NOESIS

THE INNER NATURE OF BODY EXPRESSION

BY

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Etymology and Definition of Noesis

noesis:

Etymology:

From Ancient Greek νόησις (noēsis, “concept”, “idea”, “intelligence”, “understanding”), from νοεῖν (noein, “to intend”, “to perceive”, “to see”, “to understand”) (from νοῦς (nous, “mind”, “thought”), from νόος (noos)) + -σις (-sis), suffix forming nouns of action

Noun:

1. To have insight and understanding.

2. The act or result of understanding the inner nature of things or of seeing intuitively.
Artist Statement

As we progress through time, language is generated and adapted through the ever-changing structures of society and technology. Like all languages, non-verbal communication has adapted and changed through time and culture. A single gesture can mean a dozen different things, yet many of these traits have stayed constant over human existence; it is this universal visual presentation that is our language of emotion.

Often times we hide our true emotions from the world around us, using spoken language to deceive others. While we can easily express falsehood through speech, the body becomes far more challenging to conceal our true emotions. Through the use of postures and gestures, I explore the visual language of emotion as a method of studying one of humanity's most basic forms of interaction.

Scale drastically changes the way we perceive an object; something small can seem vulnerable while larger scaled objects can become menacing. The same is true for material and its appearance and wear. By creating distressed surfaces I illustrate the rich history of my figures' lives, exposing the fragile process of creating such forms. We are the sum of our experiences and my figures wear their scars visibly as their skin.
Introduction: A Brief Historical Look at Nonverbal Communication

One of humanity's most astounding skills is our ability to understand each other through subtle expressions of our bodies. With nothing more than a slight look or gesture, we are able to translate, express, and communicate a vast array of emotions across a variety of cultures within seconds. As a result, body language is a powerful, versatile, and dynamic form of communication. Even though there are many cultures that communicate in unique and distinct ways, we all find common ground in this universal language of emotion. It gives us a look into our shared past and future. This is why I find the naturally-embedded visual language of the body so fascinating.

The evolution of human communication involves prolific use of the body as a method of exchange of ideas and emotions. Artistic representations of the human body are found in almost all cultural groups and races. One of the oldest known figure sculptures is the Venus of Willendorf statue, dated from 28,000 – 25,000 B.C.E. Though little is actually know about the figure, the extended stomach, breasts, and groin suggest that it was a kind of a fertility goddess. (Cunningham, 2014) While this example does not communicate an emotional use of body language, it does show how the human form is used as a method of translating information. The figure and form’s use throughout history and across cultures is ubiquitous.

"Venus" of Willendorf
C. 24,000-22,000 BCE
Oolitic limestone
During the Kamakura period of Japan (1185–1333), artists used ink and color on scrolls as a method of story telling and recording. Many of these scrolls depicted mythological events including the *Illustrated Legends of the Kitano Shrine (Kitano Tenjin Engi)*. In this scroll we see a tormented human spirit unleashing the power of nature onto the Kitano Tenjin shrine. Studying this work exposes a simplistic but very identifiable use of postures and facial expression to create a sense of fear, pain, and sorrow. (N.Y. MET, 2013)
Introduction: A Brief Historical Look at Nonverbal Communication

In the western tradition, Ancient Greece’s Classical period (5th - 4th centuries BCE) is likely the most widely accepted starting point for expressive figure sculpture. (Athens, Greece 2014). Pieces such as this Athenian family pictorial grave marker demonstrates a very expressive use of body language.
The Function and Form of Body Language

In regard to my own work, I attempt to highlight this long history through surface and color, giving my figures a sense of weight and age. Decay is an organic and often beautiful visual process that exposes a history through scars and damages. There is an interesting relationship between decay as part of body language and the relationships we have with each other. Many of our internal emotional scars often leak out in our movement, especially when we are unaware of it. My own figures work as a metaphor for such internal struggles through the use of surface, placement, and posture.

As a material, ceramics can be considered to have a memory for manipulation. Clay exposes the methods that are intentionally expressed through form and surface, showing the tension and stress that it is exposed to during its many changes. Ceramics is an extremely dynamic medium because of its memory, and perfect for expressing emotion through the human figure. By
harnessing this inherent aspect of ceramics, my figures show a sense of age and weight, which give them the appearance of being brought through history. With this presentation a viewer can observe the figure’s long, difficult life and the many scars that life has left behind.

Communication is an essential tool used by all forms of life. According to the English physicist Donald M. MacKay, who has been a major contributor in research for Communications, Linguistics, and Neurosciences (*Formal Analysis of Communicative Processes*), communication is any form of interaction that an organism has with itself or another living organism in order to change a behavior. By this definition we can think of language as a multifaceted mechanism that simultaneously functions both consciously and unconsciously.

For humans, the most basic vehicle for visual communication is our body. The body is an extremely telling visual source of non-verbal communication, and is used to express many ideas, feelings, meanings, and the nuances in between. Non-verbal communication can be grouped into five areas of study: gesture, gaze, interpersonal space, gait, and posture.

Gesture is primarily manifested through hand movements, but head and facial movements can be gestures as well. Acting as additions to linguistic languages, gestures help express our thought process, and likely coevolved with our physical anatomy, as well as our cognitive and linguistic capabilities. (Matsumoto pg. 76 , 2012)

Gaze refers to the use of eye orientation, and is probably the most widely studied area of nonverbal communication. When one person's eyes are oriented directly at another's, the gaze is often associated with dominance, power, and aggression. When the eyes are averted, the gaze is associated with passiveness, fear, sadness, and submission. Studies with humans and non-human
The Function and Form of Body Language

primates have also revealed evidence that these traits evolved over a long period of time. (Matsumoto pg. 82, 2012)

Interpersonal Space refers to the area a person occupies in relation to others. What qualifies as a violation of interpersonal space often depends on culture and gender, as well as cultural standing within the community.

Gait refers to the way someone is walking, or the stride distance individuals use. Gait often has a direct correlation to a person’s psyche, with much of the research in gait being used for police or for security purposes. As with interpersonal space, the meanings of one’s gait are often culturally based.

Posture refers to the overall orientation of the body. It is often a collection of several forms of nonverbal communication, including the other four mentioned above. When a viewer’s sight is limited to beyond the chest level, the three emotions that are most easily recognizable through posture are anger, sadness and happiness. Of the five areas of study, posture has the fewest number of culturally-based studies. However, some evidence suggests that posture also has the least amount of cross-cultural diversity throughout human society, suggesting that it could be the most universally-understood form of body language. (Matsumoto pg. 88, 2012)
The Function and Form of Body Language

My own work explores these five areas of body language and uses them to express a wide range of emotions and tendencies in order to elicit very real feelings. My figures often display some of our less desirable feelings, giving the impression of loss, regret, annoyance and shame. These emotions are meant to expose some of our common tendencies in order to create a dialogue centered around human interaction.
The Function and Form of Body Language

As described above, most body language is created through movement, particularly when gaze, gesture and gait are invoked. In order to bring about such movement, I began working with projected video. Ceramics as a material is very dynamic and pliable during the high hydration stage, but as the water evaporates, the molecules become denser and less lubricated, making the clay brittle. Firing the material increases its strength but results in a very rigid ceramic form. Without the aid of other materials or motors, it would be impossible to create a realistic illusion of movement from the piece directly. The projection was a simple but elegant method to translate emotion through fluid movement.

*Old News, Noesis, 2014*
The Function and Form of Body Language

By isolating a particular area of the body such as the eyes, I was able to focus on how individual aspects of non-verbal movement can communicate, affecting our relationships and reactions. Though much of these actions are subject to some variations of interpretation, there remains a common central feeling.

Culture has a major influence on societal impressions and expectations of body language. Most of our responses to external subjects are subject to change, as body language is a component of both learned and instinctual knowledge. Based on this understanding, my work uses scale, color and texture to create new and unique methods to expose how dynamic our ability to understand and empathize with one another is, even when we are confronted with something uncommon.

In his book *The Communication of Emotion*, Ross Buck compounds nonverbal communication into two subgenres. The first is symbolic communication, which stems from semiotics: signs that are only understood through the addition of audible language or references to external ideas. Symbolic communication is very dependent on societal factors, evolving within a group or population. One society can easily become confused by another society's symbolic communication due to the vast variety of meanings a single gesture can have. (Buck, 1986)

The other form of nonverbal communication is spontaneous communication, which is an unconscious mechanism that our brain uses to display how we are feeling to others. Also known as autonomous gestures, these unconscious movements act without the aid of an audible linguistic language or reference.

Buck explains:
The Function and Form of Body Language

“The sign (facial or gesture) is an external manifestation of the referent (the animal’s motivational/emotional state) in the same way that dark clouds are a sign of rain.” *(Matsumoto pg. 37, 2012)*

This form of spontaneous communication is the primary source for my own visual representation. By looking towards the unintentional or unconscious forms of language that the body displays, I am able to elicit a cross-cultural display of emotion that reveals some of our shared ancestral links.

Nonverbal communication was first studied by Charles Darwin, who first published his findings in 1872 with his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*. Author and linguist Dr. Nicla Rossini summarized Darwin's words in *Reinterpreting Gesture as Language* thusly:

“…Darwin argued that there is an inherent usefulness for facial expressions and other visual cues that social species use to communicate some kind of inner state of thinking or emotion.”

Buck furthers the sentiment:

“In other words, it is useful for social animals to be able to communicate their internal states of anger, fear, interest, sexual excitement, and so forth, to their fellows without actually having to engage in the overt behavior associated with those states. The more highly social the species, the stronger are the selection pressures favoring the evolution of such communication systems.” *(Buck Pg. 36, 1986)*
The Function and Form of Body Language

This research suggests that as a highly social species, there is a necessity for humans to empathize with others within their own community for stability of that community. This principle functions through an innate understanding of empathy, enabling humans with the ability to quickly identify and respond appropriately to a situation. Without this adaptation, individuals would perhaps do whatever they wanted, making it impossible for any kind of large group or community to function.

The ability to translate and convey such incredible amounts of visual information has become so important for humans that we continue to create new forms of communication through a wide variety of external means. The Fine Arts are a perfect example of a powerful tool we use to elicit emotion and convey information through a constantly-changing visual medium. By applying some of these methods to my own figures, I am able to elicit a sense of empathy and connection between viewer and figure(s).
Process and Method: Scale

Scale drastically changes the way we perceive an object. When it is small, we feel an innate sense of power over it. The opposite can be said when we encounter something significantly larger than us. Interestingly, we often take little notice of strangers who are close to our own size or fit into what we consider the visual norm; a simplified answer to why this is stems from evolution and the way our brain works.

Every day we are bombarded with massive amounts of information; if we were to take in everything around us, we would be in a constant state of distraction and confusion. As a method of dealing with this, our brains developed the ability to filter out information that doesn’t seem to be immediately useful. This results in us generally taking little notice of strangers’ height or size if they fit into the boundaries of this visual norm. But when a stranger is of an unusual height or size, we subconsciously take notice. As a result, scale has wide implications that modify our reactions and behaviors.

This reaction set can be traced back to an evolutionary response that kept animals and our ancestors out of unnecessary danger. Take, for example, the idea of a dominant animal protecting...
its land from intruders. If that animal encountered a larger animal encroaching on its territory, it would consider the risk factor before engaging in an altercation. The animals that had this trait went on to produce offspring, because those that would attack the larger intruder were most likely eaten or killed before they could further their family line.

Part of my work has been to challenge our expectation in regards to scale. During the creation of the piece “Old News” I found that the figure needed to be elevated in order to have an astonishing height equal to its volume. By placing it on a low pedestal, the figure commands an impressive use of space within the gallery, making it feel even larger then it actually is. Even at a scale that is somewhat unnerving, many people found the figure to have a more peaceful presence due to her body language and use of surface color.

One artist that has greatly impacted my own work in relation to scale and use of body language is Ron Mueck. Mueck first began his fine arts career during the early 1990’s, when he used his experience working in the movie industry to create hyper-realistic figures at truly enormous sizes. Born in Melbourne, Australia in 1958, Mueck’s work deals with the human life cycle, from birth to death. Many of his figures display feelings of alienation, loneliness, and vulnerability. His work, though often enormous, is also scaled to much smaller sizes as well.

"Although I spend a lot of time on the surface, it's the life inside I want to capture."

-Ron Mueck
Surface is an important area of study, particularly in ceramics. Ceramics has the ability to mimic, transform and disguise itself through the many changing periods it goes through from wet to dry, and from bisque to glazed. This makes it an ideal medium for expression. My earlier work focused on disguising the surfaces of my figures to appear as worn and aged surfaces, such as wood and brick. These textures acted as a method of disguise in order to comment on our tendencies to hide our true emotions when they are considered less desirable. This worked successfully as a conceptual method of display, but lacked the ability to expose the rich tactile process of clay. To juxtapose this, my large figure “Old News” reveals the clay surface in a much more deliberate fashion, with large separation lines where each of the parts fit together. A multitude of hand and finger marks form a rich, spackled-like surface. This process is performed fairly simply, by dragging wet clay across the leather hard figure, exposing many of my own handprints that lay the clay across it.

I have also examined and explored color in a similar manner, with my earlier work focusing on a more Trompe l’oeil method. As I have progressed, I have increasingly focused on
Process and Method: Surface and Color

using color, hue, and saturation to influence the mood of my figures. This approach is designed to generate a dialogue between form, surface and color as they combine into a unified function of expression.

During my studies at SUNY New Paltz as an MFA candidate, I was fortunate enough to work under the artist Steve Montgomery. Steve’s work with form, surface and texture has placed him into a very small and unique group of contemporary ceramic artists that have successfully integrated into the fine art market rather then being placed into the more narrow category of contemporary ceramic art. During my semester-long apprenticeship under Steve, I learned many of his methods for building, attaching, and coloring large-scale work. Steve’s use of non-ceramic materials (such as commercial epoxies, paints, and reinforcements such as PVC piping) has been an invaluable resource for my thesis figures. His material studies and construction process played a major role in the success of the figure “Old News”.

Steve Montgomery, STATIC FUEL (1998), painted and reinforced ceramic, 27 x 69 x 31 inches
Process and Method: Pre-fire Construction

When beginning a figure, I start with an idea for an emotion and consider how to best express this idea. I then sketch several gestures, and choose one or two that best embodies the desired emotion. From there I work with live models to reproduce some of the poses, as well as create a few new ones that express the same or a similar emotion. The most successful of the poses are then made into loose maquettes, allowing for a better 3D representation in physical space. The maquettes are then measured and scaled up to the desired size.

Fig. 1 (Left) Maquette for the wood like woman in “A Lack of consideration”.

Fig. 2 (Right) Maquette for “Old News”

Methods of construction for full-scale figures may entail coil building, thick slab stacking, or thrown forms, depending on the shape and scale of the figure. For the very large female figure, a
footprint was scaled and measured for accuracy. Then 8” tall by 1 ¼” thick slabs were arranged as
the border. Once the border was completed, slabs were arranged and attached with slip, and
compressed together with rubber and metal ribs. This slab process of building makes up the
construction method for most of the large figures, with coils and thrown portions subsidizing the
head and extremities. When the figure reached two feet in height, I made cuts at the base to allow
for easy removal and shrinkage.

The initial vertical construction is fairly fast, with texture and rendering, anatomical
adjustments, and extremities taking the bulk of the time. The head and extremities are attached
after a calculated consistency of water evaporation has been achieved. Coil building is the most
effective and efficient method for more organic extremities, but drying consistency must always be
carefully measured. The larger the form, the more challenging it is to time the attachments,
requiring a consistency that is hard enough to prevent slumping but wet enough to achieve proper
adhesion. Slip and vinegar are used for adhesives, and paperclay to remedy unwanted cracking if
necessary.
**Process and Method: Pre-fire Construction**

Once the figure is completed, it is sectioned into large but manageable pieces and fired to cone 02. This lower temperature firing limits the clays vitreosity to a fairly porous and more brittle state, but allows for fewer stress cracks to occur during firing and better adhesion with commercial epoxies. Another advantage of this is that one can still make minimal alterations such as sanding and drilling, which are much riskier and less effective when done to more vitreous clays.
Process and Method: Post-fire Construction and Color Application

After firing, the figure is reassembled in slightly larger sections with commercial epoxy and fillers. About 5 large sections are fused together, making for a stable and secure stacked form. Color was applied with a gravity-fed spray gun, using watered down external house paints. Drips were applied by brushing the paint in concentrated sections over areas that slope down and then thinned with mineral oil to create a dynamic and interesting surface that exposes the detailed surface of the figure.
Clay Recipe, Epoxy Resin and Fillers

Clay Body Recipe by %

OM4 44
Talc 33
EPK 23

Fine Grog 10

Epoxies and fillers

West Systems 105 Epoxy Resin
West Systems 205 Fast Hardener
West Systems 404 High-Density Filler
West Systems 407 Low-Density Filler
West Systems 410 Microlight Filler
Much of my inspiration for projection was informed by artists like Tony Oursler, Krzysztof Wodiczko, and Colby Parsons who is a contemporary ceramic artist who combines video projection and ceramics. Parsons’ two series Materiality of Light and Semiotic Series were of useful influence to me. Parsons was also a valuable resource in pointing me in the right direction for hardware and software for the digital aspect of my show.

Colby Parsons, Box of Light Bulbs, Semiotics Series, 2011. Left: The Ceramic sculpture without projection. Center and Right: two variations of the moving images projected on the sculpture

Krzysztof Wodiczko, The Soldiers and Sailors Memorial, 1984-1985

Tony Oursler, Eyes, Metro Pictures / 519 West 24th Street, New York, NY, 10001 Apr. 20 - Jun. 1, 1996
Final Thoughts

Body language is as dynamic and diverse as a form of expression as the humans who utilize it. We use it every day, both unconsciously and formally, as one of our many forms of communication. Our ability to learn and adapt these skills to new and unique representations of the body gives me hope that someday we can live successfully and peacefully as a global community. To support this idea, my own work is intended to instill senses of intrigue and thoughtfulness, exposing the similarities and uniqueness that make up the human condition.
Old News
2014
Ceramic, Paint, Projection
Thesis Show Photos
A Lack of Consideration, 2014. Ceramic, Underglaze
Thesis Show Photos
Thesis Show Photos
Thesis Show Photos
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