Water

Master of Fine Art Thesis

by

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Introduction – Artist Statement

I return to the water’s edge to feel my mind empty before me. Water gives form to a swell of intentions, released to drift, reflect, and find resonance with the tide.

I pair digital and craft based techniques to infiltrate contemporary design and honor traditions of handmade ceramics. Patterns function as a vehicle through space, offering markers for perception and revealing a subliminal tendency to seek order and repetition. Creating patterns with Computer Aided Design, mold making, and slip casting allow me to offer an experience that provides the viewer with a quiet, immense moment.
Sublime Experience – Perception through Illusion

“The world is large, but in us it is as deep as the sea.” -Gaston Bachelard¹

"To 'see' is to go direct to the core; to know the facts about an object of beauty is to go around the periphery. Intellectual discrimination is less essential to an understanding of beauty than the power of intuition that precedes it." -Soetsu Yanagi²

"I create places in which to think, without trying to dictate what to think." -Maya Lin³

Handmade tile has been used for centuries to adorn the spaces we inhabit, to offer a sense of beauty, intricacy, and tell a story. I want to turn the domestic experience of tile into an immersive one by interrupting expectations of our routine environment and offer a space to pause. My work revolves around capturing a moment in which we experience something phenomenal but have yet to understand. This experience is a balance in perception, between a visceral and cognitive response.

This leads me to consider how an illusion of space and the complexity of pattern can embody these two ways of processing information. The philosopher Immanuel Kant suggests that “this sense of the sublime may be so complex that our inability to form a clear mental conception of it leads to a sense of the inadequacy of our imagination and of the vast gulf between that experience and the thoughts we have about it”.⁴ This gulf of comprehension is where viewers’ concept of seeing can be challenged. The artist Robert Irwin creates illusions to skew viewers’ sense of space and alter their comprehension of form so that they are acutely aware of their surroundings.

¹ Gaston Bachelard
² Soetsu Yanagi
³ Maya Lin
⁴ Immanuel Kant
Irwin describes the ideal experience of his work: “When you stop giving [a piece] a literate or articulate read (the kind of read you’d give a Renaissance painting) and instead look at them perceptually, you find that your eye ends up suspended in midair, midspace, or midstride: time and space seem to blend in the continuum of your presence. You lose your bearings for a moment. You finally end up in a totally meditative state. The thing is you cease reading and you cease articulating and you fall into a state where nothing else is going on but the tactile, experiential process.”

For a second, viewers can step outside of themselves, and into the work.

To create this window, I look for moments of beauty that are stripped of cultural references, such as a vast landscape, a fading horizon, a sunset, or rippling water in a calm tide. These natural yet familiar phenomena illicit the visceral response Irwin refers to and provide a clear entry point to that sublime space of beauty, of emptiness. The next question is, how do I translate this phenomenon into objects using color and form?

For as long as people have created sacred spaces, light and monumental architecture have been used to instill this sense of awe. Gothic cathedrals and Islamic temples were built around these principles, designed to suggest perspective and infinite space, with ornamental structure and light as a transcendent material.
We operate with visual landmarks. Unconsciously and continuously, we are absorbing the information of our surroundings, thus influencing our thoughts and experience. Robert Irwin comments on what happens when that information is taken away; to cease “reading” and “articulating” is unsettling, since it is so counter to our daily surroundings and instincts. We need that information to orient us to the experience. That information is what determines the form and structure of the work.

The rose window in Gothic cathedrals and the muqarna in Islamic temples are prime examples capturing the sublime and base that experience on a perceptual experience. A fusion of ornament and structure on an immense scale elevate these decorative elements. “Although the muqarnas function as ornament, it is not easily separated from the structure it adorns. This is because it not only began life as an architectural form, but remains one: it conveys, as a simple curved surface cannot, the distribution of forces and supports involved in the transition from one plane to another... the surface now makes intuitive, visual sense. The muqarnas bridge the gap between part and whole, and between human and monumental scale.” Understanding a horizon requires a sense perspective. Illusions of water are communicated through reflections in light and a specific flow and movement.
"Pattern is not realistic depiction. It is a vision of what is reflected by the intuition."

-Soetsu Yanagi

"Unconstrained by the need to function in the physical sense, ornament is intended, first and last, to give pleasure. It transforms the inessential into a theater for passion and beauty, invention and bravura."—James Trilling

Pattern is my vehicle for the sublime experience, as it divides and fills space. Modularity meets the need for reproducibility and segmentation of large scale ceramic installation. Each piece in my thesis show illustrates how pattern can function as framing for an interior space or as a form unto itself.

Beyond Knowing Tides began with the objective of extracting a pattern from rippling water that would communicate a sense of movement similar to the tide. A geometric pattern came from tracing components of murqarnas, Islamic dome structures. Computer Aided Design (CAD) software allowed me to generate wave surfaces by processing photographs of water and orient geometric shapes parallel to each facet of the rippling surface. This juxtaposition of naturally occurring logic with the expect logic
of geometry resulted in the final form, with radial symmetry solving my challenge in finding a tessellating unit for each tile.

I found that there was a quality of the work present in the design stage that would be lost when it was translated to a ceramic form. My surface treatment was an attempt to capture the linear, floating quality of the geometrical pattern with highlighted edges, while the glossy, running glaze would suggest a depth in water. While I didn’t intend to recreate a murqarna or image of a ripple, the research successfully circled back to these original references. The title, *Beyond Knowing Tides*, suggests that while I may try to assign a logic or pattern to water, it will always be beyond comprehension.

In *Reduce Me to Silence*, I wanted to create an illusion of perspective by shifting scale to suggest distance within a rippling water surface. I believe tying the pattern to a moment of reality, done here through perspective, gives power to the experience and the connection to the viewer, similarly to
what the artist Teresita Fernandez describes: "In general, the way I use images, I use as little as possible, I strip it down until what I have left is just enough to be a catalyst for an emotional response. That emotional response from the viewers is what triggers a wealth of imagery that is very rich, it's very specific, very personal." In this case, the catalyst for an emotional response is the recognition of water movement fading into the horizon.

The CAD design software allowed me to work with specific photographs I took of water, but the overall composition and footprint of each tile was unknown. The next question is how can structure divide space and suggest perspective in modular units?

My research in Gothic architecture brought me to the rose window, where its tracery functions as structure and ornament. The radial symmetry framed areas for content and provided a sense of perspective with the pattern tapering, as if it were stretching away from you into space. I chose the pattern of the rose window at Notre Dame because of its ratio of negative space to pattern. A gradient of Reduces Me to Silence, with Notre Dame reference and unglazed tiles in progress.
colorless grey acknowledges the lack of stain glass and illustrations, while still suggesting transparency into a fading horizon.

*When the Light Shines Through* was constructed to tie together the rippling water surfaces with the geometric pattern in *Beyond Knowing Tides*. The format of the two columns form a gateway into a sacred space, determining the limits of my show within the gallery. The edges of the pattern are cropped against a water surface so they all ripple and flow together, while the aperture of the interior of the bricks open and close, suggesting varying highlights skimming across the water. This piece was made using press molds, and carry a looseness in finished edges that convey a sense of rawness and casualness that the rest of the work does not have. This relates the columns to architectural elements similar to construction bricks.

*And Then There’s You* was designed to be the most immersive work in the exhibition. Pairing ceramic tile with photographs of water creates a juxtaposition of realistic and abstractly rendered water. Through the photographs it is easy to slip into a far away place, yet the tiles keep you at their forefront, to observe the pattern and undulating surfaces. Finished by pouring slip, the surfaces carry pour and drip lines, which complement the graphic quality of the photographs, as
well as continue a language of flow around form. The title of this piece, *And Then There’s You*, refers to the grandness of losing oneself in an overwhelming experience, and then realizing your small, humble existence among it.

**Methodology - Materials & Process**

Throughout this research, my studio practice has been centered around the goal of working in a ceramic design and production studio. My processes evolved to support easy reproducibility, customization, and design iterations. Once I created a digital design, 3D printing models in PLA plastic at the Hudson Valley Advanced Manufacturing Center was a fast, non precious manner of production. Casting the PLA model in plaster to use in slip casting and press molding enabled efficient production in regards to material and time. I had a self-assigned requirement that all finished work is “functional” tile; while it may be very sculptural in form and content, it all needed to be vitrified and securely installed so the work has the opportunity to infiltrate contemporary design and a modern market.

Parametric design, a way of manipulating form within a set of parameters, can preserve and elaborate on the relationships between parts in a form or pattern. I began integrating digital design into my
studio practice as a modular drawing tool because of its similarity to basic tile design. The capacity for customization and exact replication makes digital fabrication the perfect method for recreating phenomena that border on our human capabilities of comprehension.

Things such as fluttering leaves or moving water, known as soft fascination, are experiences in nature or soft stimuli that effortlessly capture your attention. I was not interested in my own capacity to recreate these moments by hand, but rather, was interested in how I could translate that information into an ornamental system. As digital fabrication can make the intangible tangible, I stepped closer to the balance between a moment of awe and a sense of logic.

Just as the craft community discusses at length the subtlety and value of each tool mark and consideration of the hand, I found similar “marks” in the digital process. Understanding the nuances and craft of virtual objects built a rewarding digital dexterity, rather than a manual one. Translating and manipulating points to 2D curves, to 3D virtual form, to physical being through Computer Aided Manufacturing, and then back again for iterations, accumulated an aesthetic in the work that was unique to my process.

In regards to nurturing a creative handmade studio practice, the experience of laying out the first series of unfired slip cast tiles— like seeing the piece *Beyond Knowing Tides* at full scale for the first time— is one I will never forget. It speaks of a type of creative magic I don’t hear much about but has incredible validity as it became a mode of working for every other piece in my thesis show. Shifting from digital design to material production required a large amount of testing from both sides, which then required
trust as I pushed into large scale production after only experiencing a small scale rendering.

**Conclusion**

I look for systems in every part of my studio practice. The architect and design theorist Christopher Alexander describes a system as “that which focuses on an overall behavior accomplished through the ‘interaction among parts.’ The use of the words ‘among parts’ is critical in this definition as it states that the knowledge of the components has to be complemented with the knowledge of how the components interact, whether it be in competition or in contiguity.” In my mind, this idea of a system of parts that are unique, yet self-referential, a system that’s connected in reciprocal exchanges of actions, refers to a network of thoughts as well as pattern. This is what the water represents.

The metaphor of water and psychology is beautifully described:

“…sea pieces and landscapes developed in step with the advances made by society. Naturalistic description, depth of focus and the gradual bleaching of landscape towards the horizon came to indicate knowledge of natural science and insights into the ways of nature. However, what are lakes, rivers and seas but stage sets for human passions and psychological crises, grand see pieces for a public that appreciates psychological depth of focus? Few landscapes stop at reproduction; they depict nature condensed, that has suddenly become a mirror, reproducing human psychic landscapes. Water, be it flowing or frozen, becomes the medium for reflection of intellectual worlds.” The ceramic medium freezes these intangible moments.
Whether it’s a system for modes of production or a system for generating pattern and form, this is a search for structure to create pockets for the unknown. Achieving a level of exactitude in tile through pattern design and material execution not commonly found in hand made objects made their reality both more questionable and real. Refocusing and “turning away from the simple structure of end-products and toward the active, ever-changing processes that bring them into being,” refers to my creative process, studio management and search to capture the ethereal moments in between. The exploration of these contiguous relationships has just begun.
Bibliography


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December 9 | 5 - 7pm

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
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