

UNBURDENED

By

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Abstract of Project in Lieu of Thesis Presented to
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Heritage is our inherited traditions, monuments, objects, and culture. These traditions and objects, if embraced, are an aid in constructing the makeup of our lives and personal characteristics. Identity may be defined as a set of characteristics recognized as belonging uniquely to our experiences and personality.

Farming communities, for instance, create a condition whereby individuals have a strong heritage connecting them to place, position and purpose. These inherited values provide people in these communities and families with meaning and a sense of security and place. This helps define a personal reason for and way of being.

When active participation in farming is inaccessible to the next generation, forming identity from those elements becomes a pursuit fraught with ambiguity. Descendants of this way of life must find new ways to connect and participate in their heritage or unburden themselves and forge new values and lineage. If identity is too strongly rooted in community or family experiences no longer available, abandoning them is difficult. Memorializing the lost heritage becomes the only viable solution. Artifacts become placeholders for absent experiences, charged with the task of embodying the breadth of experiences of which they were once only a part. Preservation and veneration of the

newly-assigned relics permits a new participation, albeit a diminished one, where the markers for identity can still hold true.

Unburdened explores the veneration of objects that are a proxy for heritage experiences that normally form identity. Markers for the material culture of a working class's heritage may be symbolized by tools of labor and vice: shovel, yoke, sickle, and bottle. These symbols are paired with trees and flora-based pattern: signifiers of growth and tradition. The disparity between physical space and two-dimensional space is the stage where the activity of discarding heritage outright, or finding a new way to interact with it, occurs. That which is bodily accessible and that which is illusionary separate the traditions that are either embraced or shunned. Regardless of appearance, a laden importance permeates the work through materiality, pattern, scale and pseudo-religious structure as a means to sanctify what cannot be properly honored in its intended form.

What takes place when these collective conditions, in part or whole, are outmoded or anachronistic? How do we ascribe value to seemingly outdated concepts and customs originated by forbearers who created them to manage a world and experiences that barely resemble our own? Unburdened is a monument to this investigation of responsibility to the past.

CHAPTER 1 UNBURDENED

Heritage as Identity, Experience and Transcendent

Be careful, lest in casting out the devils
you cast out the best thing that's in you. – *Nietzsche*

I am Patrick Coughlin, son of Daniel Coughlin, who is the son Lyman Coughlin, who is the son of an onion farmer. Raised in a small, tight-knit community where local lore and lineages are so entangled has created a strong attachment to place and familial occupation. I was young when the long-standing traditions tied to family farming were terminated. A crisis of identity and an added sense of responsibility to the past developed. An entire community foisted an identity on me based on the occupation and traditions of ancestors. It was my generation that was not able to continue, that failed our history and heritage. Because familial objects, buildings, and detritus of the past hundred years continually surrounded me, it was impossible to forget our past and my position as an outsider to its history. As a means to retain a connection to a past I could never be a part of, I became the steward for the objects of my heritage.

Heritage as Identity

The manifestation of heritage is an indistinct experience. Location, occupation, race, gender and family are merely a few of the more culturally universal expressions of an experience that is uniquely personal and pervasively widespread. How is one to define an experience that is intimate yet broad? Often, individuals respond more closely to notions of heritage that create an identity for that individual and their immediate kin. Consequently, the status, conditions, and character acquired by being born into a particular family or social class determine many of the factors that shape identity and give meaning to our lives.

Most elements of identity can become heritage. A uniform, a flag, or a brand are purposed signifiers of identity that may only become heritage through a concerted effort to conserve them. Conversely, many aspects of identity are meant to be transient. Identities are crafted, tried on like clothes. Hobbies, temporary jobs, and the innocence of youth are merely aspects of identity that can be tried on or outgrown. If heritage is defined by that which people choose to save, collect, or conserve then “heritage is recognized, designated and self conscious by definition” (Howard, 2003). The fact that there are many things that distinguish identity that we do not wish to conserve raises difficult questions about the nature of heritage. “So heritage may be foisted on the descendants of the perpetrators against their will” (Howard. 2003). We can observe heritage as an active experience both chosen and assigned.

Heritage as Experience

Heritage is not merely an act of remembering; it’s a tangible participation in and conservation of events, where the accumulation of past experiences and traditions is given to the next generation. Each generation has its own temporal and cultural context in applying meaning to these traditions; they are re-embodied with new memories and perspective. “In this sense, then, heritage as experience means that heritage is not static or ‘frozen in time” (Smith, 2006). Heritage is a process that passes on established values and meaning while also creating new ones. Places are often major signifiers of heritage and “while the sites (are) intrinsically important it (is) the use of these sites that make them heritage, not the mere fact of their existence” (Smith, 2006). For farming communities, the land holds enormous value as the source of economic stability, sustenance, and the stage on which to take part in agricultural traditions.

I understood this notion of active participation in heritage, at an early age. After the long and difficult winters in upstate New York, family members walk the hedgerow bordering the property to assess the fencing, and repair when needed. This chore is a tedious task of walking, replacing posts, and mending wire. On a particularly hot spring day while walking the fence, I took shelter from the sun in a shaded alcove of brush and stone. While resting, I came across a cracked teacup, saucer, and rusted tin case. In that moment, I no longer saw walking the fencerows as tedium, but understood that I had chosen the same place to rest while performing the same task an ancestor had performed before me. Through considering the abandoned teacup and saucer, I understood that day's labor as tradition spanning countless spring thaws. This mundane chore and these ruined objects became charged with meaning and new personal value.

Material Culture: Signifier and Signified

Because heritage is a deliberate act to conserve and designate, these activities are directly tied to the crafting of identity. This preservation applies to a wide range of cultural expression: folk dances, buildings, colloquialisms, artifacts, and any aspect of life that is consciously saved. The underlying premise of material culture "is that objects made or modified by man reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who made, commissioned, purchased or used them, and by extension, the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged" (Beaudry, Cook, Mrozowski 1996). A process of classifying items of heritage must take place if all material objects convey a specific system of beliefs and ideas. Peter Howard (2003) in *Heritage: Management, Interpretation, Identity* describes the process of moving objects, events and places into the heritage realm as inventory, designation, protection, restoration and commodification.

With the onset of mechanization, many tools were rendered obsolete. The sickle, an old-world agricultural implement, witnessed this transformation. “Day after day, for two thousand years or more, men with strong backs and strong arms swung scythes through the grain fields of this world” (Levene 1958) until the advent of the mechanical reaper by Cyrus McCormick (1831). The age of industrial mechanization brought drastic changes to the landscape of food production. When an object like the sickle finds itself in a new cultural context (being an outmoded tool), it signifies an entirely new meaning. “In order to understand material culture we have to think in terms that go entirely beyond it, to go beneath the surface appearance to an underlying reality. This means we are thinking in terms of the relationship between things, rather than simply in terms of the things themselves” (Tilley, 1994). For those involved in farming, constantly aware of the cost of labor, the sickle is a vestigial remnant, a reminder of the exhausting manual labor required of their ancestors. The sickle no longer signifies only the act of labor but now holds connotations of history, and transition to mechanization that rendered the traditional method and tool obsolete. The transition to a modernized society was, and remains, the most profound large-scale socioeconomic upheaval in recorded history. As expanding technologies demanded new skills, and devalued old ones, whole populations of skilled workers lost their means of support. “Mechanization pervaded even the most complex manufacturers, and workers saw themselves as slaves, not masters, of the machinery they operated, where handicraft survived at all, it survived as a relic of an older, slower world” (Trilling 2003).

Archaic objects become souvenirs filled with identities of where we came from and who we are. Because of their inability to partake in purposeful use, our interaction

with these obsolete artifacts is passive: that of constructed memory and contemplation. “Remembering is an active process in which the past is continually negotiated and reinterpreted, through not only the experiences of the present but also the needs of the present. The past can never be understood solely within its own terms; the present continually rewrites the meaning of the past and the memories and histories we construct about it within the context of the present” (Smith 2006). Material culture as heritage is assumed to provide a physical representation and reality for the ephemeral and slippery concept of “identity” The artifacts that remain are the only ways in which individuals in a truncated heritage are able to participate in their traditions and preserve an identity, albeit in a very diminished capacity.

Heritage: A Numinous Experience

“Heritage provides meaning to human existence by conveying the ideas of timeless values and unbroken lineages that underpin identity” (Smith, 2006). Finding meaning in life is an essential purpose in avoiding what Viktor E. Frankl terms an “existential vacuum.” “Rooted deeply in the human person is what we call the will to meaning: the struggle for the most meaningful fulfillment of personal existence” (Frankl, 2004). When the active experience of heritage is inaccessible, it creates a crisis of identity and also produces an “existential vacuum” where the very meaning and purpose of life may become suspect. Heritage forms identity, and also serves a clear existential purpose. Heritage allows people a way of being that is not center-focused. By imparting sentiments that one belongs in a group and has a purposeful function, heritage creates an inclusive sense of meaning and station.

No one with a last name other than Coughlin has ever lived in our turn-of-the-century farmhouse. Invariably, historic family objects or treasures are re-discovered in

one of the several buildings on the property; one need only look. These objects from unknown ancestors provide a strong sense of inheritance and place. When cleaning out one of the dilapidated barns, we found a multi-tiered chest of bank receipts, worn photos, a wedding band, contracts, a pistol, letters from family members, and postcards. Though my parents looked at these objects as one more bit of curiosity left behind by long-dead relatives, for me the chest became a tabernacle. The artifacts became numinous: filled with or characterized by a sense of a supernatural presence that arouses one's elevated feelings of duty, honor and loyalty. "This sense of inheritance promotes the idea that the present has a particular 'duty' to the past and its monuments. The duty of the present is to receive and revere what has been passed on and in turn pass this inheritance, untouched, to future generations" (Smith 2003). Artifacts become placeholders for absent experiences, charged with the task of embodying the breadth of experiences of which they were once only a part. The act of preservation becomes an act of veneration, fulfilling the existential need to create and give meaning to my life.

CHAPTER 2 UNBURDENED: SCULPTURAL MANIFESTATIONS

Installation

Unburdened, a grouping of sculptures, explores the veneration of objects that are proxies for heritage experiences. The work is a physical manifestation of the hidden, signified meaning that lies within the material culture of an inaccessible heritage system in a farming community. The work is ultimately concerned with the creation of a physical memorial so that I may unburden myself from the responsibility of preservation.



Figure 2-1 *Unburdened*, Installation view.

“Museums are fundamentally more about memorializing the past so that it may be forgotten than actually remembering the past—particularly complex pasts”(Smith 2003).

Unburdened is a monument to the investigation of and our responsibility to the past.

The examination of what modes of being are worth keeping, and what should remain separate is the central question of the work.

Tools: Engagement and Disengagement

The sculptures of *Unburdened* focus on a specific class of objects from the material culture of a farming heritage. Objects of labor and vice (yoke, shovel, sickle, and alcohol) are the personal effects that now contain a larger signified meaning than their original purpose. All the elements have existed for countless generations and, as a group, impart associations with history, manual labor, and forgotten customs. Each tool

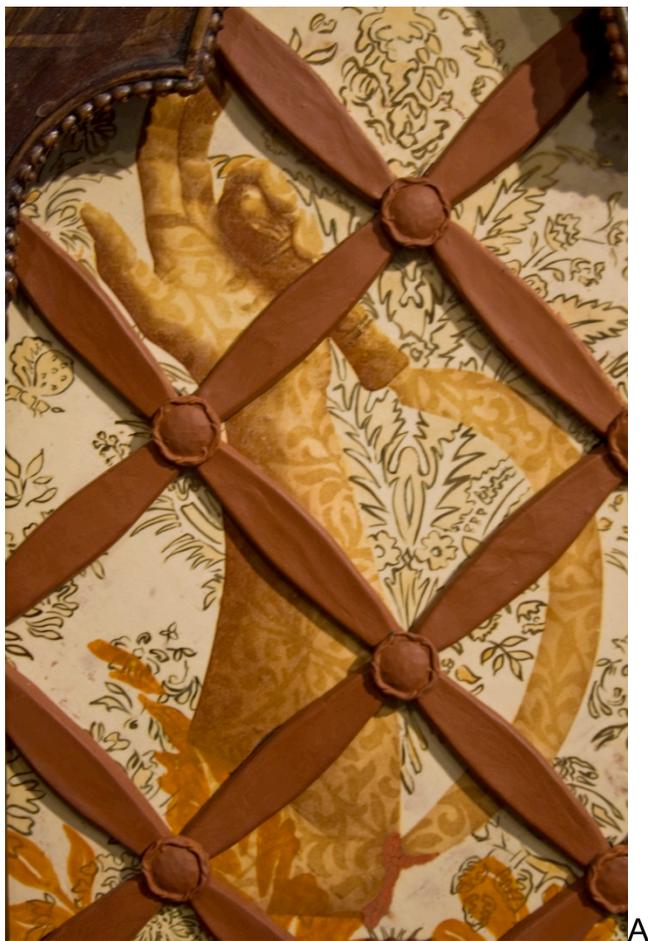


Figure 2-2. Sample of implements displayed in *Unburdened*. A) *Mos: The Custom of Habit*- a hand holding a Sickle. B). *Virtute et Labore, II: By Virtue of Labor*- a transformed shovel.

also holds its own connotation of a heritage experience, and is transformed or altered to convey its underlying meaning.

Within this classification, the implements are divided into two sets: physical, three-dimensional objects and objects that are two-dimensional illusory. This is a device used to separate the particular heritage experiences that are closed off or shunned, versus the experiences that are tangibly embraced and kept alive. The yoke, sickle, and bottle represent aspects of a heritage purposefully kept separate. *Baiulāvī*: “*I Have Carried a Heavy Burden*,” a large-scale tiled wall work, represents the act of labor that is not a choice. The yoke, a central feature of the piece, embodies oppression and bondage, traditions that were not a choice but an act of survival.

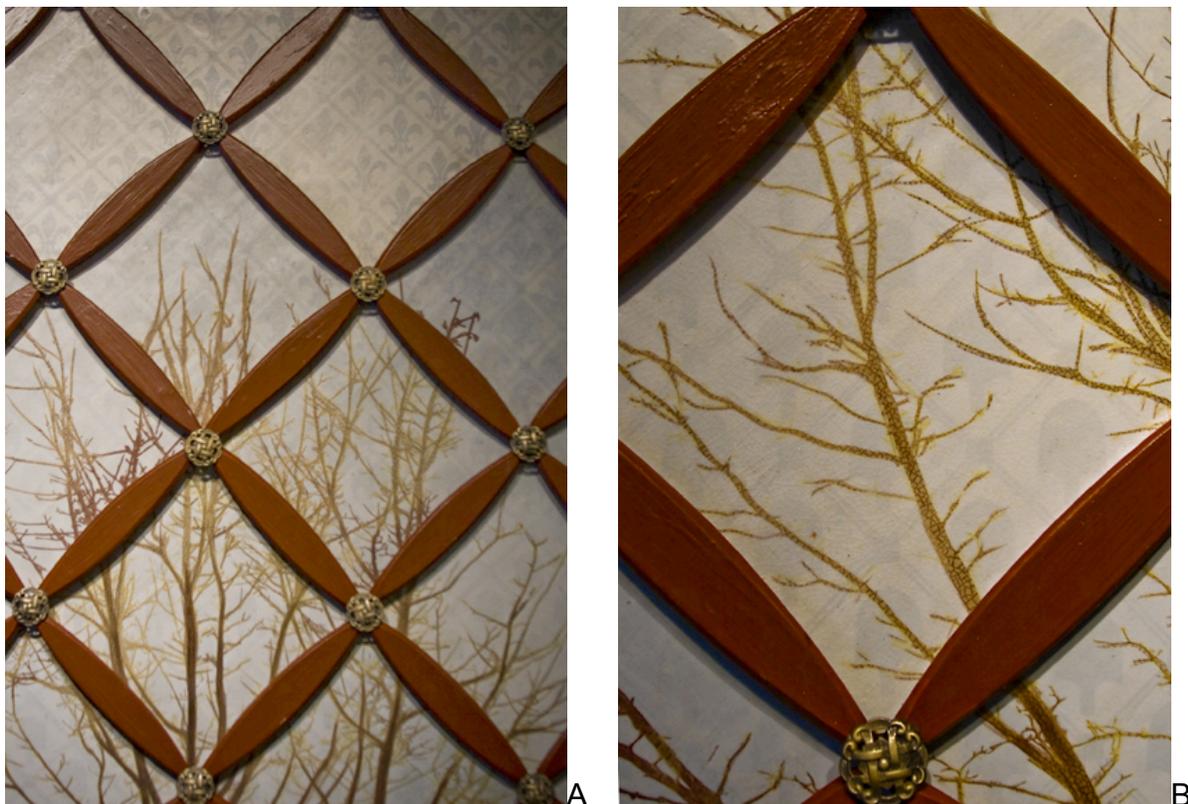


Figure 2-3. Detail of *Baiulavi: I have Carried a Heavy Burden*. A) Lattice with transforming pattern and tree branches. B) Detail of shovel pattern and branch.



Figure 2-4. *Baiulavi: I have Carried a Heavy Burden.*

The two panels forming the diptych are titled *Fio: I Become* and *Mos: The Custom of Habit*. These panels, representing shunned heritage experiences, use the hand gesture of a Catholic blessing combined with the eschewed heritage objects. In *Mos: The Custom of Habit*, the hand holds a sickle, signifying the hard, manual labor of the past. The Sickle's blade extends back into the forearm, piercing its flesh. This presents labor that is damaging to the one committing it. The liquor bottle in *Fio "I Become"* signifies another destructive habit that is a heritage experience still practiced: the vice of alcoholism. To reinforce the separation of illusory space from dimensional reality, a diamond pattern overlays the picture plane of these objects and becomes a lattice-like fencing that is a physical and conceptual barrier.



Figure 2-5. Diptych A) *Fio: I Become*. B) *Mos: The Custom of Habit*.

The shovels, however, exist in three-dimensional space and allow the viewer to become a hypothetical user to interact with the tool. The shovels become a symbol for the embraced heritage experience that is rooted in labor. The shovel's nature is to cover and uncover. By placing one shovel pointing upward and one tipped in the earth, I am giving expression to the activity of heritage investigation. I am deciding what should be unearthed and what should be buried.

Pattern and Ornament

Pattern and ornament are present in all the work and serve several functions. *Unburdened* uses Renaissance through Victorian-era ornament to place the work in a historical context, making an allusion and comparison to the long-standing history and heritage of European decorative arts. European decorative ornament was created to embody magnificence, conveying the importance of the owner through meticulous detail and luxurious material. Pattern and ornament from this historical context fills the work and its mundane images with a reverent majesty. "Another function of ornament is to express reverence for the sacred" (Trilling, 2003). Through the visible "we may be led to invisible beauty" (Trilling, 2003). Therefore, pattern is applied to convey the spiritual importance created through the tools' and implements' meaning and relationship to heritage and identity

Heritage Supplanting Religion

Religious constructs of architecture and iconography are used in *Unburdened* to suggest supplanting a religious transcendence with a heritage experience. Catholicism allows for a very personal experience within the faith. The religion encourages the congregation to choose patron saints and a multitude of rites and practices beyond the necessary dogma of the mass and liturgical calendar. This structure provides a system

larger than the individual, in which to participate. Religion is normally a practice that gives life meaning; however, “when the clergy do not or cannot awaken the heart, that tells us that they are unable to interpret the symbols through which they are supposed to enlighten and spiritually nourish their people” (Campbell, 2001), and the “existential vacuum” remains. Heritage becomes a system that allows individuals to re-interpret the failed transcendence of organized religion and connect to a personally-mediated, alternative concept larger than themselves. “Many people have learned to let religious symbols speak directly to themselves to order their lives. They don’t believe a group of bishops or other religious leaders could meet in conference and decide for them which interpretation of a symbol must be believed. But they don’t reject their religious tradition. They discover that symbols, when they are not pressed literally, can speak clearly across different traditions” (Campbell 2001). *Unburdened* strives to use the symbols of Catholicism and apply them to an experience that has personal meaning and value. In *Mos* and *Fio*, the hands holding the implements mimic the posture seen in countless religious paintings in Europe, allowing “that which is shunned” to be experienced positively in a revered light.

All objects in the exhibition have undergone some sort of transformation. Clay is transformed: through fire, what was once fragile earth becomes a permanent object. As a material, clay suggests that, through designation and preservation, the mutable heritage signifiers, too, have become permanent.

Hybridization occurs between nature and material culture: shovels have handles that grow into trees, or roots that grow into shovels. This amalgam of the man-made and nature is a metaphor for the newly assigned otherworldly character that embodies the spiritual need for meaning sought in the material culture of a re-configured heritage.

Materiality

Ceramics as a material is paradoxically fragile and permanent. By using ceramics as the unifying material in an installation of multimedia work, ceramics become an allegory for expressing heritage as a fragile constant. Even when broken, fired ceramic materials remain a permanent artifact. Through the various objects created in *Unburdened*, a hierarchy of materiality is created between earthenware and porcelain. Objects that represent aspects of heritage that are unattainable are earthenware. Objects made in porcelain are meant to be engaged and used.

Earthenware is of low value: a secondary clay, full of impurities associated with roofing tiles and objects of disposable worth. By using earthenware, I am aligning the inherent meaning of the material with the aspects of heritage that are meant to have less value. In contrast, the white, vitrified porcelain evokes connotations of wealth and purity. Historically, porcelain was a highly sought-after material: at one time, by weight, it was worth more than gold (Prime, 1879). Using porcelain for objects that are accessible lends them this added importance. Through porcelain, the objects become a spiritual and physical ideal, an ambition yet to be realized.

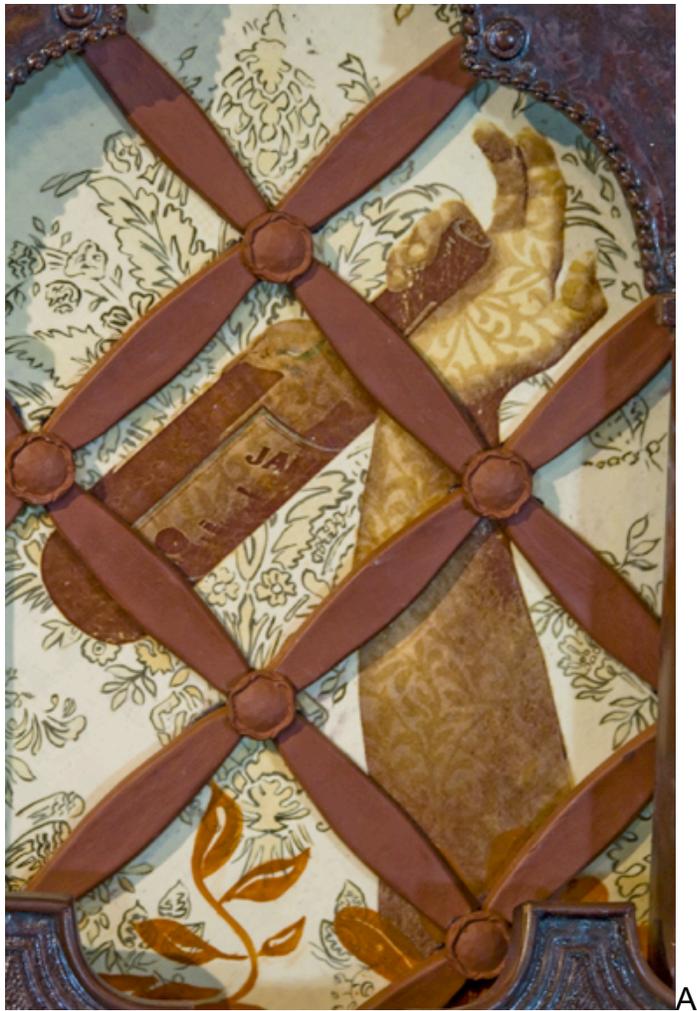


Figure 2-6. Examples of work that use earthenware and porcelain. A) Detail of *Fio: I Become*, the work was created using only earthenware. B) *Virtute et Labore I: By Virtue of Labor*, a multimedia piece where porcelain is the only clay used.

CHAPTER 3 CONCLUSION

The uprooted shrine is the culmination of *Unburdened*. As the only object that contains both porcelain and earthenware, it combines the low and the highly valued, the unattainable and the actively engaged. The uprooted shrine is the only work that does not possess an implement or tool. Housing a single, revered porcelain onion, the earthenware shrine is titled, *Sine Labore Nihil: Nothing Without Labor*. The onion is the “fruit of labor.” The fallen iconic structure of the ended heritage system enshrines the purpose for the existence of the other implements. Farming traditions depend on the harvest of a crop. This is a memorial to the harvest that no longer exists. The stool supports the fallen shrine and suggests the need to find a new way to interact with the experience. All of the sculptures deal with an aspect of separation, whether a physical barrier of patterned grid, or as uprooted or dead trees removed from nature. These images imply that without labor I have nothing: no truthful embracing of an identity that is assigned. I am separated.



A



B

Figure 3-1. Detail of *Sine Labore Nihil: Nothing Without Labor*. A) Enshrined porcelain onion B) Root structure of *Sine Labore Nihil: Nothing Without Labor*



Figure 3-2. *Sine Labore Nihil: Nothing Without Labor.*

The act of making this body of work is in itself an embracement and participation in my heritage. Because of meticulous care and the sustained labor of working large-scale, I was able to re-embody my heritage. Through this labor, I gained access to a transformed heritage: the act of making an onion from clay made me the “baroque” evolution of the unadulterated “classicism” of forbearers who grew them from earth. Although it means my heritage experience and identity is a bizarre characterization, an open door is still an open door.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patrick Coughlin is from rural Western New York and is a descendant of several generations of farmers. It was in his youth that the livelihood and tradition of farming ended for his family and is slowly vanishing from his community. After receiving a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in ceramics from Syracuse University, Patrick attended the post-baccalaureate program at the University of Florida and subsequently participated in a number of residencies. Most notably, Patrick was the “Salad Days” resident artist at Watershed Center for Ceramic Art in Newcastle Maine. Upon completing a yearlong residency at Genesee Center for the Arts, Rochester, New York, Patrick returned to Florida as an MFA candidate in ceramics. In summer 2010 Patrick begins a new position at the Pottery Workshop Design Studio in Jingdezhen, China.