

**Approaching Abstraction:**

*emergence of honest and mutable design through process of discovery*

## **A B S T R A C T**

Let us deconstruct our realities in order to construct new experiences. Experience, though unique and varied by situation, can be understood as a series of variables acting on each other to construct our mutable realities. Through investigation and abstraction of process, we can understand these variables, to shape encounter. Design becomes a process of discovery; the understanding of abstract variables our tool for creativity. In this paper we will examine the discovery of the visual experience as studied by several contemporary painters, and then through two senior studio projects. The first examines sketch and drawing as discovery of experience. The second explores the hand as learning tool for the creative mind.

Our lived realities are constructed of ephemeral experience. After all, is experience not ephemeral by nature? Each lived moment fleeting, transitory, leading to the next. One large experience, a seemingly lengthy occurrence, can be broken down into a series of tiny happenings, each one a new temporal encounter. Each encounter is shaped by a set of variables acting on and reacting to one another. We exist in a state of contingency with these variables. As they touch and shape our encounters, we push back, intermingling in their realms. To exist is to enter a mutable state, constantly affecting and being affected. How are we to understand our mutating realities? Let us seek from our transient bodies the tool to sift through these variables, to discover and rediscover encounter, and to digest experience, so that we might construct new realities (through design) that invite the mutation of experience.

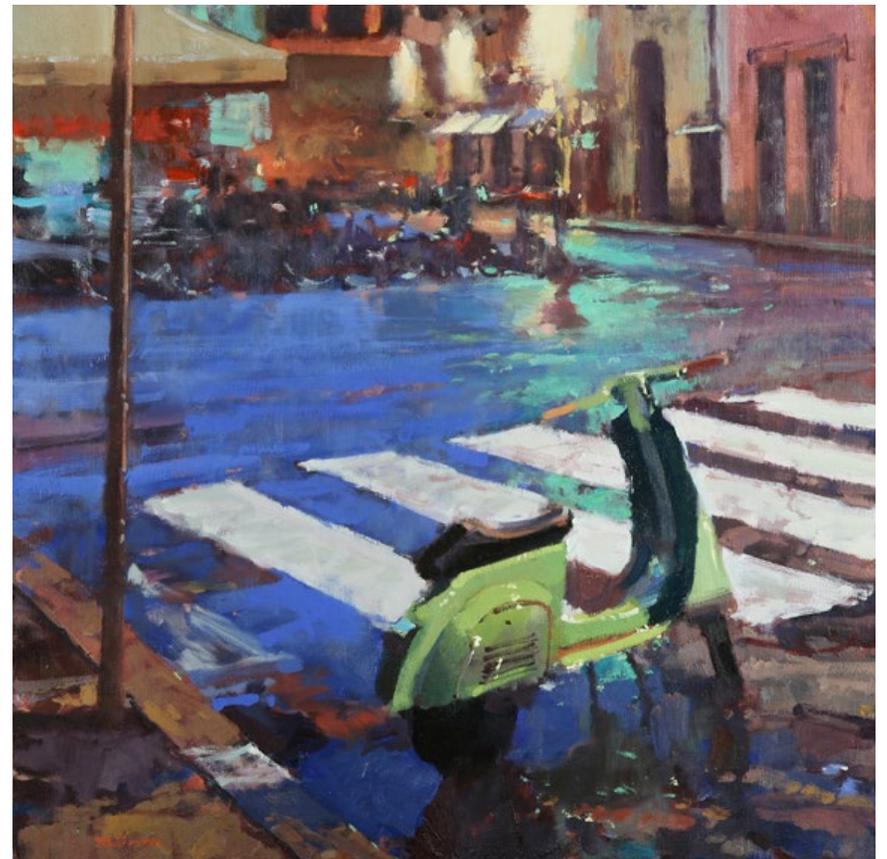
What are our tools of discovery?

Let us examine reality as it is studied by plein air painter Randall Sexton. Sexton, like many plein air painters, proposes to look beyond the subject being painted, beyond boundaries and distinct “things,” and to deconstruct a scene. Sexton does not paint things as they appear wholly before him, but instead he examines them as “purely shapes, colors, and values, as they relate to other shapes... General shapes are suggested honestly, [and] then the mass of colors start to look like things in the real world.”<sup>1</sup> Sexton advances his idea of approaching abstraction in painting in order to reach the “immaterial essence of [a thing] rather than the literal specific material object itself.”<sup>2</sup> Matthew Daub, another contemporary plein air painter, who keeps a “visual diary” of the Italian coast, recording moments, fragments, and outdoor experiences, follows a similar approach. Notes a journalist of his painting, “the subject is not a doorway or a pot of flowers, it is the arrangement of shapes on a page and changes of value color, and textures” in a compositional structure.<sup>3</sup> Both Sexton and Daub digest their visual experiences into a series of alternating variables that affect one another on the page. Might we do the same to understand our mutating realities?

- 
- 1 Bahr, Bob. “Scrape it back, Keep it abstract, Discover,” Plein Air Magazine. Streamline Publishers: July 2014, p 46
  - 2 Plein Air Magazine, p 48
  - 3 Plein Air Magazine, p 53

The peculiar way in which Sexton approaches the process of painting is of a particular abstract value. Sexton explores the abstraction of paint as a material by regularly scraping around the paint on his canvas while he is painting, in order to distort the subject he has begun to examine, so that he must then re-examine the scene in a new perspective. With this peculiar process, he claims a constant “[re]discovery” of his visual experience throughout the development of his painting.<sup>1</sup> Is it possible to see something more clearly by examining it through distortion?

Figure 1: “Curb Italia,” Randall Sexton, 2011. Oil. John Pence Gallery, San Francisco, CA  
“A mass of color starts to look like things in the real world”



There is an immediate importance in understanding plein air painting in relation to time, because the variables affecting outdoor painting are always immediately and uncontrollably changing. Weather, light, shadows, the tide, etc. will change drastically throughout the day. Thus it might be considerably notable the quickness and keenness with which these plein air painters capture such ephemeral qualities with their brush. They observe a moment and create an experience, an abstraction of their mutating reality with their analysis of tone, shape, and color. And though one might assume that once on a canvas, the ephemeral scene becomes stuck in time, frozen in dried paint, through his abstraction, the painter has created a dimensional quality for his canvas. The canvas becomes a performer, a construct brought to life that now enters the reality of another and becomes a variable in shaping a new experience.

In the way in which Sexton and Daub analyze variables of shape, value, color, and textures in order to investigate the “essences” of those things that capture their visual attentions, we might too analyze the variables affecting our spatial experiences. Each experience we move through is a performance of variables, a unique composition in time.

Through notation, analog, record, and investigation, we can approach an understanding of the underlying abstract variables that affect our experience so that we might create a construct that uniquely reacts with our situation, and mutates with our experience through time, an architecture that doesn't limit, but creates a continuum.

Let us explore two student projects in which different approaches attempt to build design through understanding of digestible parts.

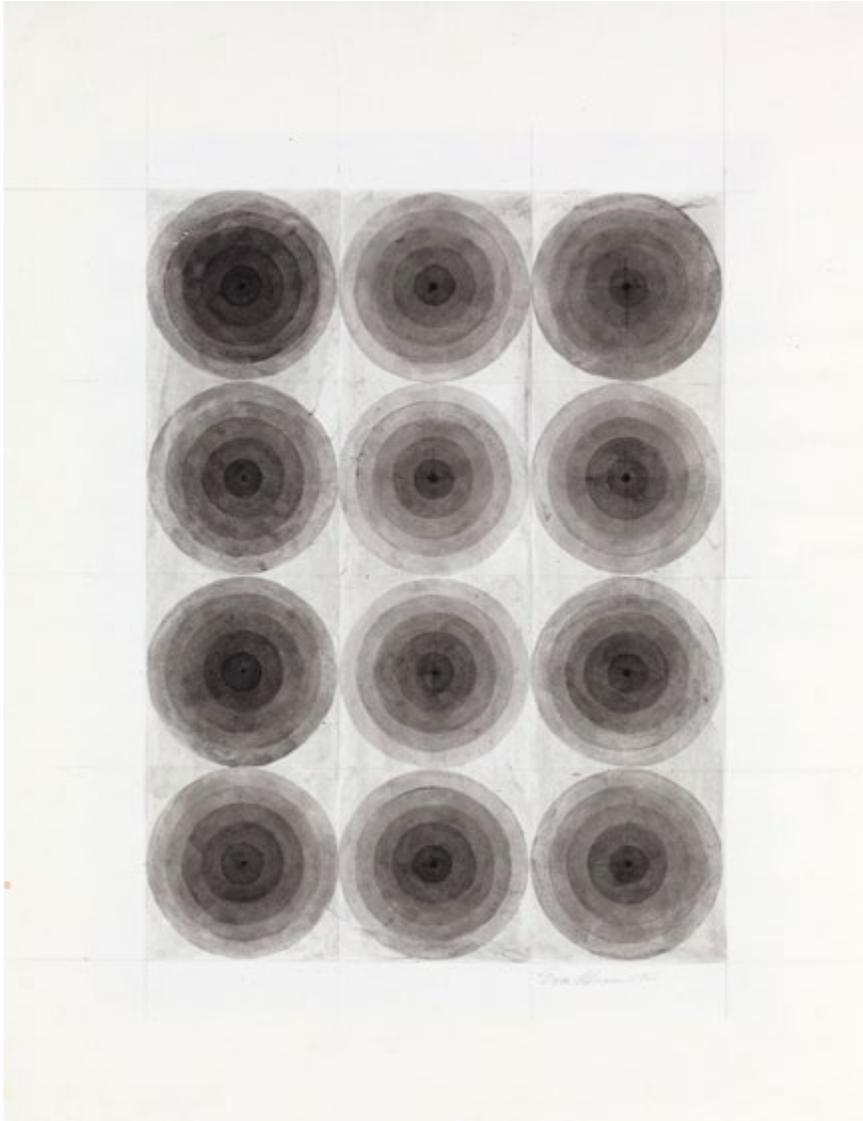


Figure 2: Eva Hesse, Untitled, 1966  
"Serialized repetitious ink washes of grey circles," notational drawing, decomposing time.

Butler, Cornelia. *AfterImage: Drawing Through Process*. The MIT Press (1999), p 39.

## STUDY ONE:

East Asia Study Abroad Program 2013

### *Taman Sari: Fragments of Experience*

UF student partner: Rachel Cloyd

The informal settlement in the local site *Taman Sari* was studied through a joint project with ITB (Institut Teknologi Bandung) students in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. Once a lavish water palace for the Sultan, the historic ruins are now home to roughly 3000 residents. Though many are living in “illegally” constructed homes throughout the historic settlement, this is their lived reality, and many would consider it cruel to vacate the historic site for preservation purposes. The settlement has flourished organically, growing around, on top of, and sometimes through parts of the ruins, creating a labyrinth of tight alleyways, a fractured adventure through historical time.

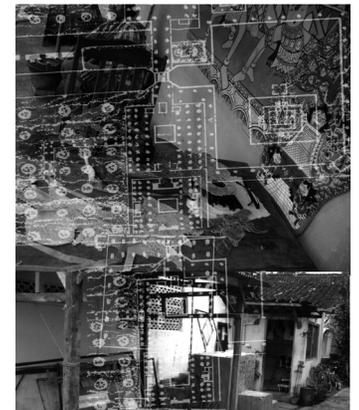
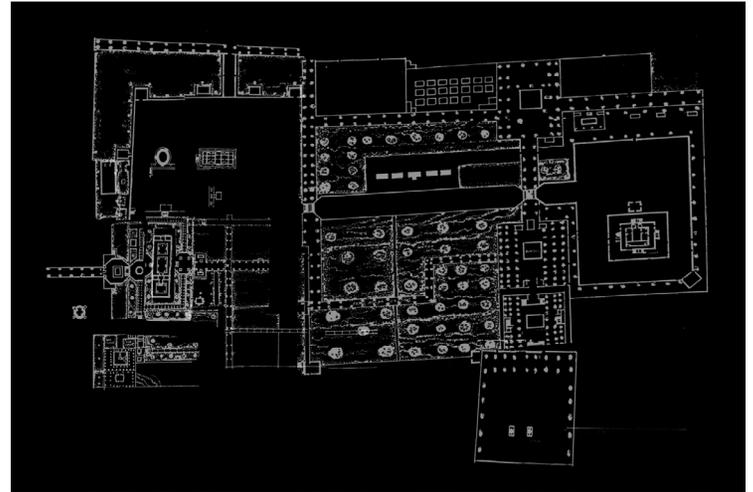


Figure 3 (top right): Historic pan of Taman Sari, water castle

Figure 4 (middle right): a Batik maker, photographed in the path

Figure 5 (bottom right): Photomontage of art in path (Kania Pradipta)

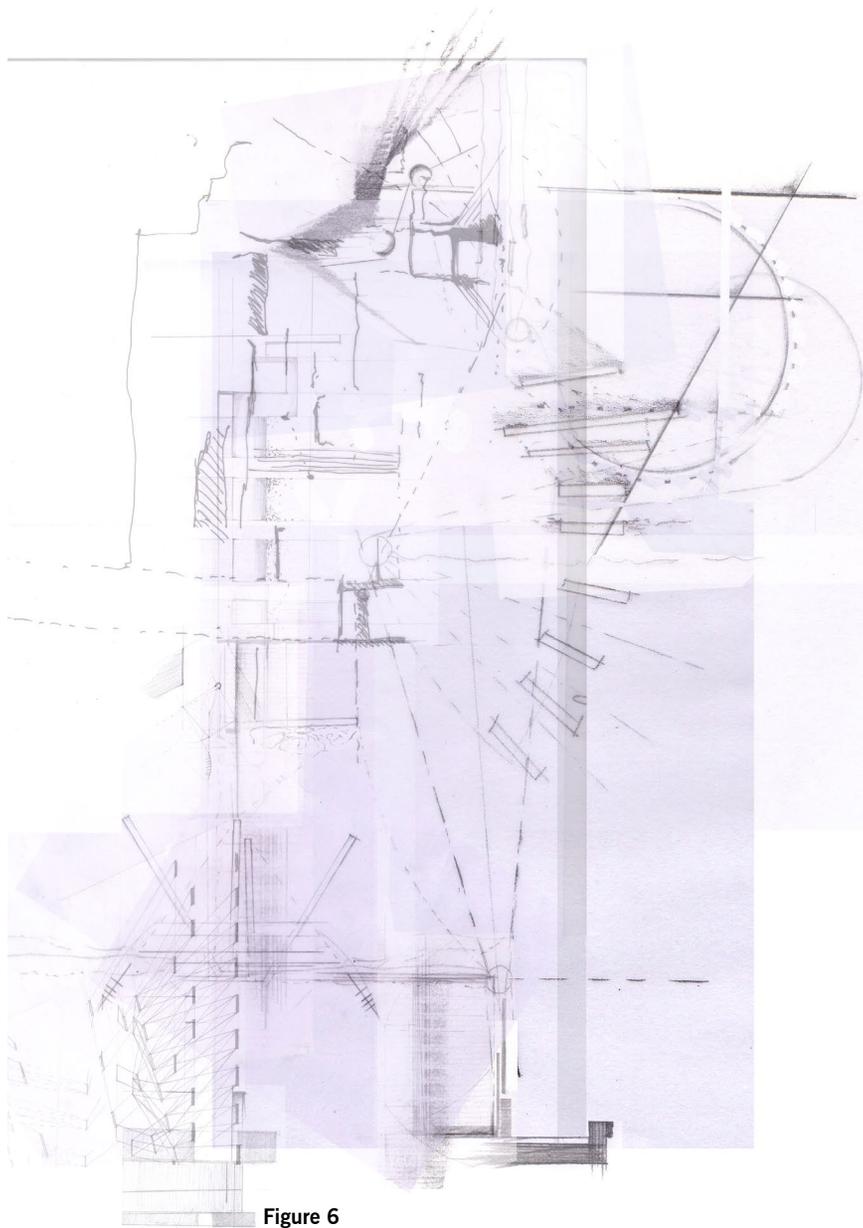


Figure 6

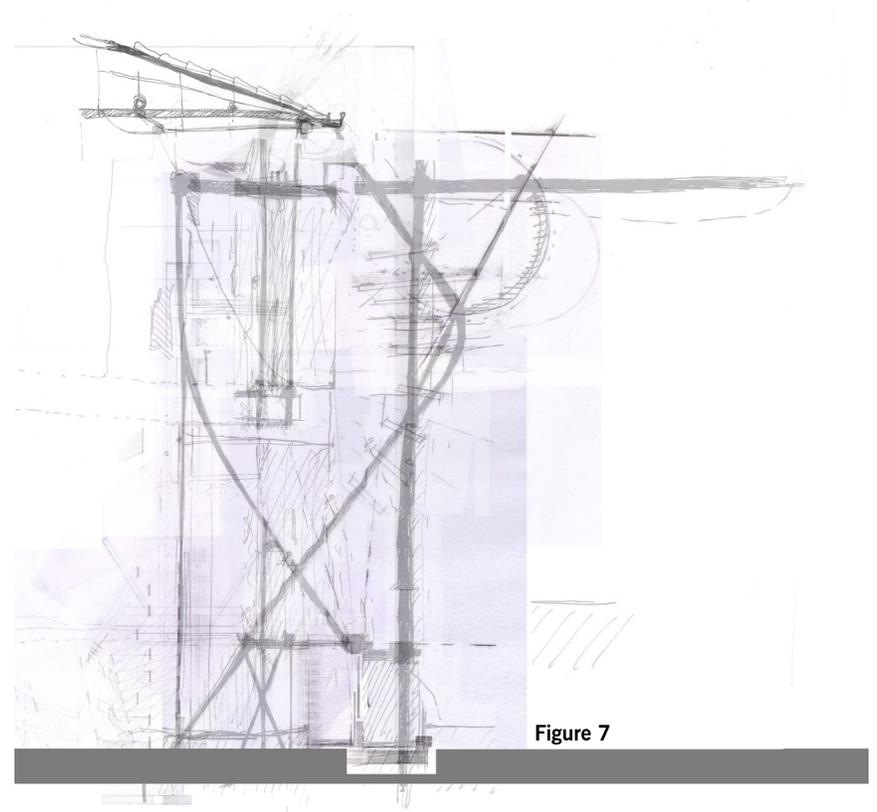


Figure 7

“Fragments of experience,” personal sketches recording individual observations and notations throughout the site, were collected from each of the eight team members to collaborate into a composite diagram (Figure 6).

Figure 7: The composite diagram was treated as a section. A bamboo construct was imagined, that would graft to the rafters of the informal housing and redefine the edges of the path.



**Figure 8+9** (above): drawing lines from the section: a bamboo construct emerges from the composite diagram.

The pathway of Taman Sari is an interactive place, a space for community gatherings, for children to play, for residents to hang clothes, park bikes, dry rice, and to make and display local art.

In a crowded settlement where the conventional idea of “public space” is scarce, the people have reinvented the path.

Reinforce the edges of the path to rediscover the void in Taman Sari.



**Figure 10**

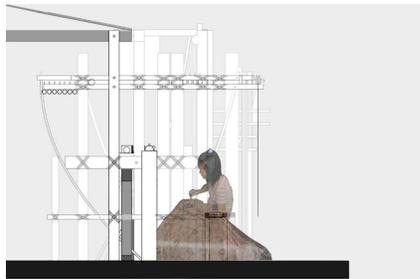
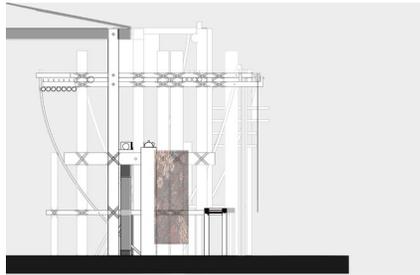
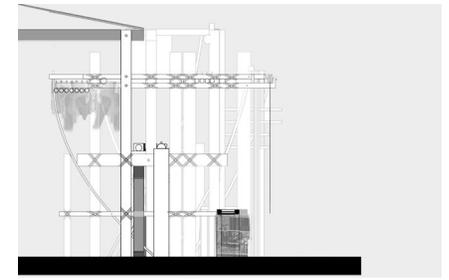
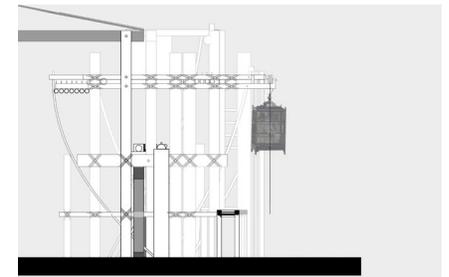


Figure 11 (left): uses of the construct.  
(Kania Pradipta)

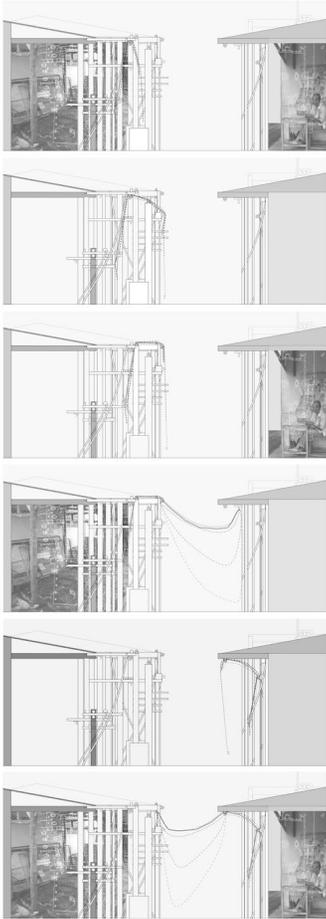


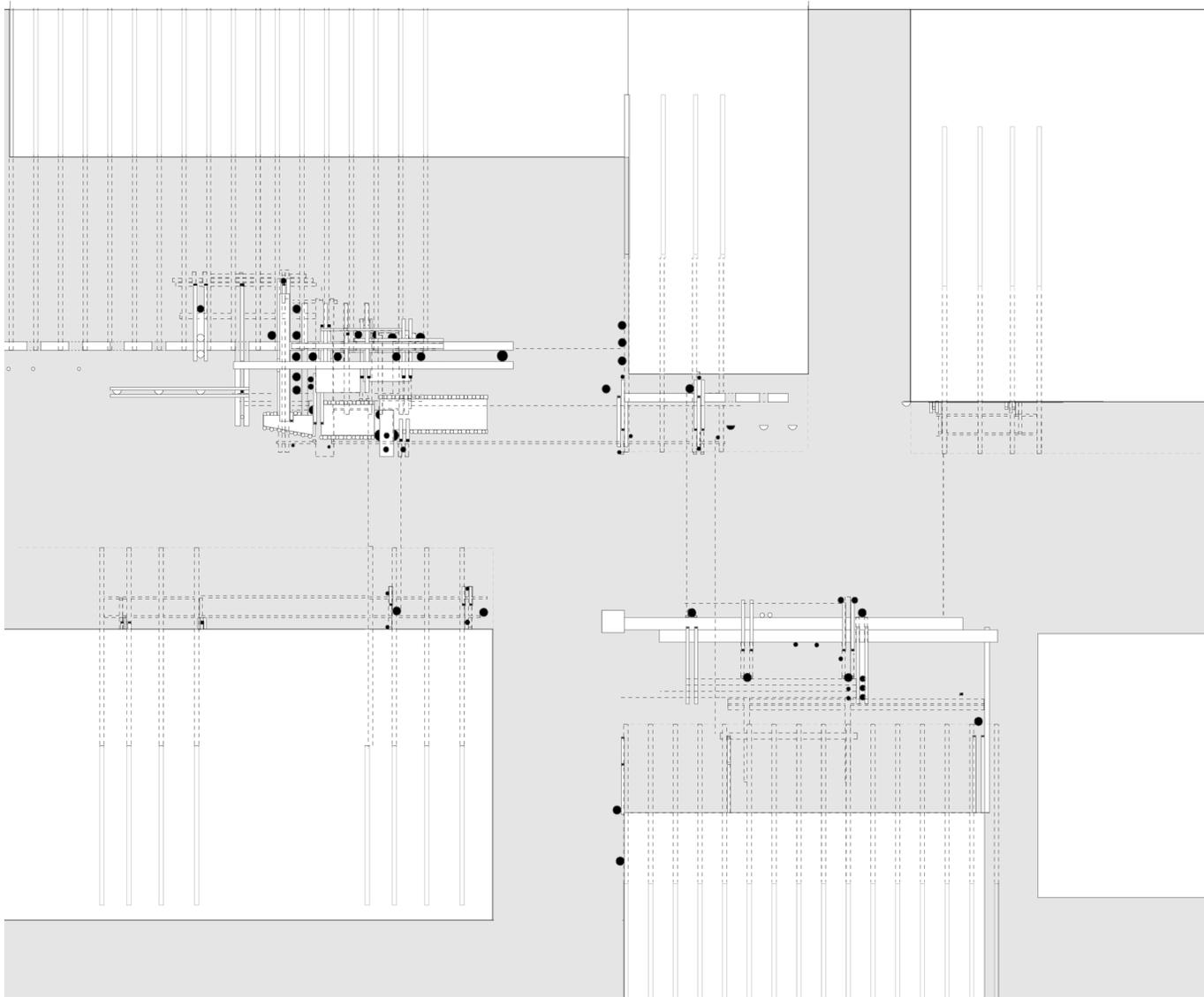
Bamboo, a locally favored material, can be easily acquired by the community, so that the system can be recreated throughout Taman Sari, becoming a unifying gesture throughout the fractured site. The system, tested in one brack of the path, creates seating, shelving, and storage, and incorporates a system of pulleys adaptable for a multitude of uses. The bamboo system frames the path, defining the edges, and providing interactive utility at the service of the inhabitants of the community.

A system of interlocking bamboo grafts onto the rafters of individual houses and weaves between fences and porches, undulating between the home and the path.

Figure 12 (right): section diagrams of pulley configurations

Figure 13 (below): render of the pathway





Accept the “disorder” or organic growth as a new order, and rediscover Taman Sari.

Figure 14: site plan of a portion of the path

**STUDY TWO:**  
*Experiments in materiality and form*

Independent Study Spring 2014, Critic: Prof. Lisa Huang



The study began as an exploration in materiality of Porcelain, a high-fire clay body. The hand investigates the material, learning its qualities, testing its extremes, observing its tendencies. Through a variety of trials and processing of the material, the hand becomes familiar with clay, understanding its abilities and desires.

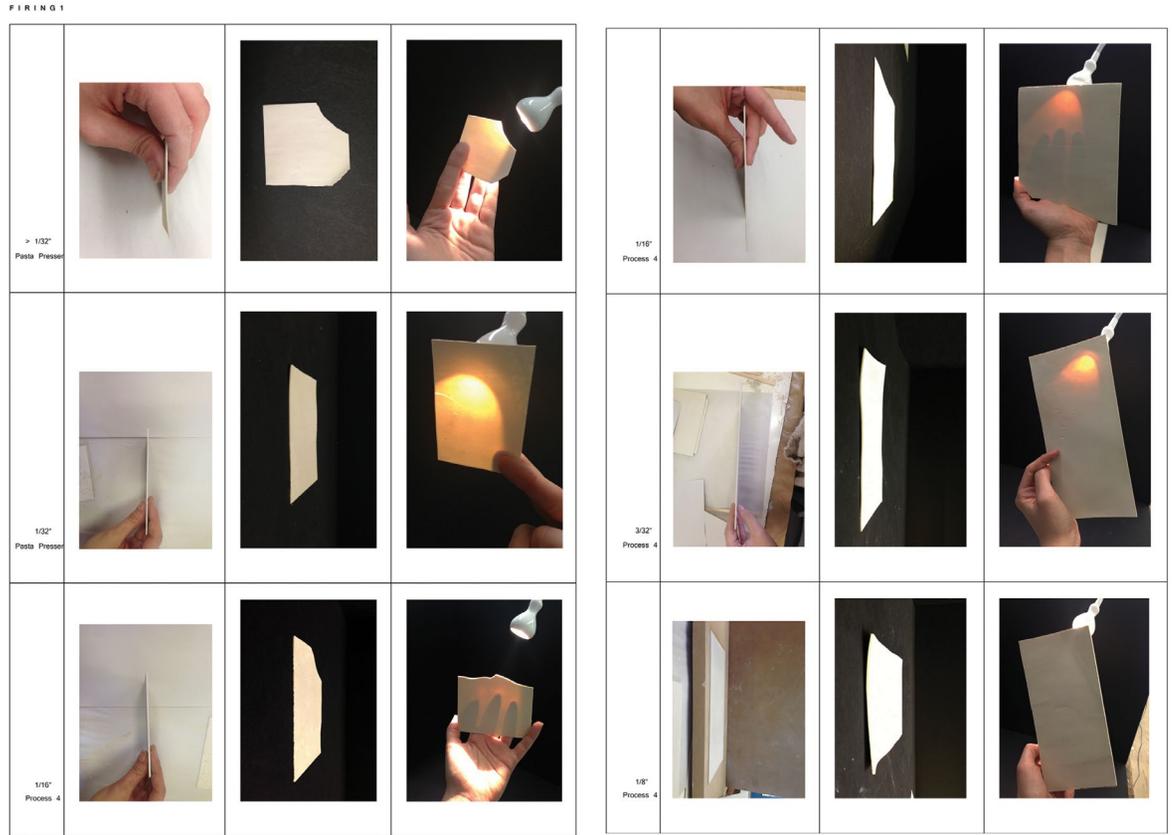


Figure 16

Porcelain, a very dense clay body, has the tendency to warp as it dries, or, even if dried flat, to warp during firing. It can develop a grain as it is processed, causing it to warp more in one direction. If rolled very thin, porcelain can transmit light, allowing shadows to dance behind.

Through various trials (some shown **Figure 16**), a process of using a pasta presser (**Figure 17+18**) to roll the clay to 1/32" developed.

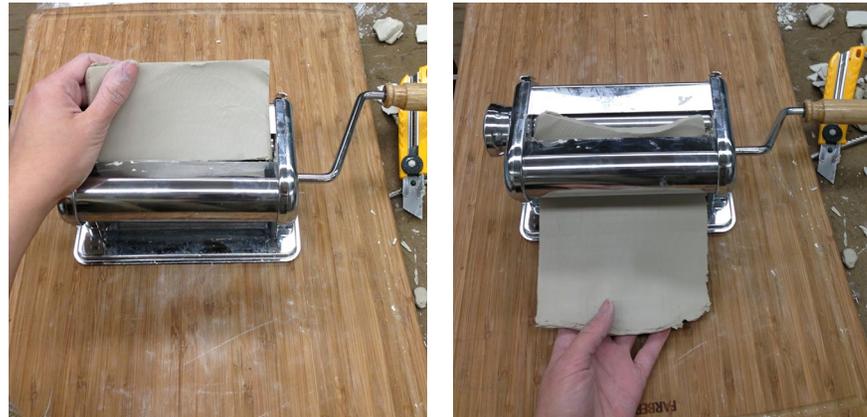


Figure 17+18

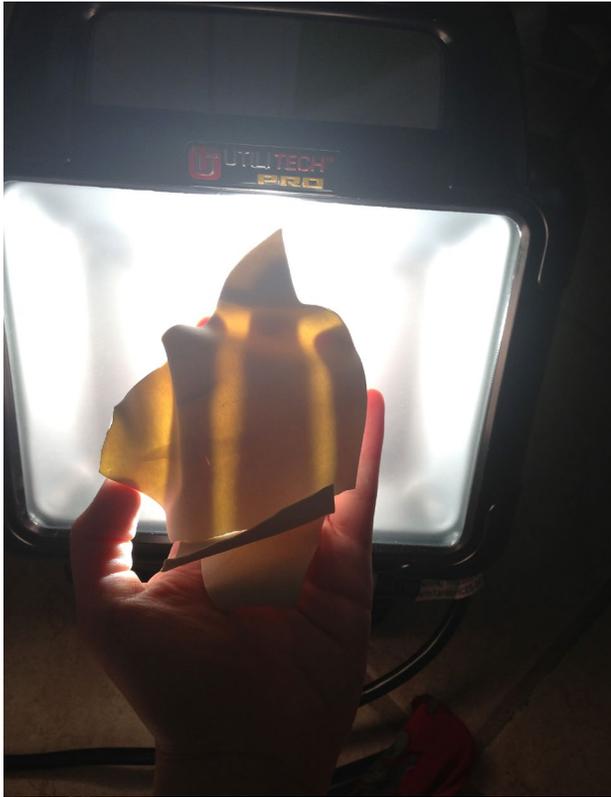


Figure 19

As the hand becomes familiar with the material, it learns from it; it listens.

“[hand] labor is the first manifestation of creativity.”<sup>1</sup>

The hand enters a relationship with the material, where it begins to understand the behaviors of clay, and the different variables that govern it.

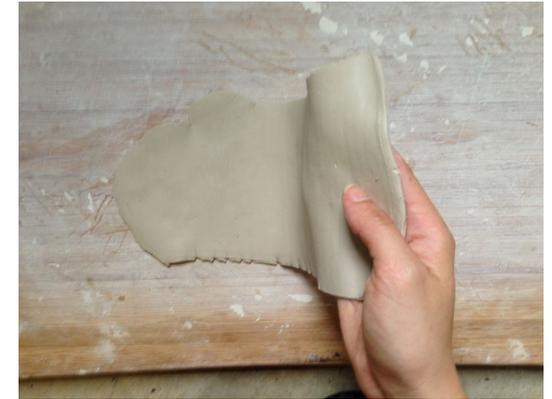


Figure 20

A form emerges from the interplay between hand and material that encourages the warping tendency of porcelain, instead of forcing it flat.

“[Form] does not exist solely as static consequence to an otherwise irrelevant act of production, but conversely, the nature of form is inlaid in the process of making.”<sup>2</sup>

The clay body, unrolled, is a blank manuscript, a canvas, that folds and curls.

1 Zambonini, 6

2 Zambonini, 3



Figure 21

Figure 23

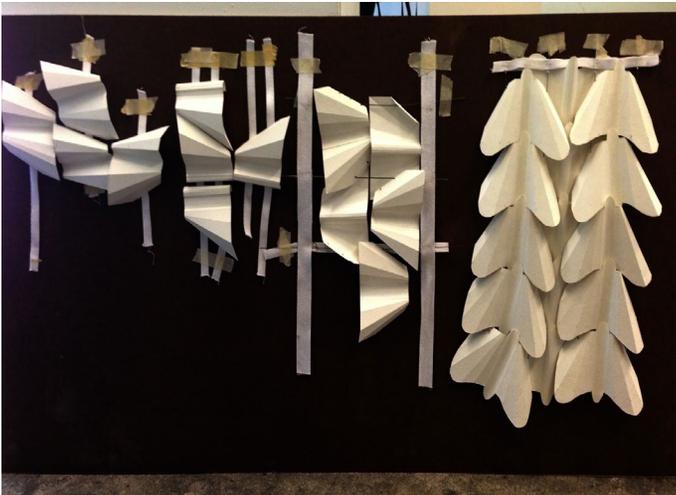


Figure 22

Over a series of weeks, several paper iterations of folding, curled forms were tested until a module was developed that could interlock to disguise a hidden framework (Figure 21). To create this form in clay, the form for a mold was developed and milled into plywood using a CNC machine. This first mold proved problematic in removing a module once it had dried (Figure 22)

Figure 24





Figure 25: A second mold is milled: a hidden shadow landscape emerges, a topography of modules

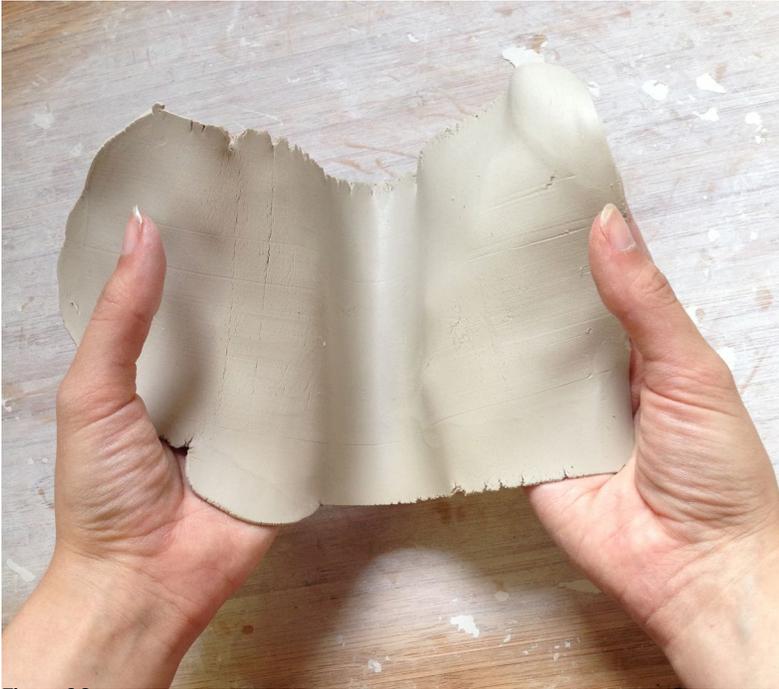


Figure 26

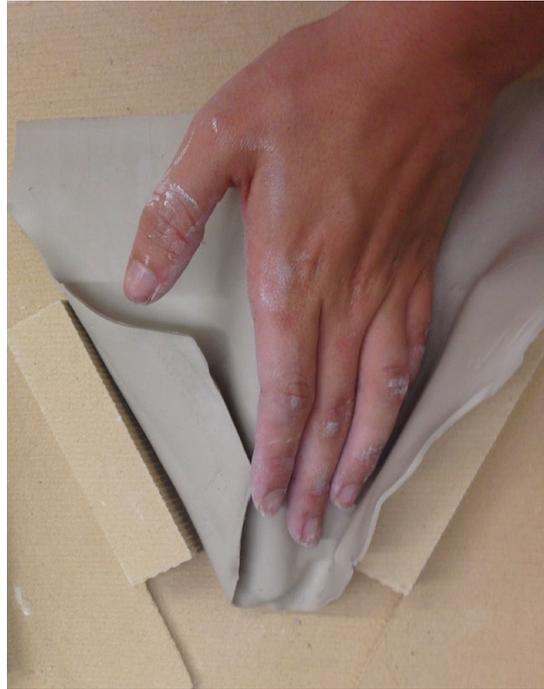


Figure 27

The second mold proved successful, working with the qualities of the clay. The thin strip of clay emerging from the pasta presser dips easily into the mold, curving to its contours.

This positive outcome is the result of past failures; each success is built on past trials and errors. Says Matthew Daub of “failure:” “when I first started painting blossoms, I learned that painting them with the same size with no variation in direction, shape, or size, or isolating blossoms by putting the same amount of negative space between them is not successful. The next time I painted blossoms, I remembered this, and became more successful in my painting.”<sup>1</sup>

The hand learns from its labors. Each judgement is based on experiences in dealing with choices that have worked, as well as those that have failed. The hand is a tool of discovery; it inquires into those variables that will bring it success.



**Figures 28+29 (left):** Intimacy of the hand and material. The hand explores its relationship with clay.

**Figure 30 (bottom left):** the mold works with the curling qualities of clay.

**Figure 31 (bottom right):** as the clay body dries, it shrinks and gently pulls away from the wood of the mold

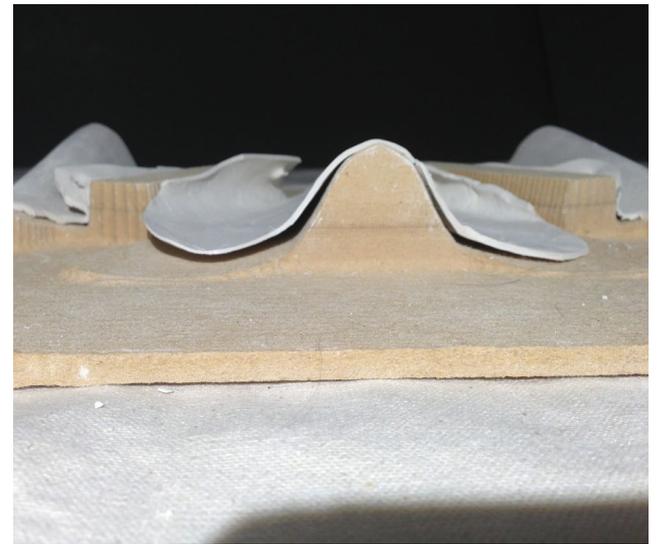




Figure 32: mold filled with clay modules



Figure 33: After firing, the scales become translucent, transmitting shadows

The process of discovery must be continuous and diverse, to engage the plurality of experience.

Design will become a performance of variables, and process will be reflected in its honesty to material and situation; in its honesty to discovery.

**Figure 34: Imagined construct; a translucent volume of interlocking porcelain scales, encasing the human form.**



## B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Bahr, Bob. "Scrape it back, Keep it abstract, Discover," *Plein Air Magazine*. Streamline Publishers: July 2014.

Butler, Cornelia. *AfterImage: Drawing Through Process*. The MIT Press: 1999.

Hejduk, John. Ed. Shkapich, Kim. *Mask of Medusa*. Rizzoli: 1989

Moussavi, Farshid. *The Function of Form*. ACTAR, HGSD, 2009

Serres, Michel. *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*. Bloomsbury Academic: 2008.

Zambonini, Guiseppe. "Notes for a Theory of Making (in a time of necessity)," *Perspecta 24*: 1908.