

CAPTURING THE FLEETING

By

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Summary of Project Option in Lieu of Thesis
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Chair: Nan Smith

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Capturing the Fleeting is an exhibition that presents preserved memories through sculpture to indicate the fleeting nature of life. Boyhood hunting experiences allowed me to witness the transition between life and death. These experiences led to a raised awareness and curiosity about our brief time in this world. Memories of hunting with my family and my father's occupation of taxidermy informed and provided the inspiration for this body of work.

Capturing the Fleeting evokes feelings of memory and loss through a figurative installation composed of a life-scale classically modeled male figure whose gaze focuses on four sculpture vignettes. Combining classical sculpting techniques in clay with preservation methods and materials used in taxidermy I create hybrid sculptural forms, which compose the vignettes. Sculpted hands are used to express the feelings and peak emotions of fear and anxiety. These emotions are articulated through the illustrated tenseness of the muscle and bone structures. They grasp, clench, hold, and fall limp to suggest a narrative of loss. Deer and waterfowl elements have been chosen because they represented the animals my family hunted. The memory of these animals in my conscious mind reminds me of family in my household. The animals prompted me to consider our inevitable passing. Incorporated taxidermy methods such as treating skins, cleaning, and casting materials all showcase the desire to preserve. This

work also shows a personal approach to juxtapose two traditional, yet completely different disciplines into a new body of contemporary sculpture.

This exhibition showcases a life-sized, naked ceramic male figure seated on one side of a bench. The book in his lap suggests an empty photo album. One freestanding vignette and three wall vignettes are placed across from his direct gaze. Each vignette represents the potential loss of a loved one in an archival format representative of taxidermy. The imagery within each vignette is a metaphor for loss of a beloved family member: a spouse, a mother, a father or the self. The set distance between the seated figure and the vignettes activates a space where the viewer can contemplate the events taking place. This space represents a psychological cushion where loss is being processed. It represents a moment of inner reflection and acceptance.

Capturing the Fleeting offers the viewer an insight into the connectedness of all life. This body of work inspires the viewers to capture special moments of their own with the ones they want to remember.

PROJECT REPORT

Introduction

Memories are constructed from the daily experiences and events in our lives that impact our thoughts and resonate within our minds. Sometimes memories lay dormant for years before coming into fruition. After years of maturity and complimentary experiences, those dormant memories can awaken. Spiritual encounters may arouse memories from deep within. Many people feel a sense of peace and spiritual encounter when they are outdoors and surrounded by nature. Generally, those who hunt go into nature to escape the mundane. Some of those hunters look for a spiritual encounter there. Artifacts and trophies play a major role in hunting. Taxidermy preserves those moments that a hunter experiences in nature along with family or friends. Hunting is not just an act of killing. It encompasses ritual, rites of passage, and reverence for the animal hunted. *Capturing the Fleeting*, my project in lieu of thesis, explores how ritualistic hunting practices increase awareness of the tenuousness of life. The sculptures that form the project encourage the viewer to make memories with those who are special and beloved.

Hunting as a Spiritual Act

Every year, the cool air and fiery colored leaves of autumn brings a feeling of the holidays. This time of year also excites hunters about the upcoming hunting season. Many hunters begin flipping through catalogues and looking for the latest products available on the market. There is a vast array of equipment and weapons these days, although most are unnecessary for a successful hunt. Although many hunters eat or donate the animals they kill, hunting is hardly a means of economic dependency. According to James A. Swan in his book, *In Defense of Hunting*, the average hunter spends about one

thousand dollars annually on hunting licenses, equipment, travel, food, lodging and other things (Swan, p.3). This hardly makes for the argument that hunters hunt as a means of sustenance. However, many who hunt do it for food and enjoy the taste of wild game. They represent about 45.5 percent of the hunters in the U.S. There are the recreational hunters who set out strictly to treat hunting as a sport or a hobby. They represent approximately 38.5 percent of all hunters. And finally there are the nature hunters who represent 17 percent of the hunters. The spiritual hunters admit that there is something more than treating it as recreation. To them, ultimately it is a sacred act with as much as or more meaning than organized religion (Swan p.17-19).

Spiritual hunters begin to associate reverence for the animals that they hunt. They begin to think and feel like the animals and develop a deep appreciation for their beauty. Many artifacts begin to fill the homes of these hunters such as mounted deer heads, paintings of wildlife, animal sculptures, and clothing with images of the animals. Some go as far as depicting imagery of that animal on their weapons. Such reverence begins to stir the heart of the hunter even when not in the animal's presence. Much like indigenous tribes who create totem poles, images kindle feelings of awe and respect for the animals and birds hunted.

For the hunter there is nothing like being in the woods. Nothing is at rest in the natural world, yet everything knows instinctively what to do. In the woods the cycle of life and death comes more frequently and acceptingly than what we experience in our suburban landscapes. Hunting has been practiced in my family for generations and it is in the woods that I feel most awake and alive. These are the moments that matter to me most. My father is a taxidermist and that constantly reminds me of the peak nature experiences while hunting. Many memories were made with my father and brothers during my boyhood years. The hunt always excited us. We went from the commotion of the suburbs, to experience the rawness of nature during the hunt. Those mornings came around quickly, for at 5 a.m.

our day began. The early morning smells and darkness would roll into a blazing sunrise revealing the dew on the grass and the evidence of deer beds nearby. My deer stand was up in a tree and there my thoughts were free of distractions. My mind was being fashioned to contemplate life, all that will inevitably pass. Our hopes were in the moment; to harvest a deer or two, which helped feed our family of six.

Experiences from earlier hunts seemed to haunt the back of my mind during those years. Conversations with my brothers loomed about killing animals. Uneasiness came from watching something die. There was not guilt necessarily, just the discomfort of watching the animal in its last moments. Sometimes it was not even a matter of being a witness, but finding out more about the particular animal later on. These memories from the hunt haunted my thoughts into adulthood as I considered my family. Realizing that my kin would suffer the same fate as any other living creature, I felt compelled to cherish the precious fleeting moments that we have together. Author Dudley Young Observes:

What is religious about hunting is that it leads us to remember and accept the violent nature of our condition, that every animal that eats will in turn one day be eaten. The hunt keeps us honest (Young p.139).

Taxidermy as a Memento

Personal involvement, effort, and anticipation help create deep memories. Hunting during my boyhood with my father made a world of difference to me as an adult. It served as a rite of passage. Killing the animals was not what made me a man during those days. It was the dedication to forcing myself out of bed early on the weekends, carrying the equipment out to the vehicle, walking back to my tree stand, and waiting there patiently. Waiting until my father who led the hunt said it was time to quit.

In all honesty, some days it was better not to shoot anything. It was more about getting out of the routine of suburban life. It was about being in nature and having some time to clear the mind. I would ride in the truck thinking about things I cannot even recall these days. I know being out there with my dad taught me about dedication and sportsmanship. I learned about putting up with unfavorable smells to hide our scents from deer and walking into the dark when all I could hear were unfamiliar noises in the grass and trees. Overcoming fear was as important then as it is now in life. I would get nervous, but once in the tree I felt safe and confident. The rest of the morning was a trial of patience. Most days were the same. Nothing happened, and we left empty-handed. But persistence was the key. Every season, weekend after weekend, year after year, we went. We did not always succeed, but we were building memories together.

Taxidermy comes from the Greek origins of “to move” and “skin.” This literally translates into the study of removing skin. Taxidermists receive many bad reviews. They are seen as being disconnected from social norms, even as having bad hygiene and living “out in the boonies”, as strange folk. Some movies portray taxidermists as crazy experimentalists in remote locations who recreate strange creatures. The reality is that taxidermists can be entrepreneurs who make a modest living working with a subject matter that fascinates them more than anything else. They develop a keen knowledge about the animals they mount.

My father and mother met in art school at the Fort Wayne Art Institute before the Vietnam conflict. My father served in the U.S. Navy and later sold life insurance for New York Life. He was always an avid outdoorsman and began doing taxidermy on the side using skills he developed in art school. After a while, his clientele grew, and supported by my mother they began their new profession full-time. By the time I was born, taxidermy was a household event. My oldest brother helped periodically and I even threw salt on the hides for some spending cash. I grew up not knowing that this lifestyle was quite

different from the home life experienced by other suburban kids. Taxidermist conventions were where I started seeing some of the more quirky and bad taxidermy in the world. Later in life, people would make jokes about how taxidermy seemed so awful and a bad rendition of nature.

I never understood how even good taxidermy was a poor interpretation of nature. It always meant something different to me. It was a manifestation of my father's desire to honor the animals that we hunted. The sentiments then became translated into art, for good taxidermy requires extraordinary artistic skill (Swan, 29). It was about making the animal sacred through preservation, similar to the way native people create totemic motifs. Taxidermy allows the hunter to relive moments where they harvested that particular animal. It recalls everyone from that day and certain events that went along with it. Memories fill my mind of waking up in my tree stand the day a procession of doe came my way being followed by the buck. My father's voice echoed in delight across the field as the buck went down moments after I squeezed the trigger. The sun was just coming up and a golden light was across the edges of everything it passed. My father mounted that first buck I shot. I still have this mount hanging on my wall today. Those days have long since passed. Yet, I would have never had this opportunity or life experience had we not put in the years of effort at hunting. In truth, so much more goes into a mounted deer head. This memento of the hunt represents the learning, the discipline, the people, the moment – all are ephemeral, just like the life of the animal. The trophy represents an attempt to tangibly hold on to the specialness of that camaraderie and the event, and thus the mounted head is more than what it superficially seems.

Inspired by the Baroque

Memorials have been created since art was first developed. Traditions seem to dictate that certain people and places be remembered. Monuments and public gravesites have kindled a profound

interest in my mind since youth, an interest that took root through observing loss. Some of the greatest known works of art in the world are held in European museums. There has always been a deep appreciation in the history books for Greek art. Greece introduced much of what is today considered as classical antiquity. Over time, as artists practiced copying these old masterpieces, new ideas were slowly introduced such as depicting sensuality. Classicism gave rise to other movements in subsequent years after its reemergence during the Renaissance. During the late Renaissance the Baroque style flourished as a way of narrating and displaying power; however, it was also used for memorializing people and events the Catholic Church thought noteworthy. Of one of its most esteemed artists was Gian Lorenzo Bernini. "What Michelangelo had represented in the preceding century, Bernini incarnated in Rome of the 1600s" (Pinton p.3). Bernini was a devote Catholic and captured the spirituality of the saints in his highly charged sculptures like the *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* (fig.8). She is in a state of awe and reverence for something unseen. But it is clear that her heart has been pierced and her encounter was extraordinary and unlike anything she had experienced before. Using overstated movements and extreme detail, Bernini expressed intense feelings of raw emotion. The lighting in basilicas also emphasized the drama taking place; another key aspect of Baroque sculptures. The notion of stirring the soul through exaggerated movements and articulations make the Baroque style appropriate for creating spiritually inspired figurative work as a means to memorialize moments.

Installation

Capturing the Fleeting (fig.1) serves to inspire the viewer to reflect on special remembered moments in time. The taxidermy materials juxtaposed with the figurative work shows a desire to preserve key memories with my family. The installation consists of a life-sized, unclothed ceramic male figure seated on one side of a bench. A book in his lap implies an empty photo album. One free-standing

vignette and three wall vignettes are placed across from his direct gaze. Each piece echoes the way taxidermy seeks to fix the mortal flesh to hold in that preparation precious memories, making a touchstone from something insubstantial. The imagery within each vignette is a metaphor for loss of a beloved family member; a spouse, a mother, a father and the self. The set distance between the seated figure and the vignettes activates a space where the viewer can contemplate the events taking place. This space represents a psychological cushion where loss is being processed. It represents a moment of inner reflection and acceptance.

The Figure

The sculpted human figure has inspired generations throughout history. Contemporary times are no different. The three-dimensional human figure at life-scale serves to create an immediate connection between viewer and subject matter. People intuit what subtle body movements and gestures mean, often conveying so much more than spoken words. "A picture is worth a thousand words", the old saying goes. In *Capturing the Fleeting* (fig.2) I have chosen to use parts of the figure as a strategy to rein the viewer in without biases. The solitary use of hands in the vignettes creates a very open format where the viewers can relate their own connections to become more intimate with the piece. Inspired by Baroque sculpture, the gesturing hands are used to express the feelings and peak emotions of fear, anxiety, and isolation; the animation of life and flaccidness of death. These emotions are articulated through the illustrated tenseness of the muscle and bone structures. They grasp, clench, hold, and fall limp to suggest a narrative of loss.

Widower

The sculpture entitled *Widower* (fig.3) represents the loss of a beloved spouse. This piece was inspired by the monogamous nature of geese. Hovering as though airborne, this free-standing vignette pictures male and female ceramic hands intertwined and protectively enveloped by a pair of mounted goose wings. The male hand clenches tightly onto the female's which is sculpted as though falling limp. The female hand represents the death of the beloved partner, while the male hand represents the partner left behind. Grasping her lifeless hand, he is holding onto the special memories that have been made over the years. The goose wings are inverted to symbolize death. The wings reiterate the shape of the arcing hands. The feathers mimic the joined shape created by the couple's fingertips. The wings encapsulate the two hands, and rest upon a nest like-form. The nest is formed from wood wool often used in taxidermy to mount waterfowl. The nest in this context represents domestic memory. A steel rod painted black runs from the floor to support the hovering sculpture. This structure allows the sculpture to offer the effect of falling through the air as well as presenting a form that can be viewed fully in the round.

Orphaned

The wall sculpture titled *Orphaned* (fig.4) represents the unforeseen loss of a parent. In this vignette child's hands sculpted from clay are wall-mounted to loom over a taxidermy doe form. This cast-foam mannequin of a female deer has been set with glass eyes and ceramic ears. The two hands represent the child reaching out helplessly to the dying doe. Hung at an angle, the doe falls into unconsciousness. The child hands reach outward; however, they are purposefully spaced too far apart to grasp the doe. In this reality as in death the dying doe will fall through the hands. The glass eyes have been altered and painted on the back to give a blue hue on the front pupils. The eyes of a fallen animal

turn blue; the blue color is used here to reinforce the idea of death. The ears have been sculpted of ceramic to create a material transition between the arms which synthesize the sculpture and the taxidermy form. *Orphaned* allows the viewer to consider the idea of allowing despairing memories to fall away.

Legacy

The wall-mounted vignette, titled *Legacy* (fig.5), features a limp hand downcast and hanging from a decorative wooden trophy plaque. This vignette is composed of a sculpted ceramic hand, a sculpted and cast foam forearm, and a simulation of hunter's trophy plaque. The hand gesture was inspired by the position and the gravity depicted in Michelangelo's, *Pieta* (fig.9). In that sculpture, the gravity of the dead Christ's body weighs heavily on Mary's lap. His hand hangs lifeless and helplessly at his side. The rendition of the hand in *Legacy* is stylized in much the same way. My interpretation has the sleeve of forearm skin bunched up above the wrist. It is as though the skin has fallen down to expose the contents, in this case a taxidermy foam structure, underneath. The polyurethane foam is a metaphor for concretizing memory. The model was sculpted to mimic the hard defining muscle structures typical of taxidermy mannequins. Attached to a plaque, the arm represents the finale of a person's life. This vignette is a reminder that all life passes; including our own. This piece which reveals something below the skin is also a reminder that our loved ones will not remember us for what we accomplish in this life but by whom we are as people; underneath the surface.

Successor

Successor (fig.6), a wall vignette, is characterized by two clenching ceramic fists adorned by a skullcap with a large spread of mounted antlers. The sculpted arms are positioned to suggest a crowning

session. The old order has passed and the new has arrived. They say a man never truly becomes a man until his father has passed. The stag has historically been used as a symbol of rejuvenation, rebirth, and the passage of time (Biedermann p. 92). Here the heir prepares nervously, almost reluctantly to place the antlers upon his own brow. The positioning of the curled fingers and skull orbital cavities create a mask-like quality suggesting the unfamiliar change in perception. *Successor* adds an insight to loss; an opportunity to play a greater role in the chain of life.

Contemplations

The life-scale ceramic figure that is the central sculpture of the grouping sits alone on a concrete bench. In *Contemplations* (fig.7), the unclothed male figure holds an empty photo album. Deliberately sculpted to depict empty photo frames the album becomes a reminder to invest in the loved ones in life. It also allows the viewer to fill in the story. The figure is sculpted without the protection of clothes to indicate his vulnerability to his feelings of potential grief. The adult male figure's stare is fixed on the vignettes in front of him. The use of color on the wall is mirrored in the features of his face and on the album. The flesh-like but flat color makes him appear like statuary and frozen. It also draws attention to the idea that he is no longer in a physical place but in an emotional, psychological state. His feet are together, tense and withdrawn. This detail in gesture suggests that he is unsure of what he may see. The overall posture is contained and poised. He is ready to own his feelings; he fixates on his significant memories. The concrete bench alludes to the type of seating often found near memorials. Its hard surface indicates discomforting realities in life. The figure is seated on one side of the bench, an empty place beside him. His solitary placement suggests the absence and loss of loved ones. This state creates a void felt by the viewer as they walk between him and the vignettes.

Use of Materials

Ceramics, fired clay, has been an important factor in this body of work. Clay enables the modeling of the figure down to minute details such as veins and wrinkles. This type of detail is essential because it displays the subtle nuances that mean the difference between flesh looking dead versus alive. Our brains subconsciously intuit the difference. The forms begin as solid masses. I add and subtract where I see fit until it is anatomically correct. As the clay begins to become leather-hard many details are added. I then cut the sculptures into pieces to be hollowed out. After scoring and reassembling the pieces, the surfaces are once again cleaned, and details finalized. The sculptures are fired slowly; typically, the kiln is cycled for over a twenty-four hour period and then fired to cone 04. Application of cold surfaced house paint reflects the corresponding colors found in the complimenting materials. Layers of paint allow one color to be seen over another. The subtle color layering and brush stroke is reminiscent of Claude Monet's paintings for instance *Morning on the Seine, Mist Effect* (fig.11). As in these hazy paintings, the surfaces of the sculptures capture the colors peeking through the overlapping white strokes. This suggests the dream-like state in which memories begin to take shape.

The taxidermy materials, which compliment the figurative work, are meant as a metaphor for memory. Since memory is at the core of taxidermy, I borrow freely from those types of objects and preserved the goose wings myself. The goose wings are actual wings, including skin and bone. The skin was preserved with tanning chemicals and the wings are supported with wire into the bone. Wood wool, a material for stuffing birds, was included around the bones. Additional wood wool under the wings provides gesture to support the narrative. Some taxidermy mannequins were not available, such as a human arm. This object had to be constructed through a series of techniques. Initially a clay arm was sculpted from which a mold was made. The mold consisted of a two-part, silicone inner sleeve and outer

plaster jacket mold. The inner silicone jacket was necessary to prevent the polyurethane expanding foam from attaching to the interior mold wall. When the mold was ready, the polyurethane was poured in, expanded and then became hard. The casting then cured and was cut, shaped to fit the lower hand attachment, and set with an anchor inside the ceramic hand. Plaster was poured inside the cavity of the hand where the anchor was placed and then left alone to cure. These processes, although long and grueling, were very essential to the work due to the desire to showcase proper preservation.

Influences

A variety of contemporary sculptors use the figure as a vehicle to explore mortality and vulnerability. Amongst the many, these particular artists have played a critical role in my studio research: Tip Toland, Beth Cavener Stichter, and Kiki Smith. I am also influenced by the historical masterpieces created by Michelangelo Buonarroti and Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

Tip Toland is known for her figurative work exploring mortality and weaknesses. Her work moves the viewers to question their own vulnerabilities and benevolence. She creates an intimacy through the work by exposing the subject's shortcomings. The beauty of the modeling and intricate detail pulls us in. We begin to feel a kinship with the ineptness of the individuals portrayed. The feelings exposed from the work resonate within my own studio research. My work captures those feelings of vulnerability and humanity.

Beth Cavener Stichter uses animals to convey base instincts in the human condition. Stichter's sculptures create a scenario where the viewer can hone in on what is taking place as opposed to focusing on someone committing the deed. The animals enhance the narrative by conveying stereotypical behavior. Similarly, I use animals to substitute the roles of particular individuals in a family.

By using animal references in my sculptures, I allow the viewers to bring in their own narrative, assigning people from their own lives to the story. This further personalizes the message for the viewer.

Kiki Smith explores narratives and legends through figurative sculpture. She juxtaposes human forms against those of animals to convey ideas of death and rebirth. I draw my inspiration from her eccentric illustrations of myth and folklore. These comparisons prompt us to contemplate meanings from a fresh viewpoint. Her unique portrayal of relationships between the figure and animal suggest primal impulses that lay dormant in our psyche, showing spirituality achieved through an intimate connection with nature. My work shares a similar intent in that an awakening takes place; a revival of the conscious mind through an experience in nature. My studio research gained depth by studying and reading about Kiki Smith's narratives.

Michelangelo Buonarroti and Gian Lorenzo Bernini, artists from the Renaissance, have also played a critical role in my studio research and practice. Their mastery of the human form and attention to anatomical detail are an inspiration for me to continue pursuing the figure as a narrative sculpture device. By borrowing directly from their imagery, specifically the gestures and postures of their sculptural masterpieces, I create a memory trace with the associated spiritual connotations of their works. Bernini captured the subtle nuances in his subjects that conveyed intense emotions of spiritual conviction as mentioned in *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa*. Michelangelo masterfully portrayed hands, such as in *The Creation of Adam* (fig.10), in a way that expressed power with undertones of gentleness and elegance. The hand of God and Adam are portrayed in a way that activates the space between their fingertips as to what they are communicating. Michelangelo's use of hands commits the remaining background to narrative use. These great masterpieces of centuries past fuel my enthusiasm to create the figurative works in *Capturing the Fleeting*.



(fig1)



(fig.2)



(fig.3)



(fig.4)



(fig.5)



(fig.6)



(fig.7)



(fig.8)



(fig.9)



(fig.10)



(fig.11)

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Biographical Sketch

Jonathan Burns was born and raised in northeastern Indiana. He received his undergraduate degree from Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne (IPFW). Upon completing his Bachelor's of Fine Arts degree, he moved to Bend, Oregon for a couple of years where he practiced as a professional artist. During 2011, he traveled visiting the countries of Italy and France where he saw many of Europe's greatest artworks. Mr. Burns has given presentations on his work at the Institute for Ceramic Arts "G. Ballardini" of Faenza, Italy as well as in Miami, Florida at the New World School of the Arts. He will receive his Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Florida in May 2012. He is married to Stephanie Burns of Eugene, Oregon.