

Merging Mind and Body: A Sculptural Technique

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Abstract

Repetitive, purposeful motions are required for the construction of many ceramic forms, and the bodily experience helps to settle the mind. The simple act of pinching the cool, malleable material excites tactile sensations, sparking the release of relaxing energies. This psychological tendency to seek solace with repeated bodily action is stereotypy, or self-stimulatory behavior. The result of sense stereotypic behavior is a transformative moment when internal calm overrides chaos. Similar to a monotonous motion like tapping fingers together, ceramic-art stereotypy engages four of the body's senses: visual, auditory, tactile, and vestibular (sense of balance). The nervous system responds to pacify the mind, teaching the artist physical and mental self-awareness, which is the foundation of meditation. In this series, the creation of ceramic sculpture is referenced as terraforming, or a modeling of the earth analogous to the contemplative process that shapes the artist's personal environment. Investigating the impact of repetitive motion on emotional and mental experiences, this study evaluates how ceramics can be employed as a meditative medium for the artist. The work in this series comes to fruition through a formulated mantra bridging the tangible, natural world with the intangible realm of thought and memory. A conduit for the mind to unwind into a contemplative state, the undulating surfaces of these ceramic forms draw inspiration from the grace and simplicity found in nature.

1. Introduction: Process and Solace

In this series, the artist evaluates how repetitive motion under the systematic steps of the mantra can be used to access a meditative state. The mantra is a technique of revolving the clay within the hand, and the circular, repetitive motion is conducive to thought, reflection, and peace. These procedural strategies ignite physiological responses that guide the artist's psyche during the creation of the artwork. As the building process continues, the artist's calming inner self informs the shaping of each sculpture. The impulse to experience comfort is illuminated by the sculptures' burnished surface treatment, which invites a second wave of palpable stimulus from the viewer. Fingertip pressures seal the exterior clay particles to resemble a skin, further refining the ceramic form under a continuous touch. The result is a sculpture that emerged from the artist's journey with tactile sensation and meditation.

Beginning as a subliminal search for solace, the artist discovered stereotypy, or self-stimulatory behavior, engages the body's senses and nervous system to pacify the mind. An abbreviation for self-stimulation, "stimming" is continuing a monotonous motion, like shifting weight from one foot to the next.¹ For the artist, stimming is implemented throughout the construction process and is a technique that shapes her ceramic work as well as her mind. Through this practice, the ceramic forms distinguish themselves as a labor of continuous tactile compulsions.

Using repeated bodily action to unite the art and the maker, a relationship is formed between the product and process, or the sculpture and mantra. This notion is highlighted by Irish playwright Oscar Wilde, quoted, "A work of art is a unique result of a unique temperament."² As time unites the body with the mantra, the artist's temperament emulates the soothing and contemplative strokes that initiated creation. After becoming fully engaged in the building and refining of form, the rhythmic motions allow for mental release. The physical, yet meditative

steps cause the final product to record the artist's spiritual path. The forms become the embodiment of the experience and the method is a mantra, which in Sanskrit translates to an instrument of thought.³



Figure 1. Rosalie Midyette, *Petal Fold*, 12x18x24 in.

Evaluating the influence of one's personal psyche on the artistic product, Sue Gorman published a research study in *Ceramic Review*, "Is Mindfulness Apparent in the Aesthetic?" Also using repetitive motion, Gorman accesses a meditative state. Meditation is a holistic discipline, as defined by Gorman, by which the "practitioner attempts to get beyond reflexive thinking through relaxing the body and mind."⁴ Publically demonstrating ceramic-art stereotypy, Gorman participated in Anthony Gormley's life monument, titled "One and Other", by sitting on an elevated plinth and pinching pots. Gorman is quoted, "Despite the commotion and sounds of city life that surrounded me, within minutes I was able to quieten the mind and transcend technique as the clay in my hands began to transform."⁵ Similar to the mantra, Gorman used repetitive motion to access an intuitive state, in which her psyche determined the essence of the pinch pots over learned technique.

2. Body Influences Mind

The artist's expression of smooth and fluid formations satisfies the tactile urges for uniformity, keeping the artwork balanced compositionally as well as within space. The sculptures in this series result from a contemplative mindset, characterizing the sensory benefits of ceramic-art stereotypy. Further understanding the physiological impact of repetitive motion, the artist has linked this bodily response to a technique called mindfulness.

As the director and co-founder of Mindful Schools, Megan Cowan describes mindfulness as a state of "attentive awareness" and advocates for it to be called upon during times of intense emotion, such as stress or anger. Elevated emotions engage a small region in the brain called the amygdala, which ignites the production of stress chemicals that activate fight, flight, or freeze mode.⁶ Without training in mindfulness, a person will respond to stress through pre-programmed habits, such as raising one's voice. Through mindfulness, Cowan furthers that one can override the "automatic pilot" and engage the prefrontal cortex, or the part of the brain that is "responsible for higher-level capacities, including physical and emotional regulation".⁷ Cowan states, "The practice of mindfulness cultivates a pause between external stimulus and one's reaction to it".⁸ This technique aids awareness of one's physical and emotional place and can inform a more controlled response to stress. The goal of mindfulness is for one to compartmentalize their experience of stress by understanding the emotion, resisting the habitual urge to react, to evaluate and then execute the appropriate response. As an achievement goal for repetitive motion, mindfulness is a state in which acute understanding of emotion can be summoned through rehearsal.

In a publication of the *International Journal of Education Through Art*, researcher Sally Gradle accounts that self-awareness and contemplative actions cue emotional growth in the brain, such as open-mindedness and empathy. Gradle claims that in addition to furthering emotional growth, developing the authentic self is achieved by "staying in the moment, remaining reflexive and connecting with one's intuition."⁹ For the artist, the mantra cultivates the goals Gradle highlights for developing the authentic self.

For this series, the artist uses ceramic-stereotypy to practice ideals of mindfulness. Researcher Sally Gradle has employed a study of mindful viewing with undergraduate students. The objective was to evaluate if a student's openness and self-awareness impacted their analysis of artwork. Gradle concluded that the most useful tool to instill

is students' "understanding the link between focus, a calm mind, and insight or awareness as a connection between the world around them and within them."¹⁰ Gradle concludes that a method of "careful looking and thinking" must occur for insight to develop.¹¹ This insight can then be employed to discover a contemplative approach of viewing art. Through practice, Gradle claims that informed introspection is the reward one must attain before visualizing the world.

Exercising concepts of mindfulness, the artist uses repeated motion to elevate her understanding of the correlation between stimulus, physicality and emotion. Using this technique, a heightened awareness of self helps dictate the artist's determination of form. Decisions in contour are made after several angles of the piece are considered, aligning the artist with Gradle's ideals of "careful looking and thinking".¹² The artist allows her mental state to shape the artwork as a reflection of an inner quest for solace. With an open-ended approach to sculpture, this series is a depiction of the desires of the artist's psyche.

The psychological term for repetitive motion is known as stereotypy, or self-stimulatory behavior. Aiding a mental adjustment to stimulus, repetitive motion physically impacts one's emotional environment, sparking the release of relaxing energies amidst the chaos of one's surroundings. Researcher Stephen Edelson cites six ways one can partake in sense stereotypic behavior, and the mantra includes four: visual, auditory, tactile, and vestibular (sense of balance).¹³ The formulated building process activates the visual through the rotating of the piece. The revolving form is reminiscent of the earth turning and the passage of time, bonding the artist with the environment. Auditory senses are engaged through paddling on the hollow forms. The low vibrations echo within the piece and hold the artist's attention from drifting outward.

3. Method: The Mantra

To begin one of these volumetric sculptures, a hollow sphere is built from flat sheets of clay called slabs. The first step in the mantra is the creation of each slab. Stretching the clay with skillful throws against a plaster table outlines the desired panel and takes multiple efforts with some slabs weighing twenty-five pounds. The slabs are then placed on an edge to be connected and to construct the circular wall of the piece. As seen below in Figure 2., while the structure is open the clay is pushed outward by applying pressure on the interior of the walls with the fingertips, then by a knuckle, palm or heel of the hand.



Figure 2. Rosalie Midyette, in process.

After the structure has defined curvature, a slab is placed over the opening. Trapping air on the inside, the void is sealed and now the pressures are applied to the exterior walls. By pushing, tapping, and paddling, the work evolves from its oval ball to a form with planar changes. As the artwork grew in scale, even forearms and an elbow became essential tools.

During the process, the clay loses moisture and shrinks, and as seen below in Figure 3. The cavity holds air that becomes compressed to provide resistance against the bodily impressions. The final piece materializes from a dialogue of opposing forces affecting the ceramic barrier. As a product of the push and pull of a force between two worlds, the artworks are the imprint of these dualistic qualities within life.



Figure 3. Rosalie Midyette, in process

As a reference to the form's organic shape, the series adopted the name "terraform". Used as a landscape design element, "terraforming" is a shaping or modeling of the earth and is the designated title for the mantra.¹⁴ The forms are a continuum of undulating surfaces, inspired by the natural and infinite sculpting of the earth, most specifically by water. As seen below in Figure 4. *Sway*, wave like crests rise from the body of the piece almost like a weight has depressed the surface, projecting the mass outward. The sculpture is a chart, symbolizing intangible enigmas as the force that manipulated the raw material and the maker.



Figure 4. Rosalie Midyette, *Sway*, 12x20x18 in

4. Conceptual Framework

A personal connection with ceramic artist Alice Ballard is an inspiration for a lifestyle beyond ceramic art, offering a thoughtful perspective on memory, nature and clay. Ballard's sculptural forms are inspired by her connection with nature and the nostalgic experiences attached. Spending hours in her garden, she gathers mementos of rocks and seed pods to bring back to her studio. As seen below in Figure 5, Alice Ballard's sculptures are often literal depictions of these treasures, each piece representing a moment in her life.



Figure 5. Alice Ballard. *Magnolia Pod*, white earthenware. 6.5x12x6.5 in.

One series of work titled “environment pieces”, prompted her to build hospitable containers after envisioning a place a plant could thrive. Ballard also made containers for rocks that she picked up on morning walks. She would press the stone into the bottom of the box, making an indentation.¹⁵ This imprint allowed the rock to have a customized place to rest and was also a reminder of her day.



Figure 6. Alice Ballard, *Pod Trio*, 10 x 12 in. Photo by Luis Quiles, 2007

Informed by Alice Ballard’s balance of nature and memory, sculpture in this series offers itself to be retrospective, yet grounding for a maker. The sculpture is an avenue for introspection, and becomes the mediator between the past and present. The maker of a pod-like form must cup the rounded structure in the palm of the hand, slowly applying inward force to ensure each wall to be stable. Repetitive strokes compress the surface to achieve a smooth, skin like quality and hours turning in the hand can burnish it to the shine of an apple. This is similar to the act of holding a stone, soothing a tension and connecting to the earth.

Similar to the connection between Ballard’s pods and mementos, as shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6, the terraforms are a ceramic terrain inspired by natural occurrences. Through the geological and biological context of the terraforms, the work identifies with themes of renewal and endurance. Calming the artist’s mental state by manipulating the pod-like compositions with repeated strokes, outside stimulus becomes more tolerable. Reflecting on Alice Ballard’s natural forms, the physical, organic growth associated with the environment piece is representative of the spiritual growth achieved through the mantra.

5. Polarity and metaphor

Swedish ceramic sculptor Eva Hild cites three key points in her work: influence, pressure, strain.¹⁶ Her large-scale, hand-built ceramic sculptures are a product and a negotiation of those three listed factors. Thin, delicate bodies interact with space by challenging the viewers' perception of interior and exterior. The mortal existence of the human body is conveyed in Hild's sculpture by thin line quality, making them appear precarious due to the large sizes. Hild publishes on her website, "Everyday, I experience the tension between presence and absence. My sculptures show me the necessity of opposites; they are paradoxes. Bodies where presence and absence meet."¹⁷



Figure 7. Eva Hild. *Bilateral*. Stoneware 2008. 100 x 55 x 55 cm



Figure 8. Eva Hild. *Consecutive Working*. Stoneware and mixed media, 2008. 130 x 130 x 90 cm

The energy enclosed in the terraforms parallels the tension Hild achieves by her presentation of negative space. She discloses on her website, "My fascination is about the relationship between internal and external realities; the dualism between inside and outside, content and form, feeling and shape, impression and expression. It is a

reflection of my inner landscapes of form.”¹⁸ While Hild’s sculpture illustrates dualism through openings in bodily structure, the terraforms are a negotiation of dueling elemental pressures as the relationship between the interior cavity and exterior walls. During the building process, the terraforms differ from Hild’s fragile extremities, for the bodies are supported by the captive air pressure. As the clay shrinks and wraps around the hollow, the air offers rigidity under the thinning walls and inflates the ridges that circulate the rounded form. The terraforms appear solidified and present within their environment, with a linear, anchoring center of gravity.

Commenting on the conceptual qualities of her work, Hild reveals that she is personally and emotionally invested in each piece, taking six months to build the large and intricate structure.¹⁹ Through building, she is able to relate to dualism on a variety of levels, but specifically that of physicality. In an article titled “A Place of Presence”, Sally Gradle states, “The contemplative awareness that occurs when lingering over a work of art or research is facilitated by the intellectual or emotional investment in the piece”.²⁰ Hild’s pieces visually appear to turn inside out and is symbolic of her emotional projection, while Ballard’s pieces are tokens of a day lived.

Similar to Hild and Ballard, the terraforms are fired in an electric kiln. The clean heating elements provide for a consistent oxidation firing that allows the clay to mature without additives from the surrounding atmosphere. Terra sigillata is applied to the raw body, to create a consistent, muted white surface.²¹ This slip is a powdered mineral and water mixture made from filtering out the finest particles of un-processed clay through a method of suspension. Water puddles on top of the liquid terra sigillata, while the heaviest and coarsest particulates sink to sludge. Obtaining the center solution and applying it to the dry, sanded sculpture results in a smooth, burnished skin. Providing visual and tactile comfort, the surface contours evoke relations to human form.



Figure 9. Rosalie Midyette. *Petal Fold*. Stoneware. 12x18x24 in.

6. Shape and Form

Sculptures interact with a greater existence through basic shapes and have been revolutionized by American metal sculptor Alexander Calder (1898-1976). Typically, Calder’s pieces incorporate thin line structure with solid endings. A leader in the modern art movement, Alexander Calder was able to “draw” three-dimensional figures in space through the manipulation of line and is renowned as the father of the mobile.²² The linear components of Calder’s sculptures interact with open air to create an elegant reference to space. In discourse with the atmosphere, the proximity of the solid endings is often rearranged by moving air currents. His large scale mobile works gradually shift over time, indicating nothing is permanently fixed within the universe.

Calder states, “From the beginning of my abstract work, even when it might not have seemed so, I felt there was no better model for me to choose than the Universe”.²³ Calder’s mobiles reign in the boundless whimsy of the universe by using simple shapes connected at calculated balance points that are stable yet dynamic within the surrounding space. Noting again impact of the environment on his work, Alexander Calder continues,

The simplest forms in the universe are the sphere and the circle. I represent them by disks and then I vary them... spheres of different sizes, densities, colours and volumes, floating in space, traversing clouds, sprays of water, currents of air, viscosities and odours – of the greatest variety and disparity.²⁴

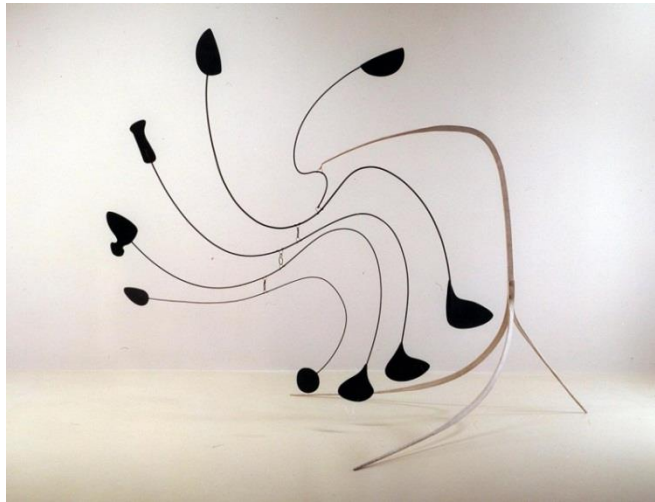


Figure 10. Alexander Calder, *The Spider*, 1940. *Calder Foundation*, New York.

A Calder mobile is interactive, literally engaging the surrounding atmosphere and the viewer. As a spectator, imagine using your own breath to cause the gentle motion of a colored disk in a Calder mobile. This phenomenon sparks awe and understanding as a direct cause and effect of objects and individuals interacting in scale to the greater universe. The emotional dialogue of humanity and natural forces humbles the viewer, and the patrons lower their voices to a whisper.

When the mobiles are heavier than the air currents and do not easily rotate, the universal references within his works are not removed. Although not all of his sculptures are kinetic, the surrounding atmosphere is always activated by a Calder piece. Constructed with the same playful gesture as his mobiles, Calder also fabricated sheet metal sculptures called stabiles. The stable visually interacts with the audience and atmosphere through the presence and feeling of monumental size, the use of a saturated primary color, and energetic line positioning. Provoking feelings of weightlessness like the mobile counterparts, these stationary structures balance height and mass on dynamic points.



Figure 11. Alexander Calder, *La Grande Vitesse*, 1969. Painted Steel. Grand Rapids, Michigan.

With recognition to Alexander Calder's body of work, the terraform series is also designed with a sphere in mind and altered. Maximizing on a monumental feel through the use of reduced balance points and arched undercarriage, the terraforms are curvaceous stabiles. Structured entryways that lead one face of the sculpture to the next are fluid transitions that install a body in the form. Projecting upward, the gentle glide of the surface lures the viewer over one crest and around a ridge, in the same way one would view weathered driftwood. Implementing the idea of endurance beyond the elemental pressures and the passage of time, the terraforms are inspired by emotional responses to geological wonders. Prescribing the context of a geological life, smoothed recessions appear as if water has pooled over an extended period of time. The stable positioning of the enclosed form removes vulnerability and fragility, keeping the artist and audience at ease.



Figure 12. Rosalie Midyette. *Petal Fold*. Stoneware. 12x18x24 in.



Figure 13. Rosalie Midyette, *Square Base*, 12 x10 x18 in.

7. Conclusion

From the structure of the mantra, ceramic-art stereotypy has been integral for meditative moments to approach the artist. Pondering life's conundrums and celebrations becomes entwined with the creation of these sculptures, and

these moments enhance the ability for the artist to resolve and respond to her unique position within her environment. The artist's contemplative state selects the contours of the forms, which raise similar responses from viewers. The circle of tactile urges begins with the initial touch of wet clay and continues with the sensuous qualities of the fired ceramic pieces.

In this series, the mantra was designed by the artist to create abstract representations of memories while also enriching her spiritual self. For the artist, ceramic-art stereotypy enhanced emotional acuity and appreciation of each moment past and present.²⁵ Construction narrows one's thoughts and attention, distilling the maker's mind from internal and external chaos. Moments, thoughts and memories become accessible to the artist during the building process, which becomes the emotional investment in the work of art. This devotion also registers within the artist as experiential knowledge, helping to catalogue distinct emotions and employ mindfulness. Three authors published a study on this technique in the *American Psychological Association*, defined as "the ability to attend to thoughts and emotions as they arise and to be fully conscious of the present moment experience".²⁶ Bringing presence of mind, the meditative result from terraforming heightens awareness of physical, intellectual and emotional place.

The artist's endeavor to achieve mindfulness through repeated actions has been facilitated by the influence stereotypy has on her temperament. The physiological responses activated by stereotypy advanced the artist's ability to understand the connections between bodily action and emotion. By engaging this cause and effect relationship, meditation occurs during the construction process. Beyond ceramics as a material, this technique could be applied to a variety of mediums if a formulated method has been devised to employ repetitive action.

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