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Anxious Totems

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Anxious Totems

By

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THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the Degree of Masters of Art.
With a Major in Ceramics

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University Park, IL 60466

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Thank you to everyone who has supported me these past couple of years. Especially my mom and Nico, who have been my biggest cheerleaders. My family and friends, who I have neglected in order to achieve my dreams. I am truly blessed to have you all stick by me through my ups and downs. I promise to make it up to all of you.

Thank you to my studio mates, for being the most caring, fun, and supportive group of people. I know these friendships are for life, thank you for the camaraderie.

Finally, thank you Leanne. Thank you for being my mentor and the person who introduced me to ceramics, teaching me, sharing your ceramic genius, and most of pushing me to realize my potential. You have been so patient with me during this entire journey, thank you.
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Introduction/ Artist Statement

Throwing clay on the potter’s wheel, I feel a wave of calm, like I am finally in control of something. Carving and creating texture on clay after a piece is thrown, is the ultimate release. Carving is obsessive, compulsive, and even ritualistic. Each mark that I make has a purpose or thought behind it. This is something that is definitely different from my daily cycle of panic and unease.

Anxiety.

I worry too much, I can’t turn this off. Clay has been the only outlet I found to help me hush these racing thoughts. By creating ceramic sculptural works my anxious thoughts are released.

Living with anxiety is the hardest thing I do every day. Panic hits me when I first wake up, planning the day in my head; what obstacles am I going to face today? Who can I possibly run into? Getting out of the house is an ordeal in itself; going to get gasoline for the car, getting groceries for the fridge. Facing people is the worst. What if I can’t articulate my thoughts to another person? What if I can’t even get a word out? What if ... what if ... what if ...

The body of work that I have created for my Masters of Art Thesis Exhibition is my anxiety in ceramic form. I make art to cope with my anxiety, and the amount of stress and anxiety I went through is depicted in my first solo exhibit.

Through my work, I want to get the viewers to feel my anxiety walking among the sculptures. I want the viewers to make the connection that these sculptures are actually a representation of me, in everyday life, uneasy, precarious, and anxious.
Explanation of Title and Show Title

Anyone who knows me knows that I am:

1. Polish

2. A fan of play on words and puns

The title of my show happened naturally. I was having an ordinary conversation with a friend, when asked to describe my work. I said "its totem pol...ish", realizing what I just said, it just clicked. Even though my work has nothing to do with my heritage, I believe that the title is fitting in a different sense in that I often use jokes and comedy as a coping mechanism to mask my anxiety.

As for the title of this paper, I wanted to put the jokes aside, and be direct. This paper is about anxiety, me, and my work.
Psychology of My Anxiety

Before becoming an artist, I had my sights set on being an art therapist. It is usually said that those going into the psych field are really doing it for themselves; to learn more about their disorder, self-diagnose, and self-help themselves. In my case, this was partly true. I also wanted to help others. I went through the motions, work and research, and received my bachelor’s degree in clinical psychology, with the bulk of my research in art therapy and abnormal psychology. Abnormal psychology refers to the branch of psychology that is “the science of mental disorder” (Davies, 1931). Emotions, thoughts, and behaviors that are unusual really interested me, especially considering I was experiencing these abnormalities. Under the umbrella of abnormal psychology, I learned about mental disorders and diseases. This is where I began to “self-diagnose” myself, spending hours reading the DSM-IV, and then the DSM-V. The DSM, or also known as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, is a manual used and relied upon by researchers, clinicians, and many other groups. I went through each disorder, reading the check lists and criteria for each disease. I was working myself up and believing that I could possibly have them all, and it doesn’t help that I have hypochondriac tendencies. It was time I got a professional opinion.

At 20, I was diagnosed by a doctor with generalized anxiety disorder, persistent depressive disorder, and insomnia. “Generalized anxiety disorder, also known as G.A.D, is an umbrella term that includes different conditions: panic disorder, social anxiety disorder, specific phobias. It is a highly distressing disorder characterized by chronic and excessive worry surrounding various aspects of an individual’s life” (Bal et al., 2017). With my new diagnosis came a slew of treatments, therapies, and medications. I have been on plenty of medication trials
to see which ones would work best. After five years of trying, nothing has helped. I’ve stopped taking my medications, and I turned to different outlets to help me deal with my disorders. One of them being art making.

**Discovering the Importance of Process**

Discovering clay was one of the most memorable moments in my life. I would end up spending all day in the studio. I became so obsessed with clay. I decided to not pursue psychology any further, and I became an art major. At first, I had a hard time discovering what I was making and why I was making it. I would do the class assignments, come up with my own concepts for independent studies, but there was nothing I really felt passionate about. That is until I started throw on the potter’s wheel.

Sitting at the wheel, I feel in control, in tune with myself. The process of wheel throwing forces me to have my mind and body working collectively. Messages are being constantly sent out throughout my body at a steady pulse. Most importantly I focus on my breathing, which is something I forget to do when I am experiencing panic and unease; I am balanced again. I first started to notice that there was something different with me, I was happy, calm, and focused. The worries that I had in my head disappeared. It was just me and the clay.

My need for calm did not stop there. I found that carving and creating textures, making my pieces tactile also produced a response to my anxiety. I have explored other methods for adding texture within my work. I experimented with trailing slips and with sodium silicate to create textures that look stretched and cracked. My way of making marks is constantly evolving as well. I gravitate towards using my usual loop tools that produce some of my most traditional
marks. However, I am always open to new tools, even using certain kitchen utensils to create
new and interesting impressions on the clay. Carving is the ultimate release of the negativity I
feel; I cut out my anxious thoughts from the clay. The more anxious that I am, the more
aggressive and quick my marks are. The marks that I make are expressive and in direct relation
to my mood and emotions. Visually, my more traditional marks remind me of patterns found in
nature, such as a grouping of river pebbles, blades of grass, or the deep and jagged lines seen in
tree bark. The connection of carving, releasing, and referencing nature is like returning into a
happy place, away from my worries. I incorporate carving in every piece that I make. This is
where carving to me becomes obsessive, ritualistic, and compulsive, but it makes me happy in
the moment. It was my own form of art therapy.

My work is a direct manifestation of my disorders. I had been searching for a concept for
my body of work and it was right in front of me the whole time. When I came to this realization,
I began to talk myself through making the most honest work I have ever made about my anxiety.

Anxious Totems

My totemic sculptures went through a long and exciting evolution to get to where they
are now. I started out making simple wheel thrown cylinders standing at about 5 inches. Then the
pieces evolved into larger thrown cylinders that varied in widths and heights going over my
standard 5 inches. After that, I began to place upon one another. Realizing how unstable my
stacked cylindrical sculpture was, I then moved on to glazing and fusing them together to have
them be one standing piece. But that did not work out either. I wanted more; I wanted to go
larger and taller, but I was limited due to the size of the kiln. My mind set began to change. I knew I had to incorporate another aspect to my sculptures- metal armatures. With the addition of the armature, it gave my sculptures stability and the ability to stack my cylinders up to 10 feet. I would throw cylinders in various widths and heights to have variation in size. close up the open end with a clay slab, carve them, and pierce them in the center to later feed the armature though.

Feeling confident that I was finally going in the right direction with my body of work, I started to experiment with different forms and even de-centering the pierced hole that is intended for the armature. After firing the pieces, I assembled them on the metal armatures. the new experimental pieces added a new component and reaction to my work - precariousness. Walking among my totemic sculptures created a sense of unease for viewers. It was my way of communicating to the viewer, this is how I feel all the time. However, I felt that these sculptures needed to be pushed further.

This leads to present day totems. I knew I had to push my anxiety. I had to push my sculptures. Being a huge fan of meandering lines, I looked to Andy Goldsworthy’s earth works for inspiration, more specifically the Storm King Wall. I loved how Goldsworthy transformed rock, a hard material, and made it seem so flexible when incorporating it in a curve. I wondered how that would be interpreted in a material like ceramic. I wondered how I could translate this concept in my own body of work while still having anxiety be the driving force behind my work. Using a conduit bender, I created curvy and nonlinear armatures. Seeing the curved armatures and picturing my pieces on them, I envisioned a huge sense of unease. I also pictured people interacting with these pieces, walking underneath them with caution. I knew that the sensation I
want the viewer to be overcome with was tension.

For my exhibition, I have made 10 totemic ceramic sculptures, six of which are standing and connected to the walls; one end of the armature is cemented in bases to bear the weight of the thrown pieces, and the other end of the armature is curved enough to enter a piece of wood that is attached to the wall to ensure stability so that the piece won’t fall over. Two of the totemic sculptures are free standing on pedestals with both ends of the armature in cement and silicone. The last two create an arch with the gallery window in between. One end of the arch starting on the inside of the gallery, in a wider and thicker cement base, with the other end just resting on a pad of silicone attached to the window. The outdoor end of the arch is installed the same way as the indoor piece, but with double the cement base to make the arch level and even. Each sculpture varies in height, with the tallest being 9 feet and the shortest at 4 feet. Each also averages between 12-18 thrown ceramic pieces that vary in size, but have some variation of a cylindrical form to create flow throughout the whole piece.

Every single piece of ceramic was hand carved, then painted with low-fire colored slip and fired once to cone 1 in an electric kiln. It is necessary to mention, in my previous collection of totems, I used glossy glazes, the amount of shine and glare my pieces had was hard to look at and caused too much visual stimulation that covered my texture. I wanted to tone the gloss down and have texture be a focusing feature in my totems. Having this in mind, I knew that the colored slips I used had little to no gloss to them. My color choices for each were not “planned out”. I had such a large selection and plenty of combinations of colored slips, I knew I was not going to repeat any of the colors I had painted on. I made sure to have variations, even if it was just in the slightest. After I painted on the slips, I scraped the slip off the piece in order to have the slip
embedded in my carvings, contrasted against the raised, scraped, and raw color of the clay body underneath. My choice to fire to cone 1 was because I wanted to see how the clay body would react at that temperature, whether it would start to bulge or become so vitrified it created its own shiny surface that would contrast the matte colored slip.

My whole process from start to finish was fueled by my disquiet. My need was not only to channel my nervousness while making, but also to expose viewers to it and make them feel unease. In my endeavor to make my anxious totems, I began with a bent metal armature that I then fed with wheel thrown, carved and slipped ceramic forms. I made circular cement bases to ground the entire piece. I then drilled a wooden bases into the walls for the other ends of the armatures in order to ground and stabilize the pieces. I intend to observe people in the gallery, interacting with these totemic structures, watching with curiosity how the viewer will walk around them or even dare to walk underneath them. Eventually, I want to incorporate welding into my process, to create new and exciting armatures. After my pieces come out of the gallery, I want to see them being a part of an outdoor installation, being attached to trees, stumps, rocks, or even partly submerged in water. I want these “manifestations of my anxiety” to have a happy place of their own, in nature. I also want to keep challenging myself to evolve and hopefully reach a state of contentment free of my anxiety.
References


Images

In order by the following:

1. Walking into the gallery view
2. Front gallery view
3. Full view of piece “A”
4. Full view of piece “B”, with “A” in the background
5. Close up of “B”
6. Full view of piece “C”
7. Close up of “C”
8. View of “D” on the inside and “E” on the outside
9. Straight on view of both “D” and “E”
10. Full view of piece “F”
11. Full view of piece “G”
12. Close up of “G”
13. Full view of piece “H”
14. Close up of “H”
15. Full view of piece “I”
16. Full view of piece “J”
17. Close up of “J”
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