

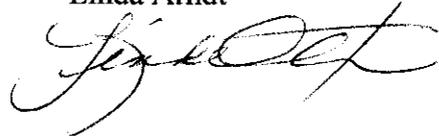
Sgraffito Dreams

An Honors Creative Project (HONRS 499)

By

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Thesis Advisor
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Linda Arndt", written in a cursive style.

Ball State University
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Abstract

As an art education major, having the opportunity to pursue an in depth creative project is difficult to do. The program is great, but there is only room for three studio classes in my area of emphasis, ceramics. This thesis has allowed me to complete an independent ceramic project focusing on the use of non-functional art and symbolism to express my personal ideas. This series was created with white clay through hand building techniques, and the surfaces of the pieces are decorated exclusively by the technique of sgraffito. The following is a description of each of my completed pieces, along with images of the work, early sketches, and my artist statement.

Acknowledgements

I owe great thanks to Linda Arndt who agreed to be my advisor for this project despite her busy schedule. Thank you for sharing all of your knowledge about the ceramic arts and supporting my work throughout the length of this project.

I would also like to thank Kim Anderson for listening to my concerns about my ability and for encouraging me to continue my ceramics career after graduation.

Great thanks also go to Nicholas Chandler for supporting my vision and for helping me tie up the loose ends of this project.

Introduction to Sgraffito Dreams

I wanted to do this project because the art of ceramics is something I am very interested in. As an Art Education major, I have chosen my emphasis to be ceramics; however, because my curriculum is so full, I have only had the opportunity to take three ceramic courses. With this honors thesis, I had the opportunity to build my ceramic skills, therefore making me better prepared to teach ceramics at all grade levels. Not only did I want to enhance my creative skills for teaching purposes, I also wanted to build a larger body of ceramic work for a portfolio. Since I became interested in ceramics a few years ago, I have considered continuing my education to obtain an MFA specifically in ceramics. This project has given me a feel for the type of independent work that is needed to succeed in a concentrated art program.

The objective of my project was to create a body of work that encompasses a variety of ideas. I created six works specifically using hand-building techniques. These hand-built pieces are non-functional, sculptural objects. The most important thing I accomplished with this project was the exploration of form with a special emphasis on the conceptual nature of art. My target audience for this project is anyone who has eyes to see and time to think. With this ceramics project, I have attempted to bridge the gap (or at least question the gap) that exists between craft and fine art; my works challenge the viewer to consider ceramics as an art form that stands alone.

The conceptual nature of this project reflected the preferential images that exist in my aesthetic file. Some of the images I prefer, or tend to subconsciously use over and over again in my work are eggs, fish scales, birds, jewels, houses, and human body parts (especially female). Linear, vertical, and crosshatched elements often appear in my work; an overall symmetry tends to define my work as well. In this project my favorite images and elements appear together to reveal my preferential concepts. My preferred concepts are inequality, prejudice, bias, and ignorance, especially as they relate to gender, race, sexuality, and religion.

Although I have very specific ideas and opinions concerning my listed concepts, I am hesitant to describe how they manifest themselves in my work. Because I am still a very young person, my life experiences are limited and I did not want to intentionally force certain concepts into my work. I would rather my experiences reveal themselves for what they are at this point in my development as an artist and especially as a human being. This is why almost all of my works focus on my personal battle with anxiety. I see my works as visual manifestations of my anxiety towards events in my life, especially marriage. I became engaged just before I started working on my thesis, therefore allowing my newly found thoughts, hopes, and fears about marriage come into my artwork.

To begin my project, I drafted many sketches of the work I wanted to complete. I have learned from this project that my ideas cannot jump from my brain to the clay; I need to use sketching as a way of channeling my ideas.

From this project I have definitely come closer to defining my own artistic style. Working within a series has helped me develop my skills as an artist, and this creative project has certainly brought me closer to my goal of earning an advanced arts degree.

The following sections of this thesis include my artist statement, preliminary sketches of my work, images of the completed pieces, and descriptions of the techniques and meanings within my art.

Artist Statement

If I were to use one work to describe my thought process, it would be the word *anxious*.

Because of the dark surface and the imagery, this collection of sculpture takes on an ominous tone. My work is a visual collection of my anxieties, fears, and suspicions. The imagery and symbols represent fragments of time from my past and perhaps my future.

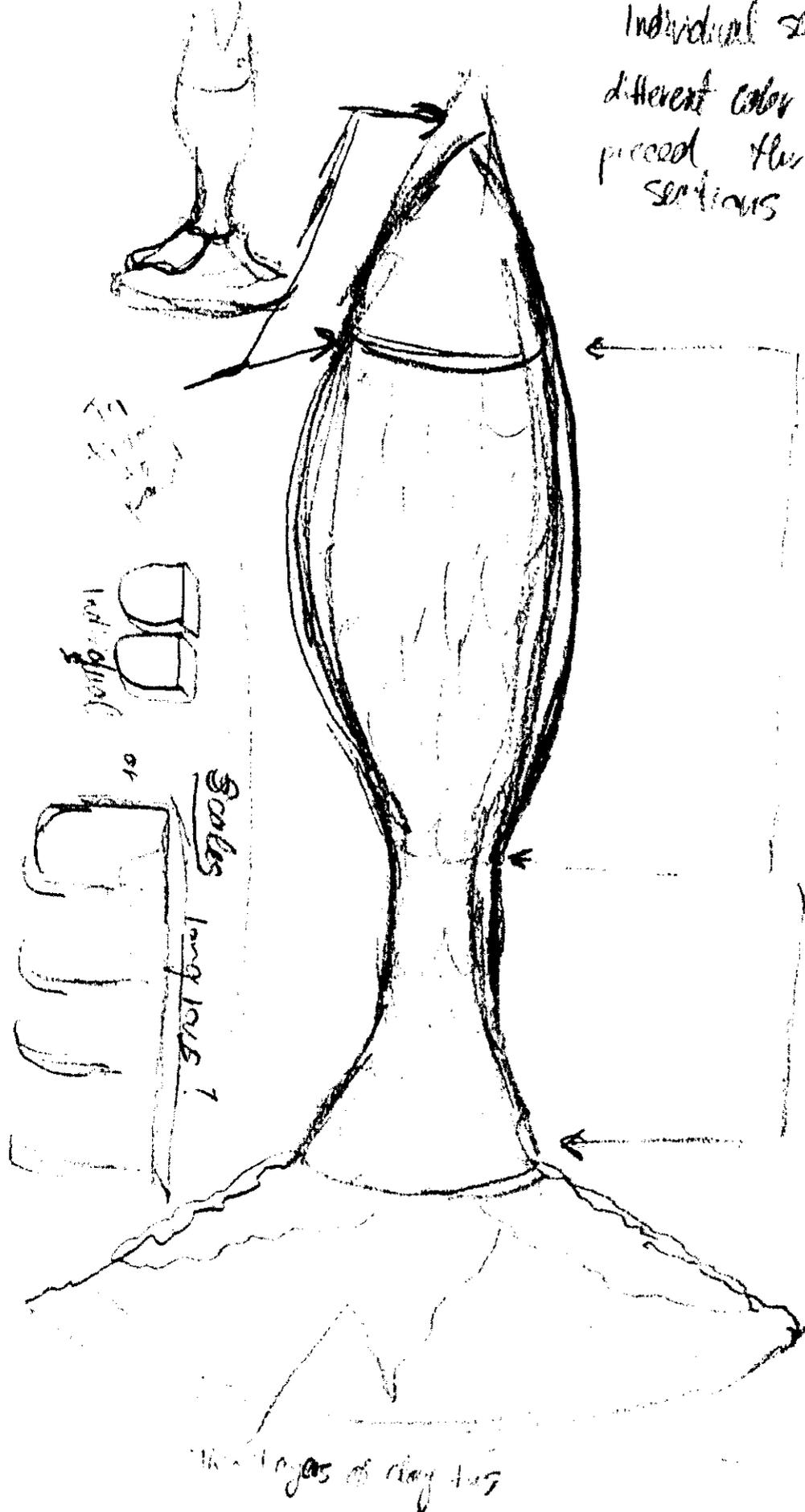
I cannot explain why clay is my medium. One day I could not understand it, then the next it seemed as if I had an epiphany. I suddenly understood what the clay could do and how I could use it to express my ideas.

This body of work consists of hand-built structures of low-fire white clay decorated by the technique of sgraffito. My sculptures are black and white, not because I am afraid of color, but because I do not need it to express my ideas. The emphasis of my decoration comes from the design of representational imagery and symbols.

Some important symbols in my work include eggs, fish, houses, and birds. The egg and the fish often represent human beings: female and male. I like to use these symbols to target my reservations concerning existing dichotomies in today's society. Birds and house forms have always seemed mysterious to me, and I often use them to suggest apparitions of my future.

When my work is viewed, it is not my intention for the viewer to completely understand the connection between the imagery on my pieces; I too am continually seeking to understand the imagery I create. There is no logical order to my artworks. They are a fragmented, non-linear collection of my thoughts...much like a dream.

Individual scales
different color patterns
pinned thru
sections

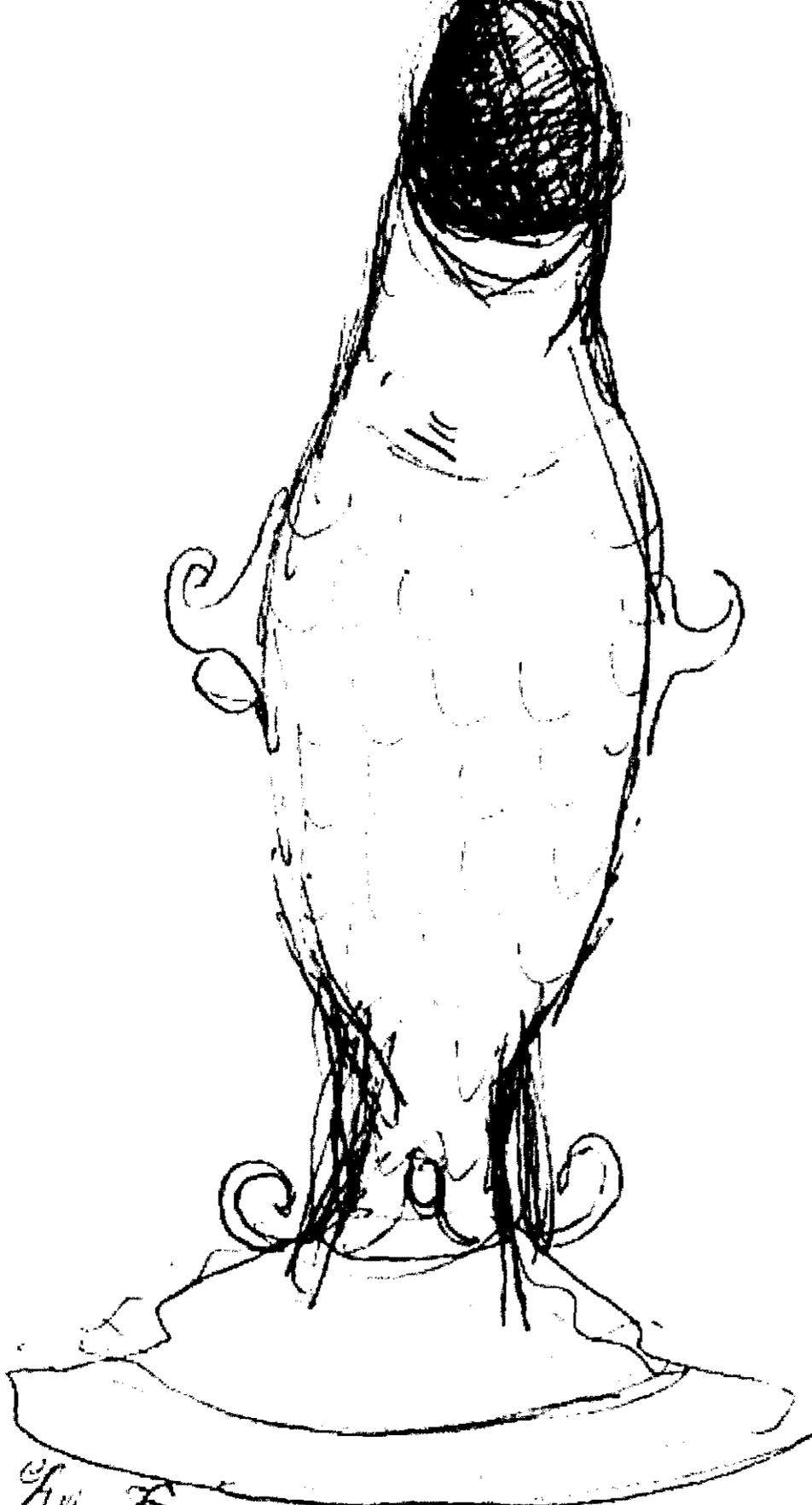


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thru
slits?)

thru

base
1 piece
not
settled
with
large
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thin layers of clay



The Egg Called Fish

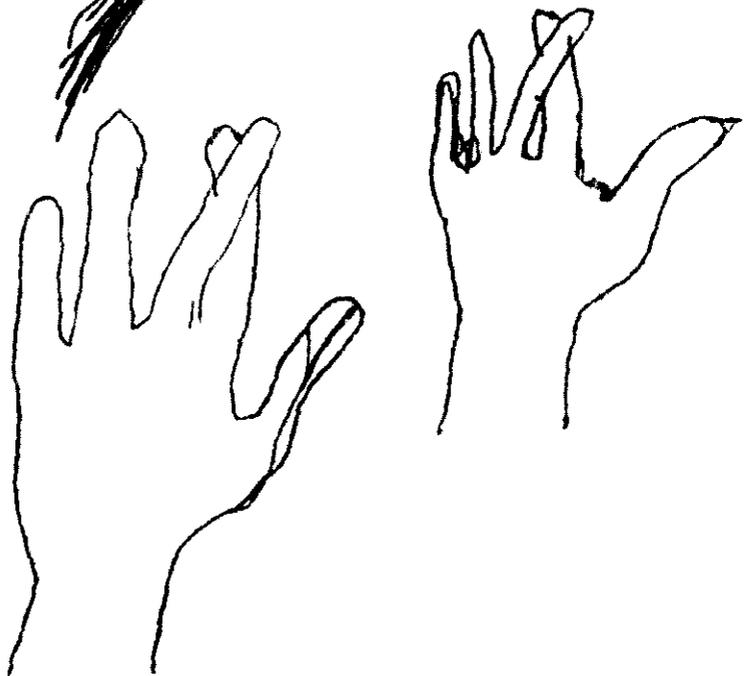
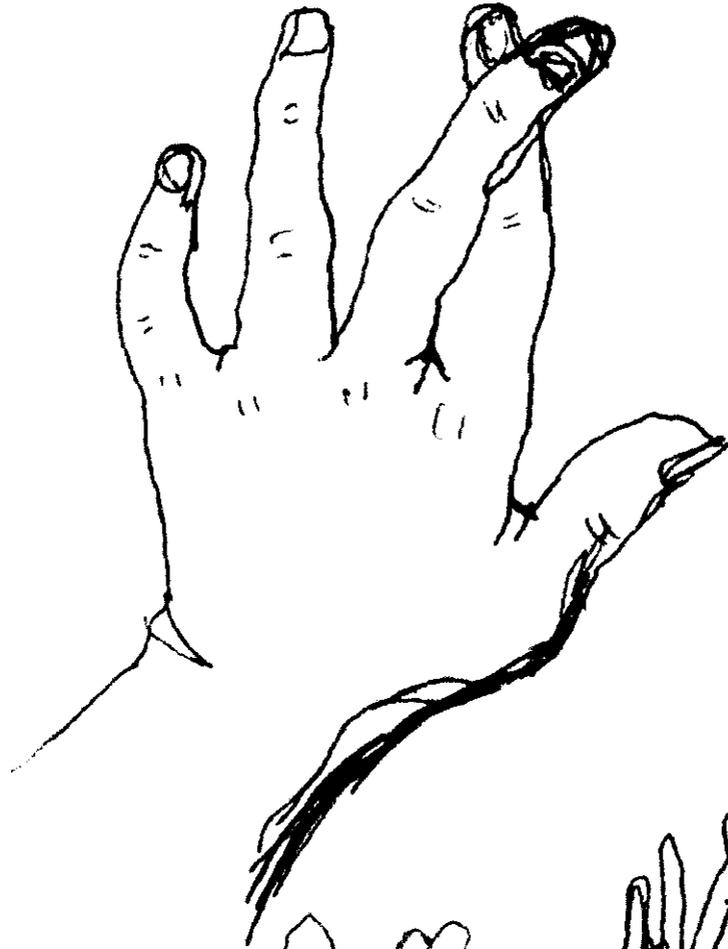
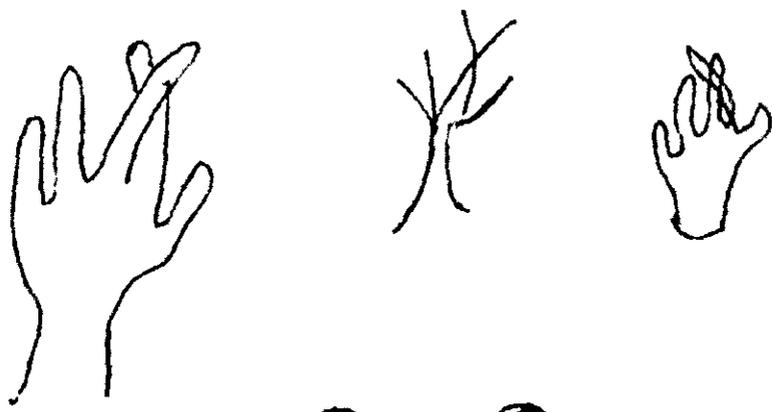


An Egg Called Fish

This piece is approximately 11” tall and 7” wide. This project was created in four parts: the body, the head, the egg, and the fins. The body was created using the technique of coil building. The most difficult part of the body was creating the tight, symmetrical base. It took time and precision to create the smallest part of the base. The next thing I created was the head of the fish; this part was created with two rolled slabs. I liked using the slabs because the effect was a smooth surface with hard lines. The egg was created by forming a solid clay egg and waiting until it became leather hard. At that point, I cut the egg in half, hollowed the inside, and then reattached the two sides. I also created the egg to fit inside the open mouth of the fish. The most difficult part of the egg was getting it to stay straight in the mouth of the sculpture. I could not slip and score it, so I ultimately sanded the bone dry egg to the point where it balanced in the mouth and I placed two dots of clear glass glaze to “glue” it in place. The fins of the fish were somewhat of an afterthought, but I wanted them to look whimsical and delicate, so I hand formed and curled individual coils of clay.

This was the first piece I created for my series, and in some ways I think it is one of my best works. As mentioned in my statement, this project took place during my engagement to be married. As much as I did not want to admit, this was going to be a big change in my life and my feelings (or more precisely, my anxieties). And like my other pieces, this one too deals with my anxieties/fears about my future nuptial.

I got the idea for this piece late one night after my mom and I had an argument about the name change that takes place when couples get married. I was undecided about changing my own name, and in my mind I was trying to work out my confusion about this tradition. I did not (and still do not, to some extent) understand why a woman must change her name and a man does not. My mother could not understand why I would hurt my fiancé’s feelings by choosing not to take his surname. I could not understand why she did not think my feelings would be hurt if I lost my last name, which I consider to be a fairly important part of my identity. Would the egg, as we know it still be the same if we suddenly gave it a new name? What if we called an egg a fish? It is these types of dichotomies and double standards that often haunt my brain and manifest themselves in my artwork.





Anxiety Egg

Anxiety Egg is the second piece I completed for my senior honors thesis and is approximately 10" x 6". After *An Egg Called Fish*, I felt much more comfortable designing with the technique of graffito. This is why the imagery on this piece is so drastically different from my first piece.

The shape of this piece and *An Egg Called Fish* are similar; however, this one was constructed in a different manner. The largest portion of this work is the egg, which was created by forming a large clay egg, waiting until it became leather hard, cutting it in half, hollowing it out, and slipping and scoring it together again. The base on which the egg stands was thrown on the wheel. This pedestal is the only part of the series that was created on the wheel.

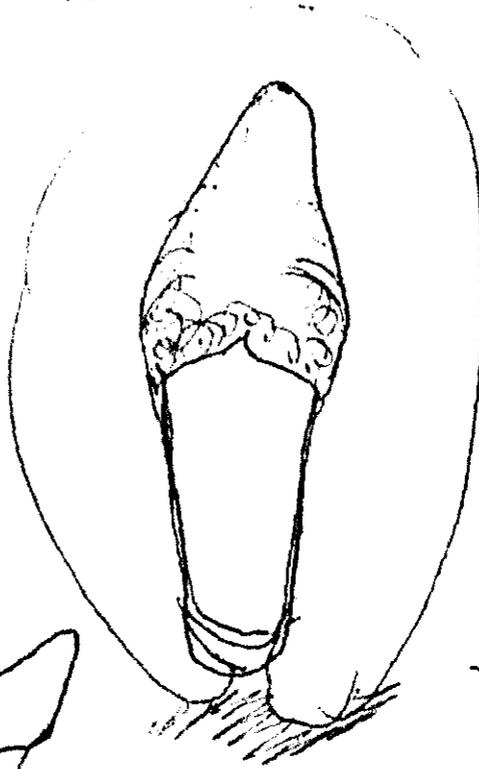
This work had a simpler form to create, but the content on the surface took much longer. My primary focus on this piece was to create a series of symbols that would conjure up specific feelings in the viewer. Once again the theme of this work is marriage, or more specifically, the anxieties of marriage. As a person I would characterize myself as creative, reflective, intuitive, and most fittingly, anxious. Anxiety is something I have dealt with for a long time, and my level of anxiety rises with the level of stress in my life. I have come to understand preparing for marriage is definitely a stress raiser.

I used three symbols to represent anxiety in this piece. The first symbol is the hand. The hand with palm side up hints at fortune telling and the magic associated with lifelines and love lines. The other hand is shown with fingers crossed. Although I think this symbol looks dark and mysterious on the egg, I actually used this image as a bit of personal humor. With the knowledge that fifty percent of marriages fail, the crossed fingers are a sign of good luck for me. In my mind I see a bride saying, "I do" with her fingers crossed behind her back.

The next symbol used on this piece represents this ideal, perfectly proportioned body that must be met by women, especially for their big day as a bride. I feel quite a bit of anxiety when I imagine hundreds of eyes on me, judging how I look.

The final symbol presented in this piece is a shoe. The symbol of the shoe initially conjures up a sexual meaning; for me it also carries a meaning of perfection, idealism, and royalty (i.e., Cinderella's glass slipper). Anxiety arises from this symbol in that brides (women) are expected to attend to every little physical detail and embellishment; it seems something as minor as a shoe is as important as anything else going on in my life at this time.

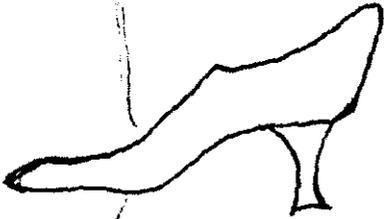
I enjoy using symbols in my artwork because they can convey so many ideas and feelings; one simple image can carry a large amount of content. However, I feel I have revealed too much about this piece already; it is time for me to move on to my next piece.



magnifying

arrow

~~dummy~~



flower

Bone

shoe

tiara

~~ring~~

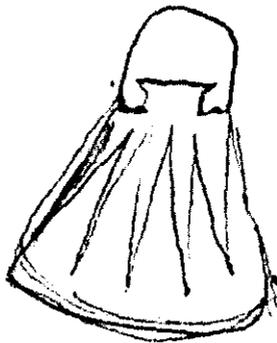
~~diving rod~~

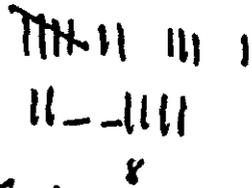
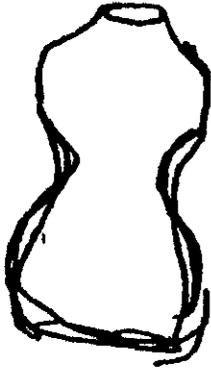
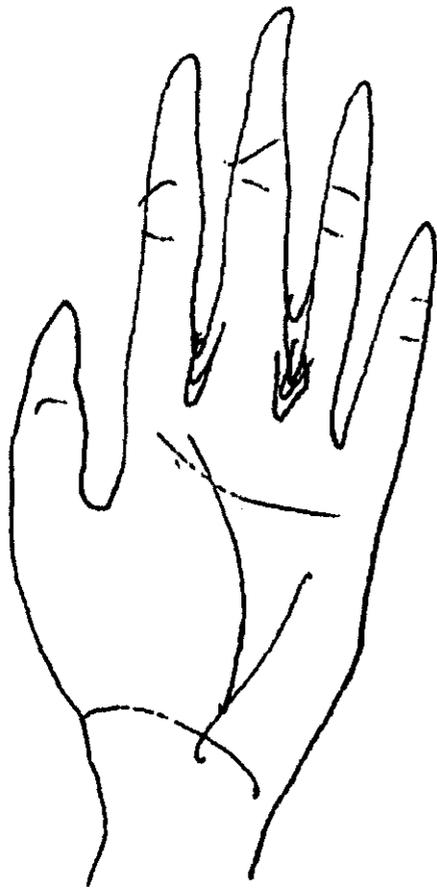
fish

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~~fish~~

Bone, shoe







Images Past; Apparitions Future

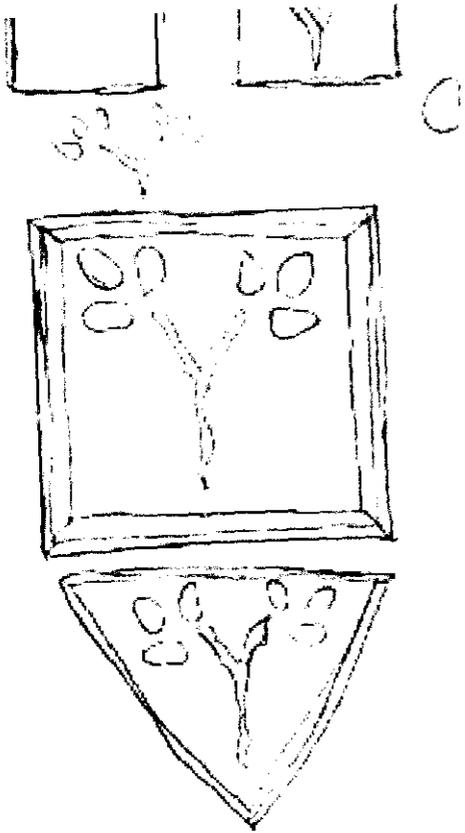
These eleven miniature eggs were the third sculptures completed for my honors thesis. Each egg is approximately 3” tall. I created the pieces by forming clay eggs and hollowing out their forms. I also hand built the tiny bases each of the eggs rest on. Of all the pieces I created for this project, this one took, by far, the most time to complete. When I first started this piece, I had planned for the eggs to be presented in a wooden box, stacked in the shape of a triangle. As the project progressed, however, I decided to have the eggs become individual pieces of art.

Originally I thought such small eggs would be quicker and easier to make—I could not have been more wrong. I could not find the motivation to begin these sculptures because I was not sure where to take my pieces after I dropped my initial idea. Because I waited so long before starting, the eggs were very hard when I began hollowing them. It was also time consuming to carve the designs on the eggs. The surface was much smaller, and, therefore, the detailing was more meticulous. I also had great difficulty attaching the eggs to their hand formed bases; they were both very dry by the time I started this step. A few of the eggs came apart after the firing because the slip did not hold. I had to reattach them afterwards with epoxy. Although a few of the pieces did not stay together in the firing, I was very pleased that none of the eggs exploded or cracked. Because the forms were hollow, I had worried there would be at least one egg that broke apart. Even though I put tiny holes in each of the hollow eggs, there was always that fear in the back of my mind. There is nothing worse than having a piece you are connected to and have spent a great deal of time on break in the kiln.

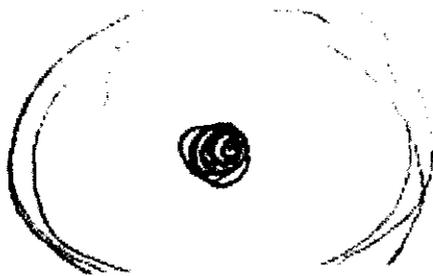
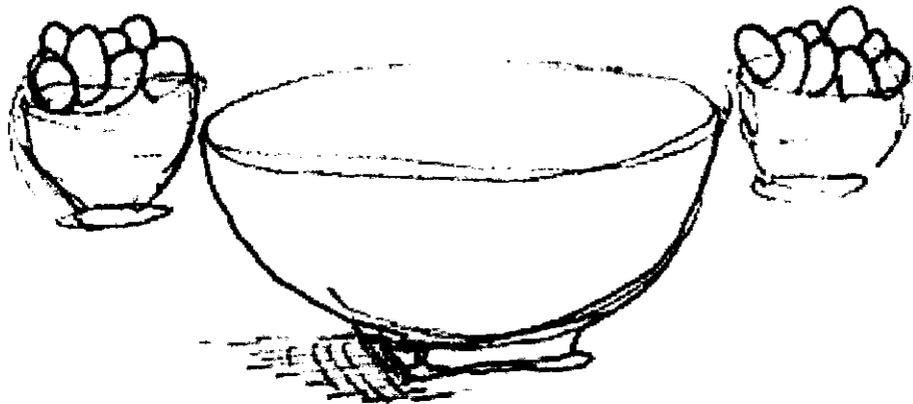
The meanings and symbols connected to this piece are very similar to the symbols from *Anxiety Egg*. The most significant difference between these pieces and my other work is the scale; the *Images Past; Apparitions Future* eggs are significantly smaller.

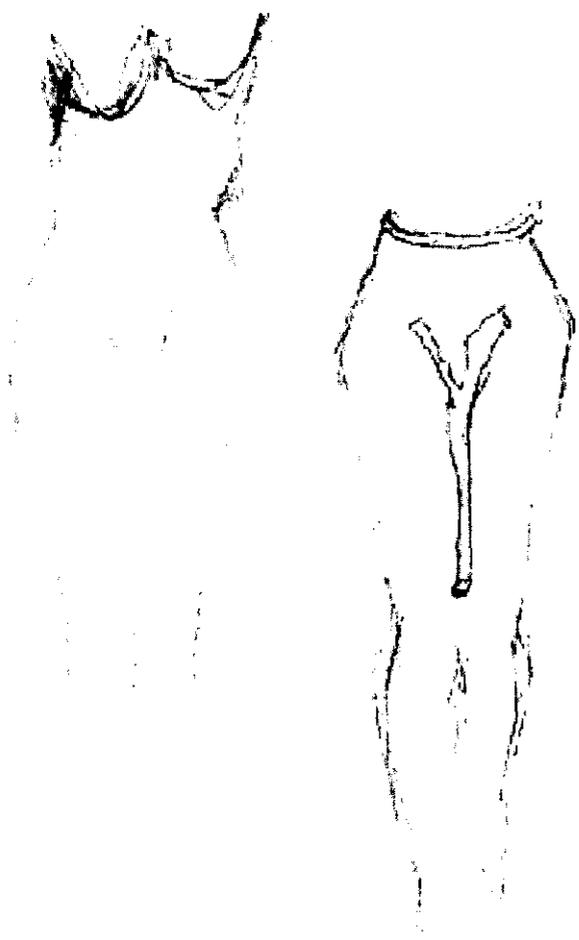
The symbols I carved into these eggs include arrows, bones, paper, crowns, birds, female midsections, rings, spades, keys, and shoes. Not only did I utilize pictorial symbols, I also used numbers to decorate the eggs. The numbers in my pieces represent a few different things. Some are numbers representing important dates from my past and future, some represent ages, and some were carved for their mysterious meaning (the number 13, for instance).

These sculptures represent tiny little pockets of fear, anxiety, and anticipation. Some of the eggs were created to represent events that have already happened in my life. Other eggs were created to represent events in the future, namely marriage, motherhood, and death.

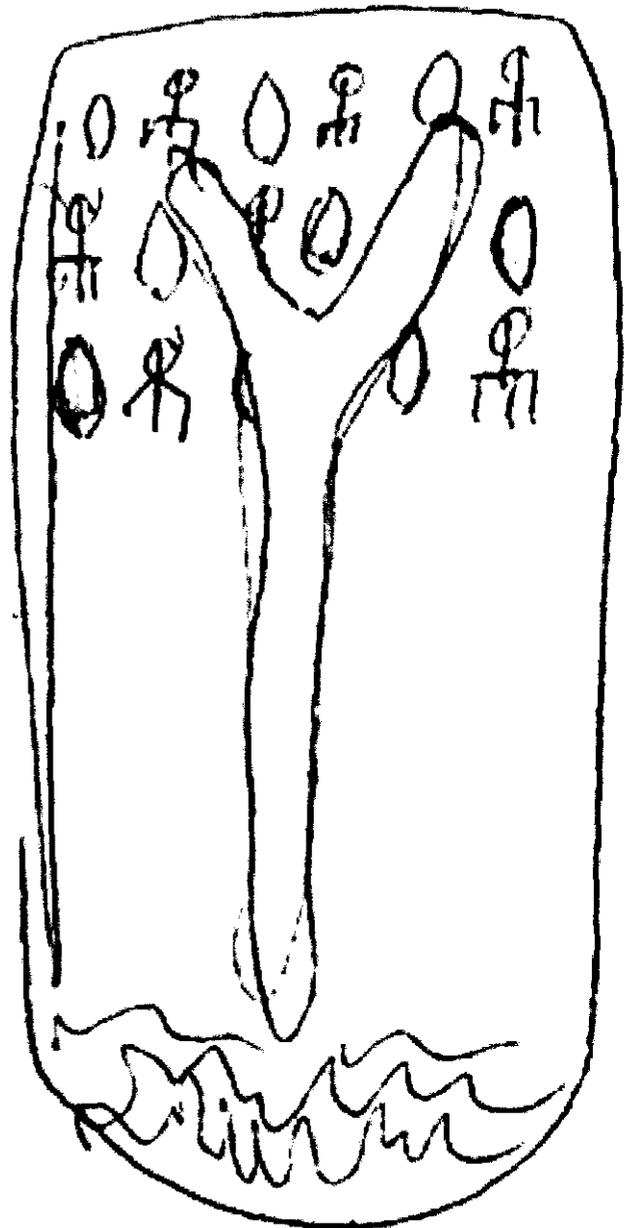


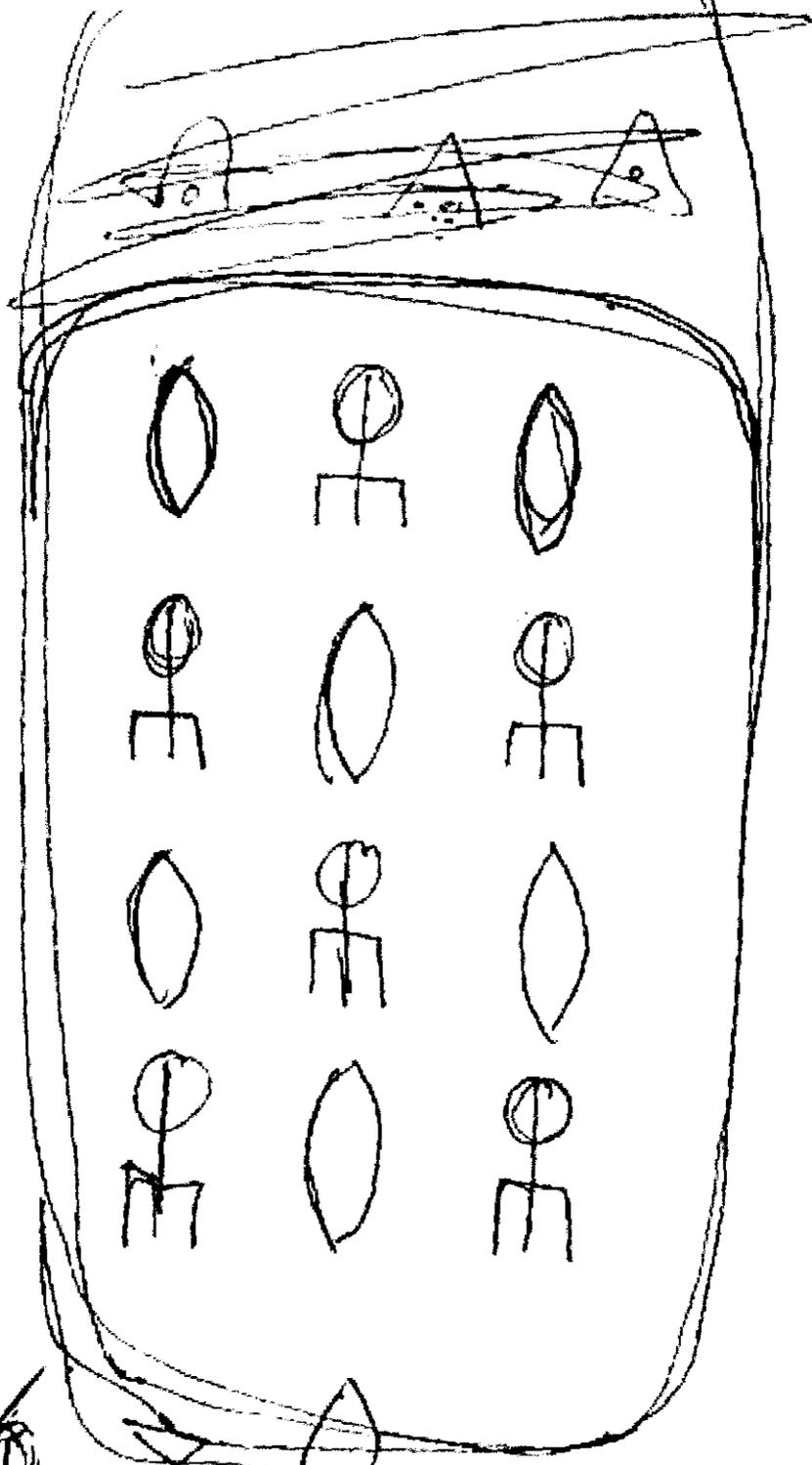
red pedestal or red cloth
or
pedestal



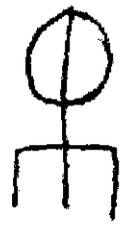


working notes

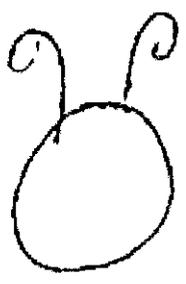




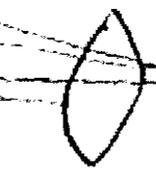
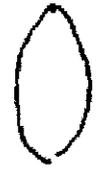
Yoni

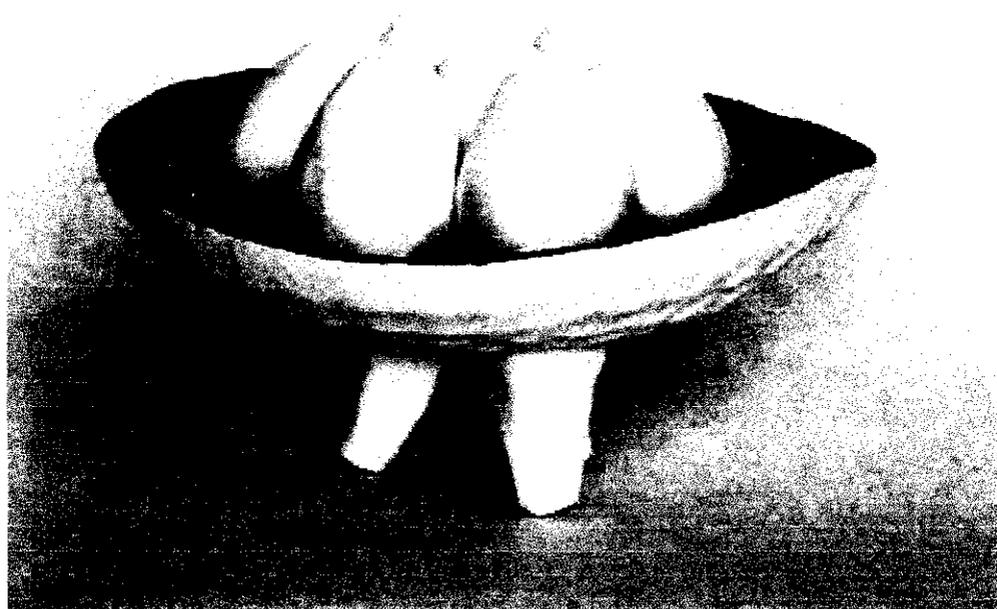


Levedoom



Spring





Watering Hole

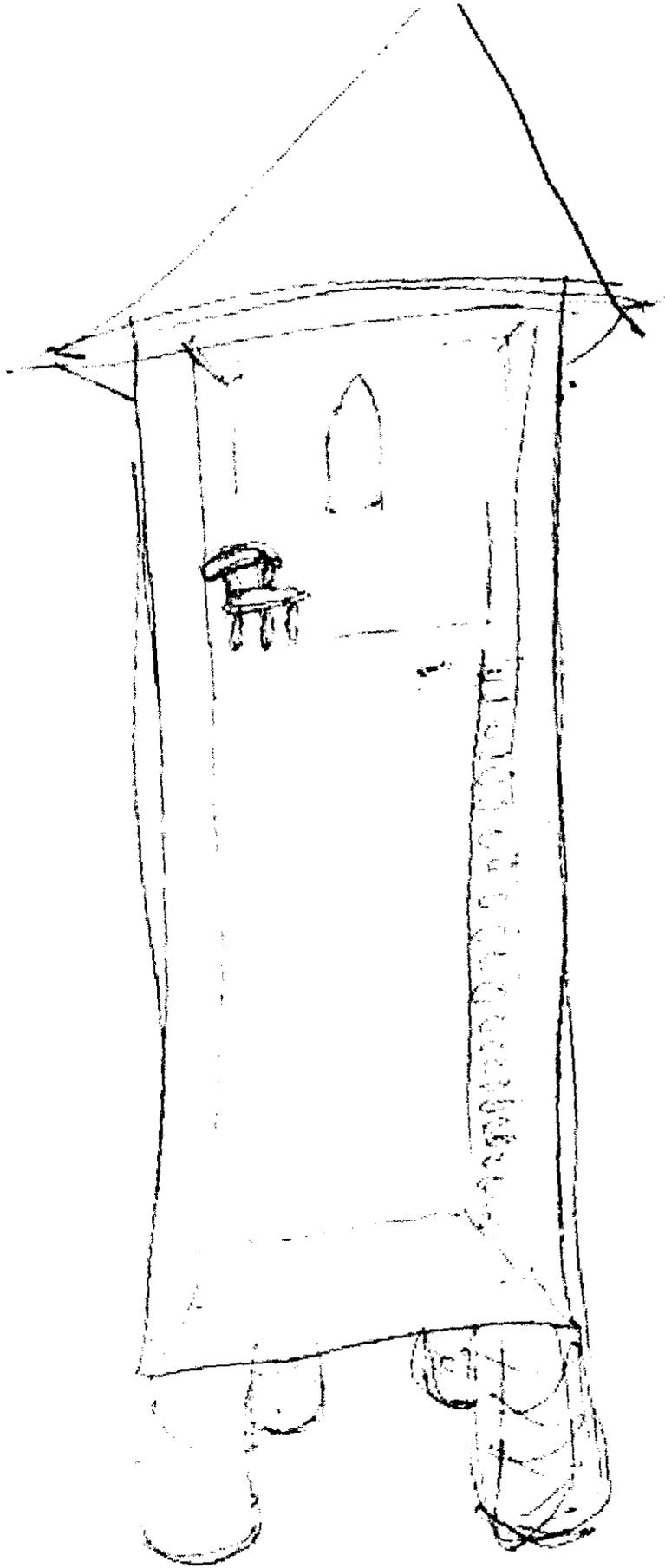
The fourth piece created for my honors thesis, titled *Watering Hole*, is approximately 20"x12"x4". I enjoyed working on this piece because I got to use a combination of interesting techniques. The vessel elements in this work were created using plaster hump molds. Over-the-hump is a method I love because it allows you to create a vessel that retains its symmetry. It also is a method that allows you to create many duplicate pieces in a small amount of time (at least compared to other hand building methods).

The egg and divining rod forms in this piece were created by hand, and unlike the other small eggs in my previous pieces, these are solid. To make certain the eggs and divining rod did not break in the kiln, I let them sit out to dry much longer than any of my other pieces; this sculpture was actually one of the last to be fired.

The legs on my vessels were also created by hand forming. The legs are actually my favorite part of this sculpture. There is something in my visual file that attracts me to the look of an object lifted off the ground by slim, symmetrical stilts. When I view an object that is lifted higher than the sitting surface, the object becomes more special and delicate to me. This is the same convention I used in *Anxiety Egg*. When legs or pedestals lift an artwork, it instantly becomes more important, as if it is being presented to the viewer as a precious object.

I used two types of symbols in this work: sculptural and carved. The sculptural symbols are the eggs and the divining rod. The eggs in this piece are much like the eggs in *Images Past; Apparitions Future*; they represent ideas or events that have not yet happened but may perhaps come to light in the future. The divining rod is another symbol I am attracted to because of its presumed magical powers and because its shape is reminiscent of a woman's sexual organs. The carved symbols I chose for this piece are symbols associated with love, sex, springtime, and the goddess—all of which imply the future birth of an event or idea.

The sculpture itself is to be set up in the shape resembling a woman's sexual organs. The two cups of eggs take the place of the ovaries and the divining rod replaces the uterus and birth canal. Unlike my other pieces, this one does not necessarily focus on the anxieties I carry inside. This work represents my anticipation of promise, of something good happening in my future. Just as the female body has the power to create a new life, I believe the mind has the power to create a positive future.





Barbara's Tower

Barbara's Tower is the fifth piece completed from my series and is approximately 14"x4"x4". Of all my work, this one is unquestionably my favorite. It is the only piece created by slab construction. I enjoyed working with the slabs because the end result gives very clean, strong lines. With slabs, you are able to plan the design of your form on paper and transfer it very directly to the clay. I love this piece because it is very linear, symmetrical, and balanced. I think the design and craftsmanship are excellent, as well.

Barbara's Tower is a work based on the life story of Saint Barbara, as told by the Catholic Church. Barbara was a Greek living in Heliopolis, Egypt in the 3rd or 4th century AD, and she converted to Christianity against her father's wishes. Some legends say that her father, Dioscorus, presented her with a prospective husband whom she refused to marry because he was not a Christian.

Heliopolis had a tower built to imprison her. While locked in the tower she ordered three windows to be constructed as a symbol of the Trinity and an outward demonstration of her faith. Her father was very angered and had her beheaded (some say he carried out this act himself). Suddenly, a violent storm erupted and he was struck dead by a bolt of lightning. Angels then descended on the scene and swept Barbara's soul away to heaven.

I was raised in the Catholic Church, and the culture associated with it has stuck with me and now manifests itself in my artwork. The lives of saints have always interested me, and I first ran across this story while I was searching for my confirmation name. The imagery of the story has stayed with me for years and I had always wanted to make an artwork symbolizing this story. One of the things I now find most interesting about this story is the fact that Barbara refused to marry and was executed. Again, my work revolves in some way around the act of matrimony.

The imagery on the walls of my clay tower depicts the story of Barbara in four parts. The first wall contains the Alpha symbol, an altar, and a budding tree. This wall represents the beginning of Barbara's faith in Christianity. The second wall depicts a long stairway and three gothic windows. These symbols represent Barbara's seclusion in the tower, and her continued devotion to her faith and the Trinity. The main image on the third wall is a large lightening bolt striking the ground, obviously representing Dioscorus's death. The final wall shows the Omega symbol and a hand giving a holy blessing. These symbols represent Barbara's own death and her ascension into heaven.



Somethingwicked; Somethingwonderful

This was my sixth and final piece from my senior honors thesis and is approximately 14"x10". Of all my works, this one was the quickest to create. I made this artwork by using a rectangular shaped slump mold. Like the over-the-hump method, this one also can yield a very clean and symmetrical work. However, I chose this work to be asymmetrical, which was a bit out of the ordinary for me. I love symmetry in my work and now that I view this finished piece, there is something about it that does not sit still with me. I love the imagery, but the overall shape of the plate feels strange.

Like my other pieces, this one is very similar in terms of the image. The imagery evokes a strong feeling of anxiety and fear, as if something terrible is about to happen. The bird is looking behind its back to see three looming symbols. The crown, sapphire, and wishbone are again symbols that represent wedding and luck. The anxiety of a soon to change life manifests itself strongly in my final artwork. Although the main feeling projected by this piece is fear, to me there is also a small amount of wonder and excitement, which is why I titled the piece *Somethingwicked; Somethingwonderful*.

If I had more time to continue this work and pursue the technique of graffito, I would create a series of platters similar to this piece. My new idea is to choose a story as a theme, much like Saint Barbara's story, and use the images from that story to create a large number of platters. I enjoyed working with the flat surface, and when I go to graduate school to earn my MFA, I will consider following through with this new idea.

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