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Journey & Connections

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JOURNEY & CONNECTIONS

By

ALDO R. ORNELAS. Bachelor of Fine Arts

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Stephen F. Austin State University
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

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JOURNEY & CONNECTIONS

By

ALDO R. ORNELAS. Bachelor of Fine Arts

APPROVED.

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DEAN OF RESEARCH AND GRADUATE STUDIES

ABSTRACT

Journey & Connections is a series of work comprised of ceramic sculptures that explore my personal experiences in relation to the human figure, immigration, and nature, as well as experiences influenced by my continuous travels between my country of origin and the United States.

This exhibition is composed of an Installation titled “A Line on the Wall” and a series of six sculptures that resemble monoliths, strong and expressive figures of spiritual origin that represent important figures in life, sources of wisdom and stelae that connect to the earth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My infinite thanks to Stephen F. Austin State University's School of Art for giving me the unique opportunity to pursue an MFA. I would like to express gratitude to the members of my committee—Piero Fenci, Lauren Selden, Dr. David Lewis, and Dr. Sudeshna Roy, who have played key roles in the evolution of this project. My sincere thanks to Piero for providing me with all the knowledge, materials and equipment necessary to develop my artistic skills and aesthetics, and for being my principal sponsor during this journey. I'd like to express my gratitude to Lauren Selden for sharing her expertise, and for always lending a helpful hand. I thank Dr. Lewis for his guidance and suggestions through the development of this project. And thanks to Dr. Sudeshna Roy for her guidance in preparing my public talk—all her advice was extremely helpful.

This exhibition would not be possible without the continuous support of the Friends of the Visual Arts, and of course I cannot forget to extend my heartfelt gratitude to my family, friends, and fellow graduate students who have always helped and supported me throughout these years.

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BACKGROUND

My background as an artist began in Mexico. I was born in the city of Chihuahua, where I obtained a Bachelors in Fine Arts. Chihuahua, like many regions of Mexico, has its own ceramic tradition. It was common for me to see clay pots and figurines with anthropomorphic motifs in museums and antique stores, and those ceramic pieces served as an early influence on my work. My first concerns as an artist were related to the human figure and identity. I found in clay a way to connect those concerns with my personal heritage as a Mexican artist.

My interest in clay dates back to my early college years when I decided to take my first pottery class. I remember my first trip to gather materials from a local clay pit located 60 minutes from the city in the southern region of the State of Chihuahua.

It was during this period of time when the interest in creating my own glazes from natural sources began. I started collecting wood ash and mixing it intuitively with different types of clays and natural materials. I was fascinated by how these materials became glass and broke into crystals in such peculiar ways, and even though I kept standard measurements and exact proportions, the results always varied. My main interest at that time was related to how the glaze reacted with clay.

As a sculptor I have always been interested in letting the materials communicate their own natural beauty which lent strength to my work.

My concerns about immigration date back to my childhood experiences. I remember moving between Mexico and the U.S. traveling with my mother back and forth to California, where we stayed twice a year for short periods in the summer and the fall. Those times were moments in which my routine changed and adapted to a new culture and way of life. Traveling and living between two different cultures would greatly influence my life as an artist, but I was unaware of it at the time.

INFLUENCES

I seek inspiration from nature and personal experiences. My life is in a constant cycle of moving from one place to another. These cycles serve as guidelines which allow me to connect my artistic practice with nature.

It is important for me to emphasize the bond of my artistic practice with the environment around me. I use clay as a binding material, as an element that connects me to my personal heritage and for its relevance to the larger history of mankind.

As a studio potter I'm in the search of balance between utilitarian pottery and sculptural work. This search lets me treat every piece as a unique object. My approach is intuitive—working with clay is a collaborative process that engages my senses, the material, and the firing process. This idea is well explained by the Japanese artist, Akira Satake, in his words:

*“The act of creation is a collaboration between myself, the clay and the fire. Collaboration means finding what the clay wants to be and bringing out its beauty in the way that the beauty of our surroundings is created through natural forces.”*¹

¹ “Akira Satake Ceramics.” Akira Satake Ceramics, akirasatake.com/

As my formal education in art evolves, new ideas address my work. For example, learning about installation art has opened new opportunities to explore my concerns regarding human scale, and how it relates to landscape. I find particular inspiration from installations created by Richard long and Antony Gormley.

Sir Richard Julian Long is one of the most influential British artists of his time. His works extend the possibilities of sculpture beyond traditional materials. Since 1960 Long has been making installations crafted from nature's bounty, materials such as clay, pine needles, stone, sticks, and mud. He also records and exhibits photographic and written records of his experiences interacting with the world. Using his walks as a form of artistic process Long contextualizes his actions in more universal and historical terms. In his words, "*My work has become a simple metaphor of life. A figure walking down his road, making his mark, it is an affirmation of my human scale and scenes.*"²

Long's Installations have shaped the way I understand sculpture in relationship to space and scale. As a sculptor working on an installation my main concern must be how I display my work. I place the pieces on the wall to help the viewer see the work from different angles; this display functions as a map. It guides the viewer through the gallery space.

² Long, Richard, and Paul Moorhouse. *Richard Long: A Moving World*: Tate St Ives, 2002.

Another installation piece that addresses my concerns on human scale in relationship to space is *“Field”* by Antony Gormley. In this work he uses the human form to explore man's existence in relation to the world. He also collaborates with communities from across the globe, gathering local sources of clay to create his figurative forms.

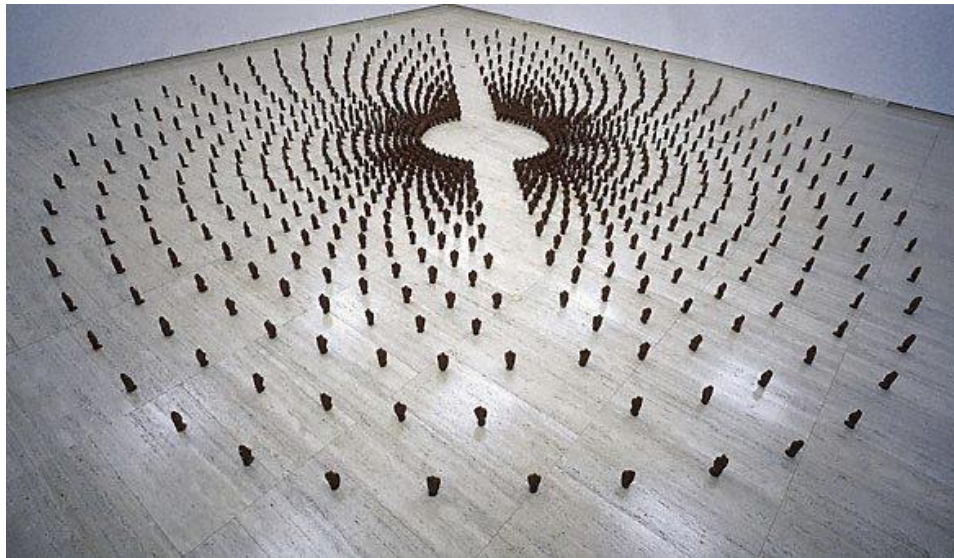


Fig. 1. Field for the British Isles. 1993, Gormley, Antony.

*“Field acts as an invasion; an endless mass that has become temporarily limited by the architecture of the place where it is installed, but could easily extend further than we can see. When we look at the figures in Field, they return our gaze, which has the effect of making us, and not them, the subject of the work.”*³

³ Tate. “Antony Gormley: Field – Exhibition at Tate Liverpool.” *Tate*, www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/antony-gormley-field.

Another inspiration for my development is Isamu Noguchi. In the larger context of Noguchi's work clay occupies a brief but inspiring interlude. While in Japan during three short periods of intense work, Noguchi explored issues of personal and national identity using clay as medium. He describes his approach in his 1952 autobiography:

*“My close embrace of the earth, as a seeking after identity with some primal matter beyond personalities and possessions.”*⁴

This period of time was a journey of self-discovery for Noguchi in which every aspect of his art was related to earth and personal connections. My current work evokes my own journey, and clay serves as a medium to connect to my heritage. Using natural materials such as wood ash, local clays and coloring oxides in my sculptures, I create unique results that emphasize the beauty of nature and celebrate my connection between art and land.

⁴ Cort, Louise Allison, et al. *Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics: A Close Embrace of the Earth*. University of California Press, 2003.



Fig. 2. Even the Centipede, 1952, Noguchi, Isamu.

An early source of inspiration is Noguchi's Totem "*Even the centipede*", of 1952. This work, made with unglazed stoneware and a wooden pole, represents Noguchi's efforts to support and suspend clay using vertical armatures, suggesting an insect. The source of inspiration for this piece came when he was living in Kita Kamakura, Japan, as his house was infested with centipedes. In his words:

*"I liked the rather quixotic notion of dignifying the centipede by making a sculpture of him—thus indicating that the centipede can aspire to humanity, or even to God."*⁵

⁵ Cort, Louise Allison, et al. *Isamu Noguchi and Modern Japanese Ceramics: A Close Embrace of the Earth*. University of California Press, 2003.

In this work Noguchi abstracted the figure of a centipede into its simplest form, as a module. By repeating this modular form in a composition, he managed to recreate the insect as a totemic sculpture; a shrine dignifying a mundane creature which lives in mud. Noguchi's work led me to explore the idea of totems and monoliths as strong figures of spiritual origin. My totemic works, like Noguchi's, are complex figures distilled into simple shapes.

A LINE ON THE WALL

This work addresses issues of scale and space. Originally my intention was simply to create a floor installation. Dissatisfied with the result, ultimately I decided to go further and take control over the walls as well. As a result, the work become more fluid and engaging.

It is important to define the work as a map. The installation serves as an abstract representation of a certain voyage, a personal interpretation of my life's journey. The work relates to landscape, the rhythms of nature and my sensory experiences.

Given the fluid nature of my installation it can be interpreted as a Marker or evidence of a temporal displacement, similar to the tracks produced by the flow of water on the soil during a rainy day. The linear patterns of the composition resemble the irregular aspects of nature. To arrange each piece I use my body as a guide. The palm of my hand, for example, determinates the negative space between the elements in the composition, creating a metaphor of cause and effect in human interactions with the natural world.

Every single object in the installation is intentionally unique. Although each modular element looks similar in appearance to the others, they are all sculpturally distinct, forming a whole composition greater than its parts.

The final installation resulted from several attempts and explorations in the gallery space, each attempt addressing some concerns relating the arrangement of individual elements to the whole.

Closed forms, such as circles or areolas, give us notions of totality, eternity, and cyclic movement. In contrast, open forms, such as lines or spirals, suggest displacement with a defined beginning and end.



Fig. 3. First Installation.

My first try at building the installation was composed of a small square resembling an old foundation, and a geometric line that divided the gallery floor into two segments. The arrangement was inspired by an archaeological sites in Mexico.

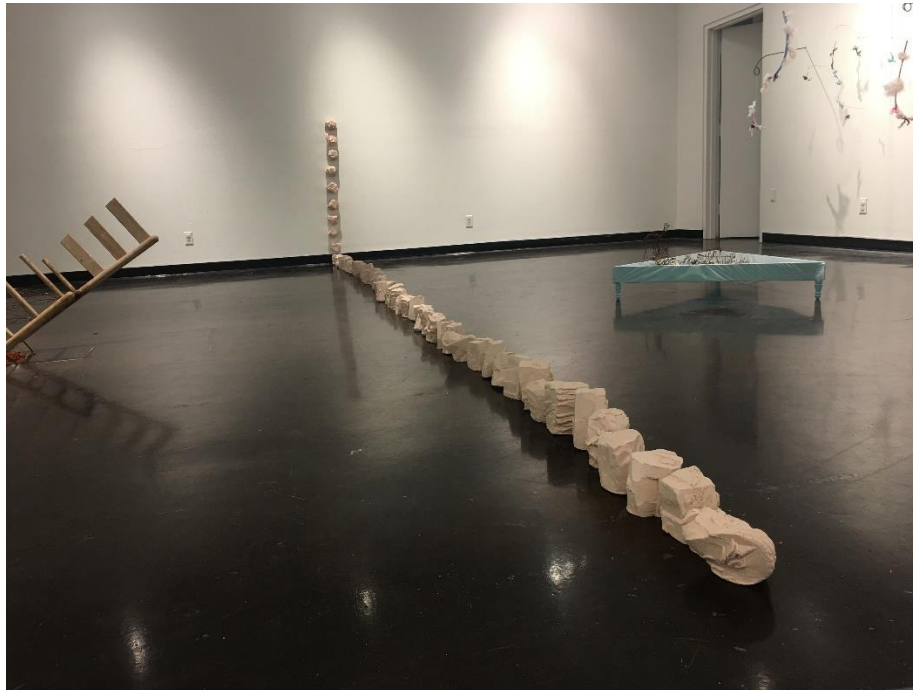


Fig. 4. Second Installation.

The second attempt focused more on the concept of line. The idea was to explore line as a barrier or limitation in the gallery space. The line went along the gallery floor and up the wall, a full 5'8", referring to my height. In this exercise I was intending to address human scale relating the piece to the given space.



Fig. 5. Griffith Gallery Installation I.

In the third attempt I installed the elements as a continuous organic line on the main wall of the gallery. The composition filled three walls and the floor. This approach addressed the installation as a map with different flows of movement, referring to nature and displacement on a grand scale.



Fig. 6. Griffith Gallery Installation II.

MONOLITHS

As a complement to the installation I built a series of six monoliths made of stoneware clay, each one addressing different ideas related to nature and human interaction with landscape. The marks on the surface of the big sculptures intentionally mirror the linear aspect of the smaller elements of the installation.

I built the figurative monoliths intuitively, employing various hand building techniques. Each piece was carved individually using non-conventional tools like metal scrapers, wood sticks, and knives. To build each sculpture I used coils made by an extruder. The engravings on the monoliths relate to paths, and the surface treatment is inspired by topographic images. The figures serve also as landmarks inspired by ancient stelae.⁶ As noted elsewhere, the use of glazes made from ash and clays from the region functions symbolically. These materials connect the art with the specific place where I am working.

⁶ Stelae are a type of engraved monolith used with commemorative purposes as boundary markers or property lines.



Fig. 7. Monolith I, 2020, Stoneware, 74in x 13in x 13in.



Fig. 8. Monolith II, 2020, Stoneware, 46in x 13in x 13in.



Fig. 9. Monolith III, 2020, Stoneware, 45in x 12in x 10in.



Fig. 10. Monolith IV, 2020, Stoneware, 47in x 14in x 11in.



Fig. 11. Watcher I, 2020, Stoneware, 30in x 11in x 12in.



Fig. 12. Watcher II, 2020, Stoneware, 31in x 16in x 10in.

CONCLUSIONS

As I have come to the close of my formal education in the arts, I have come to realize how my background as a Mexican artist has informed my art practice. My work focuses on the human figure and the nature of immigration, to a great extent because of my current circumstances. As an international student, I feel compelled to communicate those concerns as personal and universal. As José Ortega y Gasset points out in his book *Meditations on Hunting*:

*“I am myself and my circumstance; if I do not save it, I do not save myself”*⁷

In this sense, like Ortega y Gasset, I understand the concerns addressed in my work as universal regardless of origin or background.

In a fluid world in constant change and movement it is necessary to find the connections that allow us to understand each other as a whole greater than its individual parts. I find that clay is the connection between myself and the world, as it is present in the crust of the earth and is connected to the larger history of mankind.

⁷ Gasset José Ortega y, and Brett Smith. *Meditations on Hunting*. Wilderness Adventures Press, 2007.

PROCESS

Naturally sourced material is important for the development of this project and its content. The simple action of going to a place in the middle of nowhere to gather materials from the ground connects me to the landscape. Each object in the exhibition was made using high-fire stoneware clay decorated with different ash glazes. These incorporate natural local material, fired to 2300 °F in a reduction atmosphere.

Material	Percentage
Fire Clay	40.5
Gold Art	33.5
Minspar	10.0
OM4	9.0
Red Art	3.0
Alumina	2.0
Total	100
Sand	20.0 – 40.0

Clay body formula.

This is a throwing clay body with 20% to 40 % sand added to strengthen the clay, providing a wide range of possibilities during the sculpting process. The sand also prevents cracks and adds an interesting granular texture that mimics geologic formations.

For the surface finishing I made different variations of two traditional ash glaze formulations. I decided to use natural wood as a principal source for my glazes as a nod to the history of ceramics. In the words of John Britt:

*“Wood ash has been used for centuries as a source of flux in glazes, it usually contains high amount of calcium oxide, which is a high-temperature flux, ash has been an important flux for over 2400 years”*⁸

Material	Proportion
Clay	50.0
Wood ash	50.0
Total	100,0

Classic ash Glaze.

Material	proportion
Clay	33.3
Wood ash	33.3
Feldspar	33.4
Total	100.0

Three-part ash glaze.

Ash, besides being an important source of calcium oxide, reacts well when combined with local clays, and can produce unique glazes. I made several tests with different clays and ashes, and the next section is a technical appendix of the result.

⁸ Britt, John. The Complete Guide to High-Fire Glazes: Glazing & Firing at Cone 10. Lark Books, 2007.

SAMPLE APPENDIX



Fig. 13. Test Piece I.

Material	Proportion
Wood ash	50
Local clay	50



Fig. 14. Test Piece II.

Material	Proportion
Iron oxide	50
Gersley borate	50



Fig. 15. Test Piece III.

Material	Proportion
Cobalt oxide	50
Gersley borate	50



Fig. 16. Test Piece IV.

Green Celadon	
Material	Percentage
Custer Feldspar	50.0
Silica	28.0
Barium carb.	12.0
Whiting	6.0
EPK	4.0
Iron Oxide	2.00



Fig. 17. Test Piece V.

Celadon	
Material	Percentage
Custer Feldspar	50.0
Silica	28.0
Barium carbonate	12.0
Whiting	6.0
EPK	4.0



Fig. 18. Test Piece VI.

Nuka	
Material	Proportion
local Clay	33.3
Wood ash	33.3
Feldspar	33.4
Total	100.0

EXHIBITION

A select number of pieces from this series was installed in the School of Art's Gallery at Stephen F. Austin State University. Video footage of this exhibition can be found at:

<https://vimeo.com/412475357>

For the final exhibition I decided to arrange the large sculptures at the center of the gallery directly on the floor, referencing an archaeological site. The piece "A Line on The Wall" was installed on two walls on the right side of the gallery, creating a fluid and organic composition referencing the passage of a river. In addition, I installed three circular forms that resemble areolas, which are intended to interact with the stelae. The presented work takes control of the gallery space inviting the viewer to become an active part of the exhibition.



Fig. 19. Exhibition Image I.



Fig. 20. Exhibition Image II.



Fig. 21. Exhibition Image III.



Fig. 22. Exhibition Image IV.



Fig. 23. Exhibition Image V.



Fig. 24. Exhibition Image VI.

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VITA

Aldo R. Ornelas was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, January 2, 1992. He entered the Universidad Autonoma de Chihuahua in 2010 and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in June 2015. He then entered The Stephen F. Austin State University Graduate Program seeking a Master of Fine Arts degree in Ceramics. While pursuing his degree, Ornelas was instructor of record for courses in Introductory and Advanced Ceramics, as well as Three-Dimensional Design. He also worked as a studio assistant for Elizabeth Akamatzu, a full time sculptor working in Nacogdoches, Texas. In May 2019 Ornelas performed a Workshop and a public talk as an invited artist at the Universidad Autonoma de Chihuahua. In September 2019 Ornelas worked as a volunteer assistant for Simposio Internacional de Ceramistas, in Chihuahua, Mexico. Aldo maintained an active exhibition record, including national and international exhibitions and group shows. He was awarded a Master of Fine arts degree in May 2020.

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MLA Style Manual

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