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Fragments and Transcendence

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FRAGMENTS AND TRANSCENDENCE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts
Visual Arts

by
David Hill
December 2010

Accepted by:
Mike Vatalaro, Committee Chair
Anderson Wrangle
Andrea Feeser

ABSTRACT

The fragmented figure is a compelling image. To present the figure in fragments is to place the viewer in a position of recognizing their own mortality and fragility, eliciting an emotional response that goes beyond an aesthetic appreciation of the body as form. The *Venus de Milo*, arguably one of the most well recognized works of art in all of history illustrates this idea perfectly. There are plenty of complete sculptures of the goddess from the same period, but the armless *Venus de Milo* stands as the epitome of grace and beauty above the rest, and any attempts to restore the sculpture have failed miserably. From this we can deduce that, in the words of art critic Dr. Tessa Adams, “...fragmentation had been transformed as the agency of sufficiency, and thereby the agency of the sublime.” Presenting the fragmented figure somehow became a way to reveal strength and beauty.

My work makes use of the fragmented form, both abstract and figurative, to explore the suffering, fragility, and mortality inherent in life while alluding to a transcendence over those very things. Holes on the pieces can be perceived both as wounds and as passageways, implying various narratives of suffering in which the figures exist and drawing attention to the interior of the forms while calling into question the significance of what is held inside. The interesting thing for me is when the wounds and openings become more than evidence of suffering and pain but portals through which light can enter, bringing a form of symbolic transcendence to the figures in much the same way that suffering, once endured, can reveal and even produce strength in a person’s life.

In a personal journal entry, Antony Gormley states that his art "...comes from the same source as the need for religion: wanting to face existence and discover meaning."

At its core, my own work arises from the same desire: to provide a place to examine the suffering we all experience and how it can be overcome. Whether it is through wounds, passageways, missing limbs, or bandages, the incomplete and damaged form speaks to us with an emotional resonance, reflecting the scars and pain we all sometimes feel.

Ultimately my goal is to meet the audience in the midst of their own troubling circumstances and hint at the fact that there is hope despite the suffering, that in shared pain we can find solidarity and strength.

DEDICATION

To my Heavenly Father, through whom all things are possible.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The fragmented figure is a compelling image. Even a cursory look at art history will reveal the truth of that statement. It can be seen in the work of Rodin, one of the most influential sculptors of the early twentieth century, as well as in a vast array of more recent artists, such as Stephen De Staebler, Manuel Neri, and Marc Quinn. The *Venus de Milo*, arguably one of the most well recognized works of art in all of history, illustrates the idea perfectly. There are plenty of complete sculptures of the goddess from the same period, but the armless *Venus de Milo* stands as the epitome of grace and beauty above the rest, and any attempts to restore the sculpture have failed miserably. From this we can deduce that, in the words of art critic Dr. Tessa Adams, "...fragmentation had been transformed as the agency of sufficiency, and thereby the agency of the sublime."

But there is more to it than a striving for "the sublime." The fragmented figure speaks to the viewer in a language more abstract and empathetic in nature than the whole or complete figure. Ceramicist and critic Edmund de Waal addresses this when he says, "To break a figure or to leave it incomplete is therefore to enter the territory not only of the psychology of destruction, it is also to raise the imagery of the vulnerability of bodies, their intense fragility" (Brown). So to present the figure in fragments is to place the viewer in a position of recognizing their own mortality and fragility, eliciting an emotional response that goes beyond an aesthetic appreciation of the body as form. This is the realm in which my thesis work exists.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BODY INCOMPLETE

The figures in my exhibition are for the most part limbless. As a result the figures stand in a state of impotency and helplessness, unable to take control of their own fate, and only capable of, in essence, existing. Even when they do have arms, such as in the piece *Three Graces* (Fig. 1.1), they seem to somehow be constricted, wrapped in to the body in a gesture of self-protection as well as confinement. Each figure is also sightless due to an incomplete head, closed eyelids, or wrappings of some sort, which function as blindfolds or as bandages depending on the reading of the viewer. In either case the figures have to exist oblivious to their surroundings, taking whatever life throws at them with a measure of stoicism and faith.

Perhaps more important are the holes that perforate all of the figures. In a way the holes command center stage, providing varying degrees of entrance into the interior of the figures and forcing the viewer to ask what caused them. My desire is for the holes to function in many different capacities on the figures, providing a compelling ambiguity that allows for a depth of concept.

The most obvious understanding would be that the holes are wounds, alluding to a narrative of suffering and pain unique to each of the figures. This can easily be seen in the pieces *Sebastian* (Fig. 2.1) and *Hypomone* (Fig. 3.1) which are both riddled with numerous openings that can be interpreted as bullet holes or puncture wounds. What is interesting to me is that the holes become something more than wounds and scars. At some point they become entranceways or windows into the interior of the figure,

shedding light on what is inside, and inviting the viewer to contemplate the interior and what resides there. The instant light penetrates the darkness within there is a redemptive quality bestowed through the wounds, much like suffering can produce character. In a recorded conversation with Diane Apostolos-Cappadona, Stephen De Staebler talks about this phenomenon:

“I have discovered that the unasked-for accident can also be the salvation of what you are doing. This is true in life, too, if you can get enough distance from the hot-headed front lines. Things go wrong in your life, and in some strange way they are really going right. I think that is what religion does. It addresses suffering. It is only through suffering that you become human. It hurts like hell, and nobody asks for it, unless he is masochistic or saintly. But once you have endured it, you invariably are richer and more alive than before you had to suffer” (Apostolos-Cappadona 32).

In effect, the wounds endured from suffering become an instrument for a person’s transcendence over the pain of this world. Going back to the piece *Sebastian* (Fig. 2.1), the viewer is confronted with a small, fragile figure that is covered with holes from what could be bullets or arrows, much like Saint Sebastian who was shot through with multiple arrows. In this case, however, the holes become a pattern, a decorative place for light to enter, and as the viewer walks around the figure, the light from the holes on the other side shimmer in glimpses through the holes facing the viewer. The wounds become *Sebastian’s* redemption by illuminating the interior.

That brings me to a secondary understanding of the holes, which is the idea that the openings are passageways into, out of, and through the figures. As I stated before, the ambiguity of the holes is an important aspect of the work, so the shape and handling of the holes range from the natural all the way to the mechanical or structural. In many cases the holes reference architectural portals more than wounds; therefore the bodies essentially become thresholds, the points at which an exchange or “crossing over” takes place, separating the interior from the exterior and bringing to light the idea of two different realms existing in and around the body.

Take, for instance, the piece *T'Shuvah* (Fig. 5.1). Literally meaning “to return” in Hebrew, the name refers to the process of repentance in Judaism as well as in Christianity, or in other words, it refers to a return to the people God created us to be. This particular figure has only one hole, though it is a compositional focal point. The opening is architectural in nature, referencing a corridor that enters through the figure’s chest and out the back between the shoulder blades. It implies a journey, one which occurs in everyone’s life and can be seen as a spiritual journey that takes place within a person in the midst of trials and suffering. The hole represents the figure’s own path to transcendence.

Another example of the hole as a passageway can be seen in the piece *Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah* (Fig. 8.1), which is a set of three figures with wrappings around their forehead and eyes and with open mouths. The tops of their head are replaced with a sort of funnel, and the arms are missing, leaving holes in their stead. What’s interesting about these figures is that though the funnel hole on the top of the head implies an

entryway into the heads of the figures, the mouths become the focal point, leaving open the understanding of whether things are entering or leaving the figures. Are they speaking or breathing, expelling or inhaling? Named after the Biblical figures more commonly known by their slave names Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were thrown into a fiery furnace by the Babylonian king yet did not perish, the three figures are constrained by the wrappings around their torsos and heads, but the push and pull of the funnel and mouth holes imply an exchange that they accept and maybe even welcome. Like Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, they exist in the “flames” of their circumstances and incompleteness through faith alone, not letting their trials overwhelm them, but persevering to the end.

Whether it is through wounds, passageways, missing limbs, or bandages, the incomplete and damaged figure speaks to us with an emotional resonance that speaks to our own struggles and suffering. Ultimately my goal is to meet the audience in the midst of their own troubling circumstances and hint at the fact that there is hope despite the suffering and that the only way human beings will have compassion toward others is through experiencing suffering of their own.

CHAPTER THREE

THE BODY AS A TEMPLE

If the figures themselves operate as thresholds, the place at which things pass from one realm to the next, then the spaces inside the figures become set apart, creating a dialogue between what's happening on the exterior and in the interior. The exterior of these figures, for the most part, speaks toward an existence of suffering and mortality, but the interior of the figures asks for a different understanding, one that exists on the levels of spiritual and psychological existence. In effect, the interior becomes a sacred space, a place where only things of value and consequence can enter. The inner life can reveal much about who a person is, and trials and struggles have a way of bringing to light the person's true nature, much like the wounds and holes on the figures illuminate the interior.

The idea of the figure as a vessel is not a new one. A look at ancient ceramics shows numerous examples of figurative vessels used in rituals and ceremonies. The haniwa figures of ancient Japan serve as a perfect example of the figurative vessel. Often simply modeled with sharply cut holes for eyes and mouths, and coming in all shapes and sizes not always figurative, the haniwa figures were created out of an earthenware clay and were placed on burial mounds after a person's death. It was believed that the soul of the deceased would take up residence in the figures after the burial. They essentially became temples for the spirits of the dead, sacred artifacts that the Japanese respected and honored.

My thesis work creates a strong reference to the haniwa figures in many ways. Formally there is a connection through the use and color of the earthenware clay body, which places the work firmly in the context of an historical artifact. The figures are also primarily upright and static, making use of simple, hollow cylinders of clay similar to the simple forms used in the haniwa, and drawing a connection to other figurative sculpture such as the terra-cotta warriors of China. Some of them can even be seen as columns, exuding an air of stability and permanence, standing resolute under the weight of the trials of life.

A conceptual connection also exists in the function of the figures as temples, vessels of sacred interior spaces set apart for something intangible, though my own goals aren't as specific as the souls of the dead. In a way the figures in my exhibition become sentinels, connecting the present to the past and bringing to light a state of human suffering and fragmentation that exists outside of time, but focusing on the interior space that is created, maybe even guarded, by the figures themselves.

The set of figures *Three Graces* (Fig. 1.1) illustrates the idea of the body as a temple. Referencing the Three Graces of Greek mythology and their artistic depiction over the years, these figures are aggressively wrapped so as to appear bound, with their arms tucked in to their chest in what can be understood as a protective pose. The openings on the front of the figures suggest the facade of a temple or a cathedral with a pointed arched entryway, the arms acting as columns to either side. In contrast, the interior is smooth and brightly colored, illuminated by holes arranged up the spine in increasing size to draw the eye upwards into the space. Creating an interior that is so

separate to the exterior leads the audience to ask what belongs inside the space, which can be answered in spiritual or natural terms depending on the preference. The point is that the interior space has a purpose for something meaningful; it begs the question to what do we ascribe meaning in our lives? The suffering and pain of the exterior of the world can only minimally affect the interior, and any wounds, fragmentation, and bindings only serve to illuminate what is held inside.

Each figure in the exhibition allows varying degrees of access to the interior, but for the most part they are empty, allowing the audience to imagine whatever they would like in the interior. The one exception is in the piece *Chronos* (Fig. 9.1) which has a bed of sand just inside the architectural openings on each side. *Chronos* has many wounds and openings with an incomplete head and missing limbs, but though the sand is a reference to decay and the passage of time, it also brings to mind a zen garden, so there is a sense of peace that exists inside the figure, illuminated by all of its piercings.

The figures in my exhibition should not just be seen as expressions of mortality, suffering, and fragmentation, but it is equally if not more important that they are vessels and temples reserved for something sacred. It is only through the punctures, tears, and other openings that the interior is revealed, in the same way that suffering paradoxically reveals and can produce strength in a person. When all is said and done, that which is inside a person is often the key to surviving the pain and suffering of the world around them.

CHAPTER 4

THE WALL PIECES

Within the scope of my thesis exhibition, the wall pieces serve as counterpoints to the freestanding figures that take up the bulk of the show. Conceptually the wall pieces have much in common with the figures, but they address mortality, fragility, and suffering from two different strategies.

The wall piece series that perhaps has the most in common with the freestanding figures is the series of figurative pieces called *Modern Saints* (Fig. 10.1-13.1). Created using varying degrees of additive and subtractive relief, the *Modern Saints* are slightly more specific in their approach to the figure and the implied narrative surrounding the figures. Each composition takes a different real life story of a person killed for their faith in the past 50 years as inspiration, locating the sculptural body of each figure in a pictorial plane that highlights their wounds yet draws attention to the peacefulness of their expressions. Through folds and layers of clay slabs each figure is also given a sort of halo, a reference to the religious paintings of the past that is further enhanced by surface treatments of terra sigillata and oxide washes.

When the audience views the freestanding figures in my thesis exhibition, the lack of individual characteristics or, for the most part, sexual identification allows the viewers to empathize with the plight of the figures and to possibly even see themselves within them. The freestanding pieces are representations of an “everyman,” a stand in for human beings as a whole, facilitating a more visceral and emotional connection with the audience. In contrast, the wall figures present an experience that is looked at from the

outside in, evoking more of an intellectual connection to the condition of the figures and the implied stories that go along with them. My goal is not to ask the audience to identify themselves with a person such as Jim Elliot, who was speared by Waodani tribesman in the rainforest of Ecuador in 1956 (Fig. 10.1), or Gayle Williams, who was shot on the streets of Afghanistan in 20089 (Fig. 12.1). Instead my goal is for the audience to respond to the condition of the figures, bearing witness to their martyrdom and their transcendence over the horror and suffering of their deaths.

Elegy (Fig. 14.1-2), on the other hand, takes an entirely different approach to understanding the human condition. *Elegy* is a collection of abstract, spherical forms that, though not figurative, also speak toward fragility and mortality. Each piece in the installation is representative of an individual life, fragile and incomplete in appearance, yet drawing strength from it's companions surrounding it. In many ways each piece is a frail reminder, a sort of husk or exoskeleton of what once was and is now gone, asking the audience to consider the significance of the void within the forms. The arrangement of the forms is meant to be lyrical in nature, flowing naturally from small groupings to more isolated pieces, commenting on what it means to be a part of a whole in the midst of the fragility of this transitory life. Could it be that in the suffering that occurs alongside others, in the solidarity that is experienced in shared pain, we can find a form of transcendence over the pain?

In *Elegy* as well as in the figures of my exhibition, the mark and gesture of my hand on the clay is very important. Not only do the fingerprints and the hand marks on the surface create a reference to the body, but the handling of the clay also creates a reference to the condition of a life lived and, to a certain amount, the trials and struggles that go along with it. The evidence of my hand alludes to the process of creation, which in turn makes a connection to the process of living and dying, creating and revealing the holes and the wounds in much the same way that pain and suffering is revealed in the living of a life. It is through the connection of gestural energy by means of the marks of creation that the forms in *Elegy* find a sense of unity, existing separately in all their haunting fragility yet finding cohesiveness and strength as a whole.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

In a personal journal entry, Antony Gormley states that his art “...comes from the same source as the need for religion: wanting to face existence and discover meaning” (Hutchinson 120). At its core, my own work arises from the same desire: to provide a place to approach the pain, suffering, and mortality inherent in existence and to start a dialogue that examines the value of suffering and a possible transcendence over it.

The works in my exhibition are a symbolic representation of our fallen state, our destiny here on earth, a condition that binds us all together with cords of humanity, and, in the words of Christian author and speaker Philip Yancey, “...only by accepting that destiny can we escape gravity and receive grace” (273). This grace is what withstands the pain and suffering, that perseveres under pressure. It is our source of compassion for those suffering with us and around us. It is, in essence, our salvation, the source of transcendence found within my figures, and it is the place at which my work finds its culmination.

FIGURES



Fig. 1.1
Three Graces

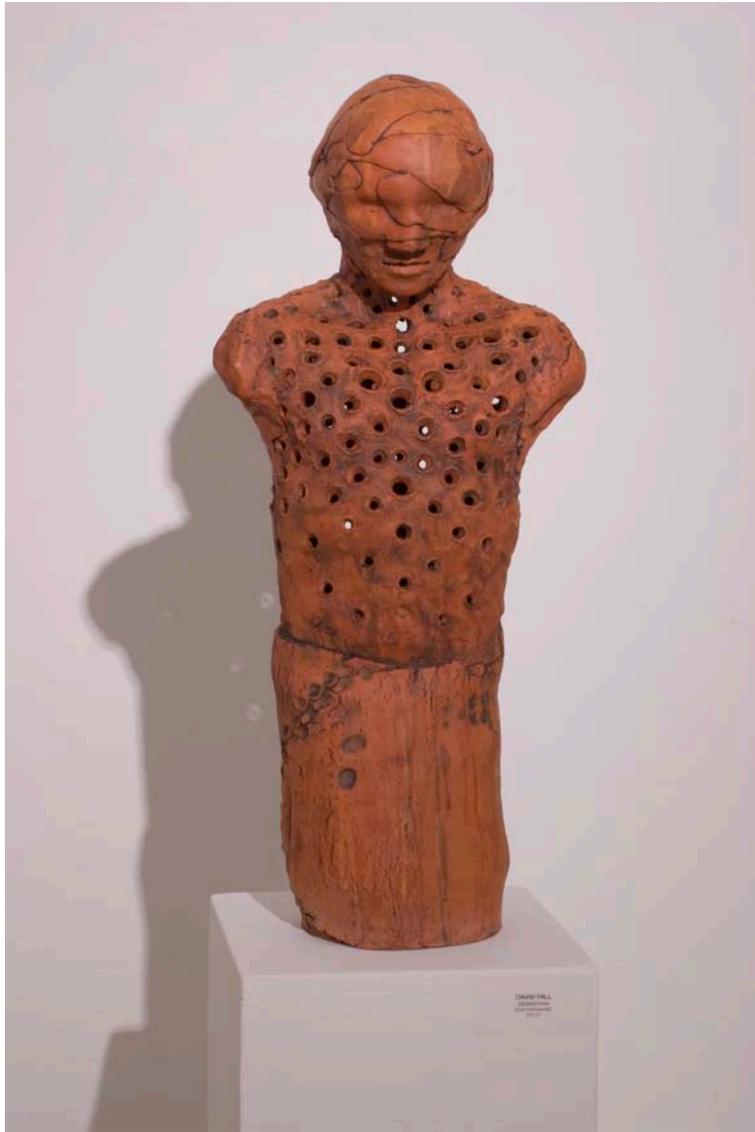


Fig. 2.1
Sebastian



Fig. 3.1
Hypomene



Fig. 4.1

Thomas



Fig. 5.1
T'Shuvah



Fig. 6.1
Ephphatha



Fig. 7.1
El Castillo Interior



Fig. 8.1

Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah



Fig. 9.1
Chronos

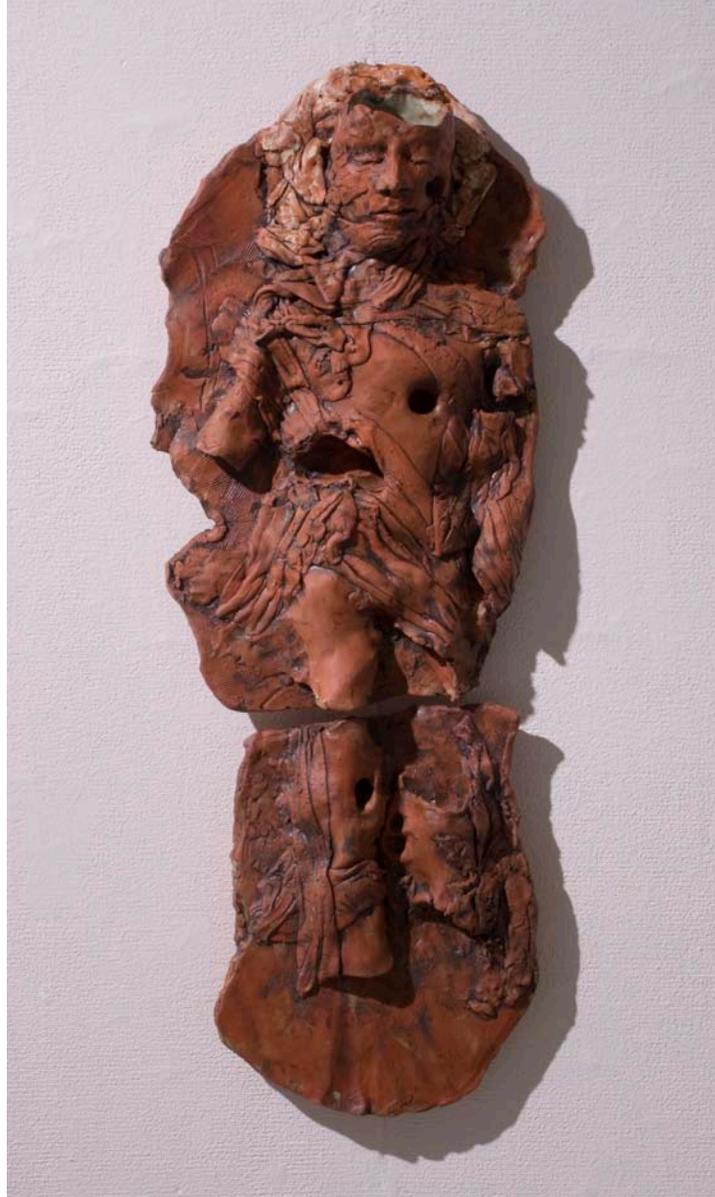


Fig. 10.1

Jim Elliot, Ecuador, 1956



Fig. 11.1

Nathan S. Dabak, Nigeria, 2010



Fig. 12.1

Gayle Williams, Afghanistan, 2008



Fig. 13.1
Artur Suleimanov, Russia, 2010



Fig. 14.1
Elegy



Fig. 14.2
Elegy (detail)



Fig 15.1
Installation View 1



Fig.15.2
Installation View 2



Fig. 15.3
Intallation View 3

APPENDIX

Clays and Materials

Cone 04 -- Red Earthenware

Red Art	50
OM4 Ball Clay	10
Gold Art	15
Talc	12
Frit 3124	5
Ocmulgee Clay	5
Additives:	
Fine Grog	7
Coarse Grog	2
AND/OR	
1 handful of nylon fibers	

Red Terra Sigillata

1500 grams	Red Art or Ocmulgee
6 grams	Calgon
14 cups	Water

1-2 tbs of black mason stain (6650) mixed to 2 cups of mixture for color variation.

Colored Terra Sigillatas

750 grams	TN Ball Clay
750 grams	EPK
6 grams	Calgon
14 cups	Water

2 tbs of following mason stains mixed to 2 cups of mixture for color variation

Teal Blue – Mason Stain 6305
Evergreen – Mason Stain 6200
Peacock Green – Mason Stain 6266
Canary Yellow -- 6410

A light wash of Black Copper Oxide was also used to enhance textures.

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