

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Emerging to the Surface

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For the degree of Master of Arts

in Art

By

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Dedication

To the people who have been big part of my life since the time I opened my eyes. To the people of Iran who have been so brave and fought for their freedom and to my grandfather, Masrour, who has been always the one that I look up to for his bravery. To my dear mother and sister whom I have not seen in ten years, I thank you both for all you have done for me throughout my life. Even though the borders have separated us and we are far from each other, but I have always kept you closely to my heart and think about you every single day. I dedicate my heart and soul to you both. Grandma, I love you so very much even though we can get grumpy with each other at times but all I have for you is love.

My dear friends at California State University, Norridge, I love you all. Kate Parsons, Ashley Mistriel, Lena Sayadian, Beatriz Cortez, and Erika Ostrander; you all are big part of my life and my family. I thank you all for being there for me.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Signature Page	ii
Dedication	iii
Abstract	v
Background	1
Discussion of Work	
Nine	3
Tolou	4
Emerging to the Surface	5
Conclusion	7
References	8
Appendix	9

ABSTRACT

Emerging to the Surface

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The art making process embodies the human spirit and becomes a metaphor for the self. The human spirit moves through transitions that are similar to the ceramic process. We shift and twist to accommodate our daily struggles. We have tenuous fragile moments much like the bone dry state of clay before firing. We have moments of unbreakable confidence similar to when clay turns to stoneware after a firing.

I keep these various stages in mind as I approach my most current body of work. I draw connections between my own states of being in relation to my work with clay. The act of using different materials and tools to carve out layers of the clay on the vessel mirrors the revelation of the inner self. Using all the states of clay in my installations; wet, leather hard, green ware, and fired, I treat the surface of the vessel as if it were my skin. The vessel becomes my own body, and the water I throw with represents my own blood. The blood holds my identity, my DNA, and my reason for being. No matter how much we change in appearance, we cannot change who we are.

Background

I was born in Iran, after the Iranian Revolution, where political corruption runs deep and the government officials imprison or kill innocent people in order to remain powerful. My grandfather was executed four months after I was born as his religious beliefs as a Baha'i deviated from the official Islamic faith of the country. After the death of my grandfather, the pressure in the family was palpable. However, my mother made sure that I would grow up in a good environment just like any other kid my age.

After my parents' divorce, the stigma of being a woman and of a different faith in an Islamic country became reality. My sister and I joined the Baha'i classes, where we learned about the hardships of families believing in religions other than Islam. At the age of fifteen, my sister was imprisoned after appearance in a commitment ceremony for Baha'i youths. The family had to fight the court for three years to prove their innocence, since they were wrongly accused of forcing my sister to become Baha'i. The officials couldn't prove the charges, so they created lies that my mother and grandmother were against the leader of Iran. Almost every month, they had to show up to court and wait for the court order and their sentence. They were wrongly accused. The only way out of was to let time pass. I was only thirteen during the trial but I still remember the horror of possibly losing my family. I knew if anything happened, the government officials would force me to live with my father, and I didn't have a good relationship with him.

We survived those days and my next challenge was to continue my education and to obtain a higher degree. At times, it felt like I was swimming against the current, and I would grow tired. However, knowing what I really wanted for my life led me to continue. At the age of twenty, I decided to find a way to leave Iran and I succeeded; I left

everyone I loved and got out. It was a big change, almost a dream that went by very quickly. It is almost a blur how it happened. I first went to Austria, the first country I had ever visited outside of Iran. I had to stay there for a couple of months until I was approved by the United States Embassy for further travel. After my interview with the embassy, my ticket to freedom was granted and I came to the United States of America.

Soon after I arrived, I began my studies at Pierce College, Woodland Hills, California, and I started taking the classes I needed to transfer to a University. A drawing class was my entrance to the art world, where I discovered a passion for drawing as well as for ceramics which was introduced to me by the professor of the drawing class. It was at Pierce Community college where I was introduced to the gay community. I found many friends and started to become comfortable with my own sexuality, something I had never been able to achieve at home in Iran

Upon completion of my AA, I transferred to California State University, Northridge, and began my BA in ceramics and illustration. Having gained a solid skill set in community college, I was ready to create my first major body of work. I knew I wanted to connect myself to my background and where I am from, but I also knew that I needed to let go of the past. To move forward, I had to tell my stories through my work. I wanted to create awareness about Iran and the government who brought these dark clouds upon its people through the story of my grandfather, and ultimately, of myself.

Discussion of Work

Nine

The executions, the prisons, the long days in court, and the brave people who fought back in Iran, became the theme of my work. Starting with my grandfather's story, "Nine" was a thrown plate designed with nine flowers on the inside. The flowers represented the nine people who stood in front of the guns on the night of their execution in 1981. They were tied to nine poles and were shot by a firing squad. They didn't have the option to defend themselves. A fatal bullet, "The Bullet", was the last bullet that was shot in their head to make sure that they were dead. The families of the victims were charged for these fatal bullets an amount equivalent to U.S \$3, and they have to live their whole life knowing that they were forced to pay for the killing of their loved ones.

To complete "Nine", I brought it to a shooting range while the clay was in leather hard stage which the clay is hard enough to have surface treatment. I placed it as a target. I recreated the tragic political executions by firing at the plate in a similar fashion. I became the gunman and shot "Nine." The feeling of how easy it is to use a gun or hurt someone was unbearable to me and horrifying. I couldn't comprehend how the cold-hearted executioner was able to carry out the calculated killing of innocent people.

Through this process, I have discovered a similarity between my family and the wet clay in terms of plasticity and healing. Clay reacts in a similar way to families; the pieces that are shot do not shatter and what remains is an enduring hole. Human families do not shatter but what remains is that everlasting mark and void.

Tolou

“Tolou” was an installation about the same problems, but presents a larger picture of what Iranian people are facing specially after Ahmadi Nejad’s (the current president of Iran) second term by cheating the system. The Iranians people started the green revolution and were not happy about the results of that election but after people tried to stop this corrupted election, the officials started killing the protestors on the street with no remorse. People were hurt, people were shot, people lost loved ones, but they remained strong and fought back. In this installation, the individual vessels represent these people, maimed, and partially destroyed, but still standing. To make the work, I used the pottery wheel to throw vessels in the most traditional form in Iranian culture. Choosing a few of them, then I transferred them to the shooting range and placed them as targets on the ground.

After lining up the pieces in front of the gunman, which in this case was a member of the staff at the shooting range, the gunman started shooting them one by one, This time, I was witnessing the opposite of “Nine”, where I was seeing the shooting range’s personnel shoot at the pieces. I was seeing my pieces being destroyed which made me think of how hard that is for families who lose their loved ones without being able to do anything about it.

The process of creating these vessels, starting with the wet clay until they are finished and fired, became a very important part of my work. I was involved in the creation and the performance aspect of the work, which caused me to think about self and my role is in this work. This took me to the next step of my creation process, the exploration of self.

Emerging to the Surface

“Emerging to the Surface” is where I began the journey of realizing the history of “myself”. I started thinking about the things that help the process of creating a vessel. Water and my own body were the most important part of this process. Water makes it easier for a potter to shape a vessel. Without water, the vessel is harder to shape on a pottery wheel as it becomes sticky and the piece will collapse. As the creator of these forms, I thought of my own blood and how it runs through my body and circulates through each organ to give life to them and to me. The motion of the wheel and the circulation of the blood made me think of using my own blood to throw a few vessels to give life and shape to them. No matter what shape the vessels were, they were still thrown by the same person and his blood. We might change from the outside but from inside, we are who we are.

Using the pottery wheel, I started throwing vessels with Coleman Porcelain in different sizes and set them aside until the porcelain was at leather hard stage. With a carving tool, I began carving layers from the body of the vessel to reveal the inner layer. An installation “Untitled”, was the result of the exploration of self using the ceramic process. I created a time-lapse image of myself as well as the act of survival and learning about myself. After firing the carved pieces, I took my pottery wheel inside the gallery space and started throwing vessels for the sacrifices, and ups and downs of life.

Those vessels, about seventy or more, were thrown on the ground of the gallery creating an island of fallen vessels that were not completed in the process. The fired pieces then placed on the fallen and were secured. The shadows were the reflection and

the results of my decisions and the whole installation became an image of rebirth, the unknown, and revelations.

Through the installation, I realized throwing on the pottery wheel has become a big part of my practice. Moving my wheel inside the empty gallery space and working in solitude allowed me to focus and only think about the creation of these vessels. The experience of throwing inside the gallery created a new world for me and opened up many other doors with new meanings. At this moment, for me nothing else exists and time stops. There is also a sense of controlling the time, clay, and life. A potter knocks the clay off center but they can also undo that and fix what has gone wrong. It is like going back in time and fix the off center clay and bring it back on center. As a potter, I feel like I am giving life to the clay by creating something out of it and giving meaning to each piece. “Getting control of life is never easy, and sometimes it can be definitely painful. But in the long run optimal experiences add up to a sense of mastery – or perhaps better, a sense of participation in determining the content of life – that comes as close to what is usually meant by happiness as anything else we can conceivably imagine.”

Conclusion

We grow in a place, we change in appearance, we shed, and we become who we are but at the end we are who we are and we never forget what has affected our lives. We tend to pull ourselves up and try to learn and become stronger as life goes on. I would never forget where I am from and who has given me life, my beloved mother. It is now almost ten years that I have moved to United States of America and gained so much from the life that I have had here. I am not living my life in transition and I know it will be a long road ahead of me with many more ups and downs but what life has offered me is beyond words to describe and I shall continue and move forward.

“Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.”

~ Søren Kierkegaard

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Appendix



Nine, Stoneware, 2 ½" x 11 ½", 2012



Bullet, Stoneware, 18"x3 1/2"x3 1/2", 2012



Tolou, Stoneware, Installation (Size Variable), 2012



Untitled, Porcelain and unfired clay, Installation (Size Variable), 2013