occurs when I attempt to understand a truth about the

world as it exists beyond the perimeter of my psychological reality. This metaphor perpetuates uncertainty, resulting in objects embodying a dynamic between the visual lexicons of traditionally ordered beauty and the grotesque chaos of geology and organic life. Between works, a spectrum of surfaces are utilized to blur states of naturalistic representation and material presence. Their colorful sheens connote candy in the same breath as viscera, poisonous amphibians, and torqued landscapes. The porcelain filigrees protruding from the most abstract and chaotic objects in this group symbolize assumptions about the natural world that I take for granted as being true. These are structures of thought that are congenital, and which have been literally perpetuated into physical aspects of the landscape as architectural ornamentation. They reach out from the central mass of these sculptures as if seeking a connection to the world around them, yet they are artificial, human centric projections. I included naturalistically represented figures of both sheep and cattle to provide a context of mundane familiarity to the more abstract formations that populate this show, however the figures of these domesticated livestock also serve to indicate how the line separating artificial and natural is itself uncertain. The most populous mammals on earth following closely behind humans, domesticated livestock are examples of how permeable the line between human thought and the more-than-human world is. The bodies of cattle and sheep have been selectively altered according to human values since the beginning of civilization, feeding and clothing humanity while being sacrificed in temples to appease the gods, ensuring that the perceived natural order would be maintained. Since the Industrial Revolution, genetic modification has been utilized to maximize the productivity of livestock. Humanity has discovered that by directly altering the DNA of both cattle and sheep, yields of wool, milk, and meat can be even further maximized to satisfy the needs of our own exponential growth. For instance, dairy cattle in the United States have been genetically

altered using CRISPR technology so that they are born without horns. This removes the need for surgical procedures to physically de-horn cattle, and is considered to be a much more humane alternative (Ritter). However, by modifying a cow to be born without horns, we are forever removing a body part that has evolved to protect the animal in the wild. This ensures that the dairy cow as a species is now better suited for an industrial environment constructed by humans, than it is the natural landscape where originally evolved alongside us. Genetic modification in this context is an example of just how powerful humanity has become in our ability to manipulate natural forces, however this power is disproportionate to humanity's consideration of the impact our choices will have upon complex ecological systems.

Alongside the recognizable forms of the sheep and the cow are sculptures depicting a change of state; from animal into ornamental object and nonorganic material. By showing the audience animal figures that are in a state of mid-transformation, I want to encourage a dynamic connection to be interpreted between the entirely representative and the entirely abstract forms encompassing the show. Despite these object's static nature, I want to indicate that they are changing into something new with each gaze directed towards them. The recognizable and unrecognizable then become two ends of an eidetic spectrum wrought in clay. Each object is an artificial mutant, with DNA passed down from dead civilizations, adapting into states of formlessness through my hands as I face a world ahead of myself that I do not understand. Viewers are invited to interpret the formal dynamic between objects as a transformational narrative, with each of their gazes acting as a mutative force.

Historical Contextualization

The fundamental mechanics of making an object out of clay by hand hasn't changed since prehistory, when humans first began utilizing this material to embody meaning. The oldest known ceramic artwork is considered to be the 26,000 year old Venus of Dolni Vestonice (Lienhard). This small, earthenware figure was molded between fingers and palms, with details excised using simple tools. The act of handling clay, compressing it into a recognizable form before it dries, protecting this fragile body until the point of giving it up to the fire to be made permanent, is what I experience as a performative recreation of this ancient act of making.



Figure 1: “Venus of Dolni Vestonice”

A form of experimental archaeology, making objects out of clay with human hands allows contemporary artists to share a direct experience with our oldest relatable ancestors. It is probably impossible to fully comprehend the motivations of ancient artists, and to understand the intended meaning that objects such as the Venus of Dolni Vestonice were created to embody or represent. After all, the people who created the Venus of Dolni Vestonice would neither recognize the names Venus nor Dolni Vestonice. However, I argue that the phenomenological action of making an object out of clay is an objective experience that unites contemporary and prehistoric humans. In this sense, clay is a medium for traveling through time.

The desire to understand where I come from and who I am are a primary motivation behind my research for creating the body of work that encompasses *Mutants*. As an American artist who is the descendent of European settlers and who is making work in post modernity, my identity is divorced from ancestry and lost amidst the exponential possibilities to invent oneself. There are no stories remaining from when my family were connected to a particular landscape. I yearn for the contextualization that knowing these stories would afford me as an individual. I sympathize with the efforts of Renaissance humanists to revitalize their perceived ancient past. However, lacking the ability to transport myself back to a time when I would have belonged somewhere, the best I can do is pay attention to the sensation of wet clay between my palms.

The power structures of Western civilization also thirst for the same connection to ancestry that I do as an individual, as evidenced by the perpetuation of decorative iconographies appropriated from the ruined facades of Ancient Rome and Greece on institutional buildings. The act of sculpting a Corinthian capitol identical to those topping the columns that once lined the Temple of Saturn on the Capitoline Hill in Rome, for instance, does recreate a sequence of aesthetic problem solving and material manipulation that allows for my concept of time travel to

occur; the act of rendering this capitol engrains the same neurological pathway in the mind of a contemporary sculptor as it would have been engrained in the mind of an ancient Roman artisan. However, the act of recreation alone betrays the disconnection between Eurocentric western culture and the history it so wants to legitimize itself by appropriating. I sense a fallacy underlying the notion that by recreating architecture and artwork from antiquity, an unbroken continuity is established between contemporary culture and the ancient civilizations it is modeling itself from. This can be evidenced by examining how many cycles of recreation Greco-Roman motifs have endured. In 15th Century Rome, The Roman Catholic Church revitalized the crumbling pagan monuments to legitimize itself as the spiritual successor to the Ancient Roman Empire (Stinger). By emphasizing the value of ancient architecture and art, papal authorities were able to appropriate Roman history as a means to indicate that the church was a continuation of Rome's perceived timeless legitimacy. Between the 17th and 18th centuries, Georgian Britain similarly adopted Greco-Roman architecture as a model for sublime construction that appealed to an emerging neoclassical interest in humanism and antiquity, fueled by the Enlightenment (Cruikshank). Piggybacking of the Roman Catholic Church's effort to utilize Greco-Roman art and architecture as a political callback to glorious empire, Britain utilized its own brand of neoclassical architecture for colonial outposts as it went on to conquer much of the globe. In North America, neoclassical efforts persisted as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington built palatial mansions that mimicked famous structures which sought to revitalize Ancient Rome in Renaissance Italy. The dome of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C. was modeled after St. Peter's Basilica in Rome, which was itself designed by Michelangelo to reference the Ancient Roman Parthenon. The Corinthian columns supporting the dome, rather than directly mimicking the acanthus leaves carved upon St. Peter's, were reimagined to

represent tobacco leaves (Bigler). I argue that each of these efforts to revitalize the glory of European antiquity, while interconnected through the establishment of a globalized colonial discourse, have more to do with the desire to legitimize emerging power structures than they do the European antiquity itself.



**Figure 2: Tobacco Leaf Capital
(Architect of the Capitol)**

The legends underlying the origins of classical western motifs also shed light on how fundamentally disconnected these motifs have become from the cultural contexts from which

they emerged. The acanthus leaf motif is attributed to the Greek sculptor Callimachus living in the 15th century BCE, and is said to have been inspired by a basket of offerings left on the grave of a child outside of a temple that Callimachus was visiting. The basket had been there for some time, and an acanthus plant had grown up through the vessel, lifting the baskets lid (Gilani).



Figure 3: Callimachus designing the Acanthus Capital (Chambray)

Bucranium, meaning cow skull in Latin, similarly has a specific religious association regarding its origin as a decorative motif. Commonly seen lining the friezes of classical and neoclassical buildings, the skulls of cows as well as sheep “allude to the Ancient Greek and Roman ceremonies of sacrifice....Each God required an animal of specific species and sex. Apollo required a bull, Jupiter an Ox but also a lamb on special occasions. Sacrificial cattle were decorated with garlands of fruit and flowers or decorative ropes with tassels. Following execution, their heads were hung on [the walls of] the temple” (Loth). These two motifs emerged from very specific cultural and religious contexts that I don’t believe contemporary mainstream westerners who subscribe to a Eurocentric world view can relate to or understand the same way that the sculptors and architects who first invented them did. For instance, mainstream western culture is not polytheistic. The acanthus leaf working its way through the basket of offerings left upon the grave of a child is a poetic image that, on its own, appears timeless; possessing power to evoke relatable meaning in a modern mind. However, when we consider that the acanthus leaf was a symbol for the goddess Athena during the time that Callimachus was alive, another dimension of contextual interpretation is revealed that contemporary humans can not access in the same way that Callimachus did. This is in part because the polytheistic religious tradition of Greece in the 15th century BCE exists today only as piecemeal Latin inscriptions carved on to stone slabs. There is no living source to ask in order to gain a clearer understanding from, only archaeological speculation. In my mind, speculation about the dead will only provide insight into the mentalities of the living.

I propose that the reality Callimachus was living in is alien to us now, despite the lingering presence of the iconography attributed to him. The ornamental acanthus leaf is in a state of strange limbo for a contemporary viewer, as is the iconography of bucrania. The

origins of these motifs are inaccessible, but the images themselves are immediately recognizable, if overlooked. They are present on entablatures in most contemporary western cities with neoclassical architecture, and serve as relatable symbols to a contemporary audience with connotations of nature, innocence, labor, and subservience. More tangibly, sheep and cattle play a physically substantial role in contemporary western lives as sources of food, clothing, and income. By referencing bucrania in this exhibition with the sculpted bodies of sheep and cattle in varying states of wholeness, my intention is to draw attention to the flimsy foundation underlying the efforts of post enlightenment rationalists in their efforts to construct the modern world by appropriating religious iconographies from long absent civilizations. By utilizing ancient iconographies to insinuate continuity between modern institutions and the perceived origins of civilization, an unavoidable tapestry of misunderstanding is perpetuated for succeeding generations to inherit.



Figure 4: Bucranium from the ruins of the Roman Theater at Arles (Clemens)

The concept of repeated misunderstanding is what led me to use the biological metaphor of mutation to frame the show, with the title of *Mutants*. A mutation is a misunderstanding between sets of DNA as genetic information is transcribed into copies within a living organism (Brown). Mutations are not necessarily malignant, or benign, and they do not always affect the outward appearance or function of an organism. While interoperable as isolated objects, the sculptures in this exhibition are also able to be seen as a transformative spectrum that visualizes the process of compounding mistranslation, flowing from points of familiarity to complete abstraction. Each sculpture harkens back to an art historical ornamental motif. Through the process of replication and translation carried out by my imprecise hands, the motifs present in the work have become altered as I allow fissures in the material to emerge, encouraging the forms to move in space towards a state of entropic chaos. The glazing process involves layering materials over the top of surfaces directly affected by my fingerprint. This material is exposed to high temperatures in a kiln, melting and fusing based off of chemical interactions that I frankly do not understand. The resulting surfaces obfuscate the original thread of information that each sculpture was encoded from as it flowed from my hands, but also allows for that information's interpretive renewal. In this sense, the intentional misunderstanding that I express in each sculpture is a generative endeavor. The acanthus leaf, recreated out of a non organic material by a person who has never seen its living counterpart, is no longer an acanthus leaf, but rather something entirely new. An important aspect to this process of misunderstanding that I want my audience to consider is the idea that I am only one Thesean plank nailed to a structure that extends much further back in time than anyone alive can remember. The process of transformation through misunderstanding portrayed by the objects making up *Mutants* (2023) did not begin with me, and it doesn't end with me either. Every member of my audience brings the

possibility of a distinct connotation to the recognizable structures present in each object based off of their individual worldviews and cultural backgrounds. The goal for me as the artist isn't to encourage any particular association or to recreate my experience of making in the mind of every audience member. These objects are meant to be refracted by each mind that touches them.



Acanthus Order, Ceramic, 18" x 7" x 36", 2023

Material Philosophy

My artwork and I have grown up in a position of ontological uncertainty, jostled and squeezed deep within the glacial crevasse between a polarity of two seemingly irreconcilable belief systems. Vitalism spans one side, materialism opposing it on the other. At the deepest point of this crevice the shear walls of each system diverge from the irreducibly essential dilemma present in recognizing the difference between objects and subjects. There is a fundamental pragmatism for survival and societal navigation to establish definitions to recognize what a thing is and what a person is respective to one another. The freshly aware child who is born into the bottom of the crevice is offered a choice of two extremes as they wrestle with the formulation of a human identity intent on survival. In recognizing an obvious distinction between things as configurations of inert matter and persons as living beings possessing a soul, the child begins to scaffold up the wall of vitalism to a position of comfortable human exceptionalism. In recognizing an obvious sameness between objects and subjects as embodiments of identical, inert material building blocks, the child ascends the wall of materialism to a comfortable position of non accountability in a mechanistically determined universe absent of meaning.

Violence is perpetuated from the comfortable fortifications on both sides of the crevasse. Both positions of vitalism and materialism are built on logic that justifies the exploitative relationship that humanity enjoys over Earth's non-human, material objects. There is no logic present in either vitalist or materialist belief systems that would compel a person to ask a pebble permission before skipping it across a pond. Likewise, there is no logic in place in either system that would require humanity to question whether crude oil was ours to burn. Choosing the fate for any being expressing agency is a violent act, and deciding which systems of matter qualify as beings and which are inert objects is a decision that humanity makes out of convenience rather

than ethics. This decision ignores the fact that non human agency is expressed by material systems without exception through constant chemical interactions and physical processes. Radioactive elements decay without humanity's intervention. The icy surface of the tundra melts and the methane resulting from thousands of years of rotting vegetation releases itself into the atmosphere. In a pool of warm mud bubbling deep inside a volcanic fissure, atoms arrange themselves into amino acids, and eventually into a system of matter that eats and swims. By assuming non human matter to be inert and incapable of agency, human centric intentions have been forced upon the world, similar to the way that Eurocentric intentions were forced indigenous cultures in all corners of the globe. In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennet describes the implicit violence embedded within the logic of a materialist perspective, which insinuates that humans are not unique amongst a universe of diverse material configurations. The logic of materialism leads to a conclusion that Humanity is fundamentally inert and non vital, which leads to a justification for the treatment of other humans as objects, according to the same attitude with which we treat the nonorganic material configurations that we live alongside (Bennet 13). This is a logic of slavery and late stage capitalist spreadsheets. From the alternative vitalist perspective, Bennet describes the theological attitude that the apparent power of human agency as the preeminent mover and shaker on Earth is evidence of humanity's status within "a divinely created order that has the shape of a fixed hierarchy. Humans are not only organic, unique, and ensouled but they also occupy the top of the ontological hierarchy, in a position superior to everything else on Earth" (Bennet 87). Divine superiority is the banner of manifest destiny and conquistadors. It is apparent that to expand the potential of divinity more broadly to nonhuman material systems is to throw an ethical monkey wrench into the moralistic platform and economic incentives driving colonialism. Expanding

humanity's consideration of objects to allow for the potential of a material awareness and agency also creates a problem for modern industry. This expansion allows for an inkling of an uncertainty to develop in the back of our minds when we strip mine the top off of a mountain. This uncertainty might lead some of us to question, are we negatively affecting a being with agency that we just can't quite recognize, and how might this affect the vast material system we are all a part of? It is important to point out that human intentions, even while human centric, are not necessarily divorced from or alien to the non human material world. Humanity is after all exemplary of the idea that matter has a potential for agency. Human bodies and minds are ultimately composed of the same elemental material building blocks as the non human things that surround us, so it can be understood that our ability to manipulate and affect Earth's material substance is more of a feature of this world's dynamic, interconnected material system than a flaw in humanity itself. This is why I think that in the effort to avoid committing violence against the planet and one another, humanity must expand how we define agency and objecthood at the same time as expanding our considerations for how we define human centrism. Because we are an undeniable part of a vast material system of human, non human and non organic things, avoiding violence isn't simply a matter of suppressing human agency. By shifting the logic of vitalist and materialist ontologies to fit within the context of an extra human material system, Human centrism could shift to become a reflective device functioning to help us understand how humanity belongs in this vast system, and how the decisions we make using our agency as humans might effect the interwoven material agents that act beyond the scope of our understanding.

The repulsion felt in response to the object, as experienced for instance when we notice a part of ourselves apotheosizing into foreign, inhuman material, betrays the tenuousness of the

logic we have built to define ourselves in accordance to the non human world. Kristeva describes the experience of abjection, “something that I do not recognize as a thing. A weight of meaninglessness, about which there is nothing insignificant, and which crushes me. On the edge of non-existence and hallucination, of a reality that, if I acknowledge it, annihilates me. There, abject and abjection are my safe- guards. The primers of my culture” (Kristeva 2). Abjection is a side effect of both the positions of vitalist human exceptionalism and materialist non accountability. As a blatant example, I find it difficult to believe that even the most staunch materialist does not cast a disdainful gaze from a position of superiority at their own feces. Likewise, the vitalist hierarchy ignores how matter continuously permeates and is divorced from human bodies. If humans are the kings and queens of the world, shouldn’t the vitalist logic insist that humanity’s refuse ought to enjoy the status of princes? So then why are we repulsed by the mountains we make out of the garbage we are responsible for creating? Kristeva describes the anxiety that lies between the bold outlines of our civilization’s most obvious and essential distinctions. The boundaries that we assume exist between our bodies, each other, the world around us, and the waste we excrete are intuitive and foundational to the way western thought has been formulated to attempt an understanding of reality and to forge the certainty of humanity’s survival and domination. We understand life through the process of isolating and categorizing distinct species. We understand material through distinguishing differences in chemical structure. We, perhaps most obviously to the western mind, make distinctions between what is alive and what is inanimate. This act of distinguishing isn’t just a tendency or inclination of western knowledge seeking efforts, it is the substance that western knowledge seeking efforts are generated from. The necessity of distinguishing where one thing ends and another thing begins is an essential ideological basis for the western conception of self, individuality, and

national identity. Evidence of how deeply rooted the act of distinction is in our western cosmological framework can be seen how we linguistically structure the world through a perpetual narrative describing subject vs. object. Kristeva describes this engrained necessity for distinction as primal repression, stating, “let us call it the ability of the speaking being, always already haunted by the Other, to divide, reject, repeat” (Kristeva 12).

Considering the ecological disaster unfolding before us in the 21st century, described by Timothy Morton as the trauma of our age that is “defining the Anthropocene” (Morton 9), the prevalence of either materialist or vitalist attitudes regarding human-nonhuman-nonorganic relations is worthy of reevaluation. Bennet proposes a solution that merges threads of logic from both materialist and vitalist positions. Humanity’s status as consisting of elemental material building blocks proves that matter has a capacity for agency. Because these material building blocks are anything but unique to the physical structure of a human, the potential of a material capacity for meaning and agency separate to humans is revealed. Bennet’s solution is what she considers as an ontology of Vital Materialism, the aim of which is to “raise the status of the materiality of which we are composed”(Bennet 12) thus in turn raising the status and actant potential of the material things we consider to be inanimate objects.

My art practice has become a way of avoiding the binary choice offered within my analogy of the ontological crevasse. Fostering an intuitive interaction between the material embodied by my fingertips and palms and the material embodied by wet clay is a modality that allows me to slip between the object-subject dichotomy in order to know them both as dynamic. A material exploration is the strategy I employ to experience physical reality alongside my static, silicate siblings. We are interstitial microbes lurking in the crevice, and our material collaborations are a wobbly scaffolding, so that we might climb detached from the walls.

My work at its core is a material based practice. In the most simplistic terms, each of the things I am involved in making can be considered as material objects that physically exist in the same space that I or a viewer does. Considering my practice in context with Bennet's Vital Materialism, I can understand my work as a collaborative union between the organic actant of my body, and the non organic actant that humanity has named clay. There is a reciprocal affect generated between both of us. When I move my fingers through clay's body I become a catalyst, all I am asking from this nonhuman material is for the thing-ness of clay to reveal itself. The clay in turn becomes a catalyst acting upon me, causing changes to occur within the material substance of my own body. The matter that my neural pathways consists of is being shaped by the clay as I handle it, physically altering me through a reinforcement of muscle memories and an ever broadening mental indexing of forms. Forces are applied to the clay with intentionality that ceases at sensation. In this way I am shaping the clay as much as it is shaping itself, there is no disguise of substance occurring in these initial formations.

Clay is a material that expresses an overt agency separate to my hand and any preconceived, directed intentions that I bring with me into the studio. What might be considered as material limitation of clay, I choose to experience as clay's inherent transformative properties and evidence of its vitality. There is an implicit compromise occurring between both our material bodies as we collaborate, and this compromise generates a new thing that couldn't have existed without our combined interaction. I exult in witnessing something that I did not expect to manifest. Thus, ceramic materials and processes offer the possibility of escape from my inherited understanding of how I use art making as a tool capable only for communicating a human perspective, while conversely acknowledging that a human perspective is what I have to bring to the table.

My desire to create art is in part propelled by a desire to experience transcendent meaning that promises to dissuade the looming dorsal fin of existential dread from circling my leaky raft of uncertainty and dragging me down into the inky black void of meaninglessness. The unavoidable human-centric perspective I bring with me to acts of material collaboration is a quest to feel a tangible substance pervading history, to experience a continuity of emotions, creativity, and meaning that reaches back into pre-human time. This is my naive effort to rebel against the possibility that my consciousness is a chemical accident and that my entire experience as a self is a sublime illusion. However my desire to create art is equally driven by my fascination with material, how the sensation of connecting to a force beyond human understanding makes me feel like more of an earthling who is part of an utterly vast material mosaic, and less like a holy human tyrant ruling over a lifeless rock.

There is a needle of uncertainty that persists in the back of my mind, a gnawing doubt over the truth of material vitality. I can't ignore the possibility that through my observation of a nonhuman thing, I could be merely projecting my own subjectivity, naive aspirations, utopian hopes and inherently human centric qualifiers for meaning onto a non human other and labeling this phantom projection as an external vitality. As Bennet explains, through the realist pursuit of Lucretius, Heidegger's attempts to understand the true nature of external things through phenomenological experience, and Theodor Adorno's concept of non-identity, objects are in effect created through human observation as a mental abstraction of a foreign other that exists separately to us in physical space. Efforts to determine a realist vision of world cease to be real at the perimeter of human interpretation Bennet explains, "Lucretius quests for the thing itself, but there is no there there—or, at least, no way for us to grasp or know it, for the thing is always already humanized; its object status arises at the very instant something comes into our

awareness.” (Bennet 17). For Adorno, there is an alien externality to any physical thing that humans will perceive as an object. The implication here is that the true nature of anything existing outside of the human realm is definitively elusive.

However, my uncertainty revolving around the potential agency of non human material flows in the other direction as well. If I can never fully know what a thing separate to myself is, how can I know for certain that the thing is in fact inert and non vital? An assumption is required to leap to a conclusion in either direction. In *Hyperobjects*, Timothy Morton explains how the temporal and spatial limitations of human perception prohibit the ability to witness the entirety of systems that extend beyond our awareness, using the enormous interconnectedness of climate systems to envision global warming as a hyperobject that cannot be viewed from a singular perspective (Morton).

The idea of an object with a singular, definable identity is a human centric notion. When we examine the physical properties of matter at an irreducible level, it can be seen that boundaries don't really exist in the sanctimonious manner the way we as humans imagine such borders existing. Things are made up of systems of smaller things. Bennet uses the material structure of metals to reveal a concept of interconnected formation, describing how a metallic crystalline structure determines a larger formation by impacting the growth trajectories of their neighbors. Interconnectedness and the flow of matter from one state to another is a feature of a material world. Affect is unavoidable from one system of matter to another. Considering the material status of the structure of the human mind, it is clear to me that to avoid violence, the affect of intention on a material system is what will determine the ethical efficacy of human-nonhuman interaction. The goal isn't to dominate or subjugate, to bend matter to my will. Rather, the goal is to manifest and to aid in the realization of a material's latent vitality.



Making, Ceramic, 13" x 7" x 34", 2023

The Exhibition

Out of the eleven works displayed in *Mutants* (2023), three objects have been aligned with their pedestals to be linearly oriented to the walls of the gallery space, and placed in centralized zones so that they divide the space evenly. These three objects are composed of gestural, biomorphic structures that directly represent their process of making; the clay having been pinched and extruded through the intuitive sequence of my hands movement through it. There has been no attempt to hide the materiality of these objects and their innate clay-ness. The cracks, creases, and torn edges present within each structure relay the compromise that inevitably

occurs when the gesture of my fingertips exceeds the physical limitation of the clay body. Each of these imperfections reveals the generative possibility within the mechanism of my own misunderstanding regarding technical handling of this material. I am imposing myself onto the material, and the material is imposing itself right back. In this way, each of these objects enables a conversation to take place between the internalized formal rhythms that underlay my intuitive gestures and a physical reality that is literally beyond my grasp. Along the spectrum of objects that this exhibition consists of, ranging from identifiable to unrecognizable, these three sculptures are the most formally chaotic and abstract. By situating them in a logical accordance to the rigid confines of the gallery space, their presence is emphasized as culminations of the transformative process that the objects orbiting them are intended to indicate through their respective levels of formal realization. By orienting these three objects to be parallel to the walls, they fulfill the spatial expectation of an audience that is set forth by the rectilinear layout of the gallery. By fulfilling this expectation with objects that stand out as being placed in harmony with the constraints of the space, these three pieces operate as visual anchors for the audience to contextualize the other works present in exhibition as they maneuver through the space. Emerging from each of the anchoring objects are delineated filigrees that are interpretations of the acanthus leaf, framing devices, and grotesque marginalia that have been used traditionally to emphasize artificial constructions in western art history. In their reference to architectural ornament, the porcelain protrusions speak to humanized space and a codified interpretation of nature that is linear and formally balanced. They reach out of bewildering masses as if searching for the light, akin to the long dead plants that once inspired ancient sculptors.



Anchor Object, Ceramic, 38" x 20" x 42", 2023



Anchor Object (Mimic), 24" x 18" x 50", Ceramic, 2023



Anchor Object (Entrails), 22" x 30" x 36", Ceramic, 2023

While the three anchor pieces function by grounding the viewers experience of the work as being directly related to the linear confines of the space containing this exhibition, the remaining eight objects are each placed on a slightly different angle that are oblique to the walls of the gallery and the linear orientation of the three anchoring objects. This allows for spatial relationships to be interpreted between the peripheral objects that are distinct from the gallery space itself. By defying the expectation of rectilinear alignment that is established by the gallery space and the place of the anchoring objects, the peripheral objects embody a unified dynamic through the similarities in their pedestal's alignment to each other. This activates the perception of smaller, subtle spaces within the broad expanse of the gallery that illustrates a network of formal interactions between the objects and their neighbors, rather than a disparate array of isolated objects.

By displaying the majority of objects on axis's that are off kilter from the linear matrix of the rectilinear gallery space, the work begins to revolve around itself. This enables the audience to contextualize each object as being related to each other, while still allowing the objects to exist in the space as individuals due to the fact that each object stands upon an independent pedestal. It is important that the audience serves as the force that connects the work together narratively. Rather than enforcing viewers to make interpretive leaps between work by placing the objects on a unified plane or in a pre-packaged setting that insinuates an obvious connection between them, I want to loosely insinuate that connections can be made. In this sense, I have arranged the objects in this exhibition to be experienced by the audience in the same way as they might experience a pile of scattered building blocks in a child's playroom. The potential for narrative assembly is present, but the act of interpretation and discovery is left up to each viewer.



Installation View of *Mutants*

Rather than casting a random distribution of objects throughout the gallery space, my intention was to meet my audience halfway by insinuating a narrative connection between objects by grouping certain objects in close proximity to reinforce the connection between them. The objects titled *Ornamental Lamb #1* and *Ornamental Lamb #2* serve the purpose of introducing a transformational narrative that is linking objects in the show, which is indicated by the contrast between the forms of a naturalistically represented sheep and a sheep with a body that is clearly distorted, exposing an interior structure.



Left: *Ornamental Lamb #1* , 18" x 6" x 13", Ceramic, 2023

Right: *Ornamental Lamb #2*, 20" x 8" x 24", Ceramic, 2023

The interior structure that is growing from the body of *Ornamental Lamb #2* is intentionally colored with pink and red glaze to evoke viscera. This provides a reference point of realism that serves as one end of the representational spectrum that the other objects in this exhibition encapsulate. This piece is the most literal depiction in the show of a living creature transforming into an artificial, human-centric ornament. The form of a sheep's body sculpted in clay is immediately recognizable and mundane. However it is also entirely strange to me; a three dimensional shadow of a living being while sharing no material similarities to the creature it represents. By taking the form of a living creature and transforming its body into clay, I worry that I am creating an artificial monster, perpetuating an affectation towards the natural world that has more to do with my human centric projection than truth as it exists outside of myself.

Ornamental lamb #1 and *Ornamental Lamb #2* speak towards the sinister aspect to the act of repurposing an innocent creature's form to serve my individual pursuits of meaning.

Ornamental Cow #1 and *Ornamental Cow #2* are also grouped closely together, located diagonally across the gallery space from the two sheep. This placement frames a zone within the gallery space between the recognizable imagery represented by these sculptures, which allows for the audience to encounter a reoccurrence of familiar and relatable forms as they wander further into the space to witness increasingly abstract objects. *Ornamental Cow #1* reinforces the presence of realism that is established to the audience through *Ornamental Lamb#1*, however while *Ornamental Lamb #1* is textured and colored to reference classical figure sculpture and the colorlessness of plaster or marble, *Ornamental Cow #1* is textured with a varied brown glaze that references the leather skin of a living cow. This allows the viewer to experience the representational imagery within the exhibition as slipping between states of natural and artificial. This prepares a fluid expectation that nudges the audience into contextualizing the cows and

sheep as belonging to the same reality as the highly abstracted anchor pieces. The physiognomy of the *Ornamental Cow #1* is also much more detailed than the figure of *Ornamental Lamb #1*, with a greater emphasis on articulated musculature. However, this emphasis on detail also amplifies the points at which the realism of the cow begins to break down; when my hand as the sculptor shows through the formal articulation despite my best efforts to hide it. In effect, I am intentionally highlighting the limitations of my technical skill, so that the technical flaws of this sculpture are exposed to the audience, and that the quality of representation is beginning to unravel. The uncertain state of this work as both material object and representational idea is meant to subtly indicate the loose reality imagined by the collective works in this exhibition.



Ornamental Cow #1, 28" x 9" x 13", Ceramic, 2023



***Ornamental Cow #2*, 24" x 10" x 15", Ceramic, 2023**

Reality as it is depicted by this exhibition begins to become messier after this point, as exemplified by *Ornamental Cow #2*, and *Ornamental Cow #3*. Each of these sculptures continue to represent the body of a cow, however the material aesthetic of the clay is beginning to play a larger role in each piece. *Ornamental Cow#2* continues the naturalistic coloration of *Ornamental Cow #1*, however half of its figure has been made to appear as if it were in the process of dissolving into a formless tangle that references its own materiality. Similar to *Ornamental Lamb #2*, there are traditionally decorative forms that have been incorporated into the abstracted body, however these forms have been distorted, stretched, and broken. While maintaining an art historical reference, this object is in a much louder conversation with the material itself, approaching a similar state to the anchor pieces. *Ornamental Cow #3* calls back to the idealized artificiality of *Ornamental Sheep #1* with a recognizable cow form made of white porcelain.

The cow form in this piece has, however, been subjected to another level of abstraction, having been flipped to defy gravity, with its hooves facing the ceiling. The body of this cow is also in a state of obliteration, with a stark contrast between its sculpted porcelain and the geologically inspired stoneware that the cow is flowing into and over.



Ornamental Cow #3, 15" x 12" x 21", Ceramic, 2023

Dragon is the only object in the show that has no pedestal, and shares floor space with the feet of the audience. As the audience navigates the gallery space, this piece directs their movement as an obstacle at the same time as inviting inspection by being inscrutable at a distance. Similar to the anchoring objects, *Dragon* represents a culmination of the transformative process of abstraction that is suggested by the formal dynamics expressed by the previously listed objects. A geologically inspired mess of pinched clay and layered glaze that is interspersed with sculpted wings and talons, *Dragon* appears to have slithered into the gallery space as if it were a member of the audience, forsaking the need of a display device. While the pedestals supporting every other object in the show create a small world for each object to inhabit that is separated from the world inhabited by the audience, *Dragon* disrupts the separation between the audience and object, literally sharing the same reality as the audience by occupying the space that the audience is meant to walk upon. The forms of wings and talons supply the audience with connotations of natural forces that are beyond humanities control, and its glazed surface is an exercise in working with a process that I do not fully control. Each swirl of color and over-fluxed drip is literally an unintended consequence, as I intentionally utilized a method of reckless abandon when applying *Dragon*'s glazed skin. By allowing my gestures to be overwritten by the heat of the kiln, I am using this object to underscore the show by representing the frustration I feel as an artist in attempting to make the freedoms felt within the psychological reality of my mind tangible. It is a flock of raptors transmuted into a static object with wings that are vestigial and too small to support its weight. This object is a dragon that cannot fly outside of my imagination.



Dragon, 15' x 4' x 20", Ceramic, 2023



Top: Installation view of *Dragon*
Bottom: Installation view of *Mutants*



Conclusion

Mutants (2023) is an exhibition that encourages its audience to interpret a narrative of transformation that is unfolding between each object on display, interconnecting fundamentally legible forms with abstract structures that embody the work's materiality as well as the energy of my physical struggle during the process of creation. My role in creating this work concludes when it is put on display for an audience. The audience is in possession of every object on display after this point. The audience's gaze introduces a tapestry of connotations and personalized context to the imagery and abstract forms offered to them in this exhibition, bestowing alien meaning to each object that exceeds my individualized rationale as the artist. It is essential to me that the work I create allows for its interpretation to be open ended, and to continue evolving outside of myself. The history of representative art in western civilization is tangled inseparably with a political legacy of colonial domination. Each of the classical motifs that have inspired the creation of this exhibition; the architectural filigrees, figurative sculpture, acanthus leaves, and bucrania are so thoroughly embedded into the American landscape as decorative tropes that it never occurred to me to question why they were there in the first place. My European ancestors brought their decorative iconographies with them as they settled the continent, and while the acanthus leaves and corinthian capitols that my ancestors embellished their settlements with were perhaps thought of no further than as innocent reminders of a distant homeland, the presence of European iconography on this land is an assertion of colonial power. It is also a reminder of the iconographies that are absent, which would otherwise be embellished upon native cities had these cultures not been oppressed, and erased, by European colonialism.

I believe that enabling manifold interpretation with abstract art is an anti imperial act. While the Eurocentric idealization of nature is baked into the sculptural iconography I have chosen to study, I am reversing this effect of a singular perspective and giving power over to my audience. There is no imposition of meaning in the raw, material based abstractions that the objects in this exhibition culminate in. My audience is allowed to enter into a world of their own making in each of these objects, and I want the work itself to draw attention to this possibility. Colonialism is antithetical to the notion of an audience with agency: it is the forced imposition of a singular set of ideals onto people without considering that these forced ideals are a limited, fallible perspective. I am using Eurocentric devices and referencing a past of imperial grandeur, but my intention is that by altering these rigidly idealized, “naturalistically” representative figures and ornamental motifs with the intentionally clumsy gesture of my hand, I can enable my work to swell into a narrative bigger than any one person or philosophical agenda. By juxtaposing representations of a natural world that I have inherited with material based gestures that have more to do with the sensation of making than depictions of a particular reality, I am subverting the colonial framework that I have inherited, instead of refuting its factor in my social identity entirely. The material is as such, allowed to speak over the din of human rationalization.

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