EARTH DIVERS I – VI

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A selected project submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

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Brigham Young University
April 2010

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Abstract

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My stoneware sculptures in my MFA final project were named *Earth Divers* because clay as a material is earth and clay is also symbolic of the Earth. The way that I physically dive into clay up to my elbows is a poetic performance. The sculptures were built in sections horizontally and then stacked vertically. I began the process by first making life size plaster molds of the human figure taken from live people. *Earth Divers* take their architectural structure specifically from the organic curves of the negative voids that are characteristic of the plaster figure molds. I built into these plaster molds a block or brick like section. I then removed the large block sections from the molds and stacked the sections one on top of the other combining the figurative and architectural structures with gothic influence. The sculptor, Stephen De Staebler, who works in a similar fashion, describes his work as, “… first laying the figure down and later standing it in a vertical position.” The way of life that was lost with the manufacturing past of my family at Castone Brick is found in the use of industrial nostalgia by modeling I-beam shapes as part of the structure of the stacked sections. I also fired nuts, bolts, and washers of various sizes in the clay that build the surface of the human forms. The square nut seen in my work is no longer being manufactured and is symbolic of the passing of the industrial age in America. Finally, to build the surfaces of my sculptures I used slips, glazes, and a variety of clays on top of clay, and laid glass fragments on the horizontal surfaces to create a look of pooled water when my work was fired similar to what I have seen in the Lehman Caves in Baker, Nevada.

“I believe there is a force in this world that lives beneath the surface, something primitive and wild that awakens when you need an extra push just to survive, like wild flowers that bloom after a fire turns the forest black. Most people are afraid of it and keep it buried deep inside themselves. But, there will always be a few people who have the courage to love what is untamed inside us.” (Tim McGraw)

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Acknowledgements

I especially want to thank my MFA committee Bryon Draper and Brian Christensen and most importantly my chair Von Allen. I also want to thank my wife, Wende L. Tolbert Prince, who made my education possible and my children for their support Travis, Tirzah, Clara, and Rosie.

Thank you to my parents Douglas F. and Beth O. Prince and to my parent-in-laws Ida L. and the late L. Clark Tolbert.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... ii  
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................ iii  
Introduction ......................................................................................................................... 1  
Emotional History ............................................................................................................... 3  
Process ............................................................................................................................... 5  
Influences .......................................................................................................................... 9  
Conclusion ........................................................................................................................ 16  
Project Photos ................................................................................................................... 17
Introduction

The title Earth Divers is derived from the idea of the human family owing our existence to the earth, meaning clay, from which we came and to which we must return. The use of clay in combination with the human form has universal poetic meaning. The human form that shapes my work is not premeditated beyond the use of a given mold from which my sculptures are inspired. No drawings are made ahead of time. I physically dive into the clay construction process and allow the mold from which I build to lead me in a dance with the clay. The sculptor Stephen De Staebler best describes the value of clay as a material when he said,

“I carried in a very direct way the qualities clay has into my intentional form. This honest material comes from the earth, clay is earth and it generates an infinite range of expressions. Clay wants to slump, warp, crack, break and shear off. When fired, it’s hard but brittle.”

“Clay, De Staebler points out, is really the crust of the earth itself. Clay, or terra cotta – Latin for “cooked earth,” was the first material used to fashion vessels, as well as images. Suffused with myth and history, it has been reclaimed in our time as a significant material for the sculptor… De Staebler, after studying theology at Princeton, went to Berkeley where teachers such as Voulkos, Harold Paris, and Jacques Schnier created a stimulating atmosphere for the apprentice sculptor…. The concept of the intimate relationship between the human and the earth is an essential element of his work.”

Physicality, as it relates to the process of working with clay, is at the core of defining me as an artist. Constructing Earth Divers in sections and stacking vertically hundreds of pounds of clay, was a physical performance that reminded me of my youth stacking tons of brick. As a teenager, I worked with my brothers in my father, Douglas F. Prince’s, concrete brick company, Castone, the largest brick manufacturing plant in

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3 Selz, Peter. “Stephen De Staebler’s Figure Columns”, in Sculpture, May 2002, Vol. 21 No. 4.
Texas at the time. Working in this noisy industrial environment I made, stacked, and loaded bricks on trucks.

My current work is gothic architectural sculptures that are structurally dependent on the human form. An important dimension of Earth Divers is the fragmentation of the human form. The symbolic use of the fragmented figure in Earth Divers takes its place in a long, rich history of the function of human form in sculpture. When referring to Stephen De Staebler’s work, Peter Selz states,

“Ever since Auguste Rodin, evoking the damaged sculpture of antiquity, presented his partial, yet muscular and erotic figures, the fractured human form has been endemic to modern sculpture. The human torso was a dominant theme in the work of artists as diverse as Maillol and Brancusi, Henry Moore and Antoine Pevsner. Giacometti pared the standing woman and the striding man to the bare essentials of existence. But only in the “Abakans,” the poignant headless figures by Magdalena Abakanowicz, and in De Staebler’s sculpted images does the fragmented figure assume a symbolic function of human incompleteness and yearning for wholeness. De Staebler’s large-scale legs signify this predicament for an artist who faces the human condition – both its vulnerability and its tenacity. His work recalls the ancient effigies of the Sumerians and the Egyptians. At the same time, it is painfully contemporary. While there is a timeless quality in De Staebler’s work, these severed limbs remind us of our recently awakened sense of vulnerability.”

My hope is that Earth Divers will contribute to the use of the female figure in sculpture as subject and not object. Subject means that women are history makers and not just objects of the male gaze or objects of exchange.

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4 Selz, Peter. “Stephen De Staebler’s Figure Columns”, in Sculpture, May 2002, Vol. 21 No. 4.
Emotional History

The extreme events that we experience left permanent marks. De Staebler said in an interview with Jessie Benton Evans,

“I see that what happens in a person’s life is a strange confluence of experiences…. artists can’t be made. If you don’t have the need, you can become a skilled designer or illustrator. But that’s a different function than the artist, if you accept the notion that an artist has feelings of ideas that are not external, that are present only in the inner world asking to be brought into some visible form.”

My first memory of having feelings about art was as a four year old, spending hours coloring with crayons in coloring books that my mother would buy me and my siblings Sam, Kim, Sheila, and Danny. Though Danny was fifteen he had the mental capacity of an eight year old, and he was always creative and happy. Danny built elaborate forts for us to play in out of plywood, cardboard, and old wool army blankets.

Around this time in my life I remember raking up dead grass in the winter from our back yard in Albuquerque, New Mexico with my brothers. We used the grass in a mud mix to make hundreds of small bricks, about two inches by one inch, and put these little bricks in the sun to dry. We then used the small adobe bricks and mud for mortar to build the walls of our houses and buildings. We also used sticks and mud to construct the roofs for the adobe structures in our miniature village. At about this time, due to an ear infection, I lost all hearing in my right ear. My hearing loss affected my speech and learning ability. My report cards had teacher comments like, “always day dreaming”, “does not pay attention”, and “slow learner”. My only success in school was art.

We moved to Houston, Texas where my father was a plant superintendent for Parker Brothers Block Company. The surroundings of heavy manufacturing became

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familiar at an early age because my mother would take us to the block plant to drop off my father’s black metal lunch box. At this time my father started experimenting with making bricks in our garage, which lead to the founding of his own brick company, Castone Brick.

My family felt like aliens in Texas schools and we were very sensitive to how the community viewed Mormons. Because being Mormon felt uncool in Baptist and Methodist country, art was the place to hide from my negative self image. To add to the confusion, there were many difficult days growing up as the eleventh of thirteen children in a conservative Mormon family. On my L.D.S. Mission in South Carolina, I decided that when my mission was over I would confront my negative self image by attending Brigham Young University. However, I first ended up at Ricks College in Rexburg, Idaho.

Experiencing the deaths of close family members has altered my life. My brother, Donald, was diagnosed with leukemia a few years ago at the age of forty-five and died nine months later. Donald was more like a father to me than a brother because he took care of me as a child. During the last few months of his life, I drove Donald to his doctor appointments at the Huntsman Cancer Center in Salt Lake City, Utah. His death was very traumatic to me because of our close relationship; working at Castone Brick, raising children who are the same age, and spending holidays and weekends together. When Donald knew he was going to die, we promised him that we would cremate his body. This went against our family traditions, which made the cremation process difficult for us. Three years later, Donald’s son, Troy, died unexpectedly. He was the same age as my son, Travis.
Process

Because physicality was the essence of *Earth Divers*, touching clay with my bare hands, physically lifting sculptures, and using my body to move the sculptures in and out of kilns was important to me. Satisfaction came from using the muscle memory developed by working at Castone Brick. My creative innovations came from learning how to make large clay sculptures by diving into the clay; much like a person learns to swim by diving into the water.

The plaster molds were made from the bodies of Wende Prince, my wife, and Tirzah Prince, my daughter. I decided to work with my wife and daughter because they represent women who are determined to make history in their own lives as well as in the lives of others. Wende works as a Neonatal Nurse Practitioner in the Newborn Intensive Care Unit at Utah Valley Regional Medical Center in Provo, Utah. She is also a wife and a mother of four children. Tirzah is a 4.0 senior at Timpview High School. She wants to become a physician and has received an appointment to the United States Air Force Academy. Tirzah has also expressed a desire to be a wife and a mother.

Wende and my sister, Frances, assisted me in the mold construction of Tirzah as she was lying on her stomach. We made one large mold of the back of her entire body. The mold was then cut into three parts. The molds of Wende were of the front of her legs down to the end of her toes and of her neck down past her hip bone, including her right arm. Hemp was used in some of the plaster molds and a synthetic mesh in others to add strength. Making plaster molds from life is therapeutic for me because when they are removed from the body they look so strange and empty. When I was a young child, my handicap brother, Danny, died. When I looked at his physical body in the casket, I wondered how our bodies can be alive one minute and then empty the next.
The organic and gothic architectural shapes took their inspiration from the plaster molds that the clay was built into. My architectural structures followed the organic forms that were responding to the negative void of the live persons that were cast in the plaster molds. In addition to the gothic architecture of Earth Divers, I added industrial nostalgia by modeling I-beams as part of the structure and design of the stacked sections and pressed nuts and bolts into the clay surface of the human form. The iconic I-beam is the common steel material used in buildings, equipment, and catwalks found in the manufacturing process.

The clay body used in Earth Divers I, IV, V, and VI was commercial, premixed sculpting clay. It included heavy grog content in the mix, a clay that has already been fired and pulverized and is commonly used to add strength and stability. Earth Divers I is Wende’s upside-down, fragmented, ¾-torso, including her right arm and hand. Earth Divers IV is the backside of Tirzah’s legs and feet, upside-down. Earth Divers V is the backside of Tirzah’s head, and arms and hands starting at the shoulder blades. Earth Divers VI is Wende’s upside-down, fragmented, ¾-torso, including her right arm and hand. This premixed clay body showed warping and cracking, which forced me to experiment with my own mix. My clay body recipe was used in Earth Divers II and III. Earth Divers II is Wende’s fragmented, upside-down legs, beginning at the pubic bone and ending at her toes. Earth Divers III is Tirzah’s fragmented, upside-down, figure starting at her shoulder blades and including the backside of her head and both arms. My own clay body contained large quantities of saw dust and red art. The quantity of red art in my custom clay body was inspired by Chuck Johnson’s, professor at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania, clay body recipe. My clay body also consisted of granular
rutile and large quantities of vermiculite. There was no cracking or warping with this custom mix. Mixing my own clay was physically difficult and time consuming because of the dead weight of clay. Mixing vermiculite in the clay made it lighter.

The process of physically building and then extracting the large block sections from the molds required strength, but was rewarding. The larger sculptures required two people to remove and stack the sections, and it was necessary to cut Earth Divers II in two during its construction. Vertically stacking clay in sections is the process that controls the logistics of building large scale structures. Forming a figurative and large architectural structure was my goal when building these structures horizontally inside the plaster figure molds. The construction of each section began by slicing through the fully hydrated clay with a wire and taking a one inch slab cut off the top of a twenty five pound block of clay. One inch thick slabs of clay were placed vertically inside the plaster mold, side by side and one on top of the other to form the walls of the block sections. The slabs were mended together by using a pinching, stitching, blending technique, and adding additional clay to the joints. When a block like section was nearly leather hard, it was removed and stacked upright. Once the next section was completed, it was removed and stacked vertically on top of the first section. Most of the Earth Divers are three or four sections stacked vertically.

Brian Christensen, BYU sculpture professor, gave me the idea of stacking the architectural sections while they were leather hard because of the warping. He also suggested that the clay sections be allowed to dry and be fired while stacked. I discussed the causes of cracking and the oxidation of the nuts and bolts with Bryon Draper, BYU sculpture professor. He suggested slowly increasing the temperature of the kiln to
achieve cone four over a period of three to four days. He also suggested that the clay be allowed to dry slowly and evenly over several weeks, until bone-dry, before placing the sculptures in the kiln. The *Earth Divers* with the least amount of cracking were the sculptures that were dried and fired the slowest.

My committee chair, Professor Von Allen spent a significant amount of time demonstrating and talking to me about various ways of creating a variety of textures and more interest in the surfaces of the clay, including adding nontraditional and alien objects. I walked around the B-66 ceramic studio looking for anything that would add meaning, and eventually ended up staring at a metal box full of assorted hardware, mainly nuts and bolts. It reminded me of sorting through buckets of nuts and bolts at Castone Brick.

Some of the surfaces that were used on my stoneware sculptures were influenced by Brian Jensen, former studio manager who is now a visual arts professor at Utah Valley University. The surfaces were treated in various ways to reference surfaces found in nature, earth, rusted steel, and manufacturing. The surfaces of the original clay structure have a variety of slips, glazes, terrasig, mason pigments, and veneered clay on them. Other than the use of nuts and bolts to form surfaces, the most unique surface was created using thick sediment of rust, formed in the bottom of a bucket of steel nails that had soaked in water for several years. Using the rust sediment as a slip created a surface that had the appearance of weathered steel.
Influences

The process of constructing Earth Divers reminded me of my manufacturing past as well as my more recent experiences in the environment of the ceramic and sculpture studios that are housed on the upper floor of the old prefabricated warehouse structure, B-66. The vertical ribbings of the prefabricated walls not only directly influenced my work, but remind me of my first exposure to sculpture as a young child. My father took us to a new mausoleum where he was responsible for casting and hanging massive cast stone reliefs that were constructed face down on the ground. This would have also been the case for the prefabricated forms of B-66. These massive prefabricated forms were lifted out of molds that lay horizontal on the ground and with a crane were stood up vertically. My work was constructed in a similar fashion building clay sections, collectively weighing hundreds of pounds, horizontally into a plaster mold. The clay sections that individually weigh between twenty-five and a hundred pounds were then removed and stacked vertically. The physical strength that it took to build these architectural sculptures was a major aspect of my Earth Divers.

My ability to work with such heavy objects comes from the physicality of my past. Playing football at Spring Oaks Junior High and Katy High School resulted in a lower back injury. The surgeon said that because of my age, rehabilitation through careful exercise was possible. The injury was severe enough that it took a full year to resume some of my normal activities. Full recovery occurred over time, and in some ways I became stronger than before my injury. Art classes were always included in my school schedule. Because my father no longer allowed me to play sports, my interest in art intensified. My art classes provided an escape into my own world and the dreams of my heart. My junior high art teacher, Mrs. Bailey, was the first adult who helped me
recognize my potential in visual arts. She had me work with many different materials, ranging from plaster to metals. She encouraged me to pursue visual arts by encouraging my eye hand coordination, talking to me about my future in the arts, and awarding me the art student award for our junior high graduating class.

My high school art teacher, Jean Schmaltz, took our art class on field trips, including to Mark Rothco’s Chapel on University of Houston’s campus. We were required to spend a significant amount of time in total silence in the Rothco Chapel. Rothco’s paintings are extremely large and covered all the walls in the chapel from top to bottom. The chapel space was a single large room with benches. The atmosphere was very calm and serene like being in a temple. I was aware of Rothco’s tragic suicide, which became an inseparable part of the experience. This idea that we are here one minute, moving and building lives, and gone the next is synonymous with *Earth Divers*. The experience of visiting the Rothco Chapel became increasingly profound as I returned four times throughout high school. The contrast between the dark paintings hanging on the walls and the lights that were focused on his paintings brought to my mind a primal emptiness that might have been the mind of the ancient peoples of Earth. Perhaps this was my conversion to the power of minimalism and more importantly my commitment to the monumental effect of art. *Earth Divers* reveals not only Mark Rothco’s color palate but also my perception of his commitment to the primal mind of humanity.

One day, Mr. Schmaltz invited me over to his studio. I was the only student that he had ever shown his work to. He said he was preparing for a show and that none of his work had ever been previously displayed. His paintings were a combination of exotic sands that he had collected from all over the world along with shapes and lines that
represented boundaries for his abstract sand paintings. These paintings were a strange composition referencing primitive people and abstract minimalism.

Franz Johansen, former BYU professor of sculpture and painting, invited me to work on his Green River Museum project that is now displayed as a cast stone relief in Green River, Utah. While accompanying him to private modeling sessions, he communicated to me his belief of the necessity and power of the human form when used in sculpture and art. His images deal with the death and resurrection of the body as well as the existence of the human spirit. Franz was heavily influenced by Egyptian mythology and its relationship to the human form. *Earth Divers* retains some of Franz Johansen’s influences in the disoriented fragmented use of the human figure by being displayed upside down. *Earth Divers* speak to some of the same fascinations that Franz had with mythology and the classical use of the figure.

Brent Gehring, former BYU sculpture professor, once referenced a discussion he had with Von Allen about how to find a direction in art. Brent asked the class if it was better to dig fifty holes that are one foot deep or one hole that is fifty feet deep. We could not answer his question. Then he asked which method would be more effective for finding water. This idea has contributed to my willingness to stick with a direction and exploit it indefinitely. During one of Brent’s classes, we critiqued the work of a young female student who had built a charred image, of perhaps a child, that was quite graphic. Brent asked if the image brought to mind the ugliness of life and the violence that can be perpetrated towards children or if it brought to mind the sanctity of life and the need for us to protect children from violence, including war. He suggested that when artists
portray extreme negative or positive images that the reverse image is brought to mind.

Hridaya Sutra said,

“Form is emptiness, emptiness indeed is Form. Emptiness is not different from form; form is not different from emptiness. What is form that is emptiness; what is emptiness that is form.”

Earth Divers, my figurative architectural sculptures, reflect this sentiment of Sutra. From one side of Earth Divers a person can view an organic form, and the average viewer cannot recognize the human figure. Perhaps the reason why the human form is not recognized is because the figure is fragmented and upside down, which makes reference to the form statement that Sutra is making. The reverse side of Earth Divers is constructed with the idea of empty spaces. Thus, the emptiness viewed from one side becomes the form on the reverse side.

Neil Hadlock, former BYU sculpture professor, influenced me mainly because I worked with him for more than ten years professionally in the construction of a large number of his most visible public sculptures. For example, I assisted with his three stainless steel sculptures, which are permanent installations outside the Energy Solutions Arena. They depict a poetic fragmented idea of the Roman coliseum. Neil was able to convey to me a work ethic that was based on the agility of production. Through example, he demonstrated that productivity is directly related to the availability of resources on all levels, not just materials but also the availability of personal history that is brought to the work. Neil was suspicious of ideas for art and materials when not having reasonable access. The ability to keep moving forward in creating art was more important and more honest to Neil than the use of clever ideas and materials. Earth Divers speaks to this

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6 Sutra, Hridaya. The Smaller Prajna – Paramita.
The concept of availability of ideas and materials as there was a conscious effort to produce work drawing from my own history and availability of resources. This was achieved by using my wife and daughter as models for making plaster casts and by using the availability of clay, glazes, slips, glass, hardware, and kilns that were readily available at the ceramic studio.

The female form was treated as subject in *Earth Divers*. This is similar to how Anne Wagner expressed Rodin’s use of the female figure as not being a shallow adventure into the objectification of females. Even if Rodin, in part, objectified females, he clearly moved well beyond that in his later work and explored the images of females as subjects and recognized the idea that females had been treated as objects historically.

*Earth Divers* deals specifically with the idea of women and the spaces they occupy. By defining these ideas, the female form is built as part of the structure that holds up these gothic architectural sculptures. Reference is also made to manufacturing by the use of I-beams and hardware in the surfaces of the female forms, which made the female form the subject suggesting that females affect change in history and society. *Earth Divers* not only speak to women who make history, but also to our complex journey in discovering that males and females are more similar than they are different.

Auguste Rodin is possibly the world’s foremost sculptor. When discussing Rodin’s art, Anne Wagner quotes Geffroy,

“… Rodin’s reinflection of the sexual language … the identity of male and female of *Iris* and *Balzac* the sculptor’s intentions are visible in his art.”

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The female figure is at the foundation of Rodin’s work. Geffroy suggests, based on sculptures of Eve that the masculine ideals of the day may very well be projected onto Rodin’s females as they are portrayed as proud, strong, muscular females full of sexuality. Wagner illustrates throughout her article that Rodin’s intentions went further than male sexuality. Rodin inspired many women to embrace themselves in a different light. He also inspired a well-known leader in the suffrage movement, Aurélie Mortier. She said this of Rodin,

“In front of Rodin woman dares to be free and to reject all pretense. She can stop playing at being man’s… plaything. She embraces her greatness and her autocracy. She can become an animal.”

Wagner continues to quote Mortier saying that Rodin allows women to possess their bodies and she, for one, is grateful.

Chris Dunker’s *Dismantling Geneva Steel* Exhibition, which was showed at Brigham Young University’s Museum of Art, touched a common cord with me having grown up in the heavy industrial environment of Castone. I too witnessed the dismantling of my father’s brick manufacturing plants and grieve at the loss of the ideals and way of life that came from manufacturing. The meaning that manufacturing holds for me and my family is best described by what Martin Heidegger said. He deals with these complex ideas of what it means to exist on Earth, or to dwell and to build.

“However hard and bitter, however hampering and threatening the lack of houses…. The proper plight of dwelling is indeed older than the world wars with their destruction, older also than the increase of the earth’s population and the condition of the industrial workers… Dwelling, however, is the basic character of Being, in keeping with which mortals exist.”

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Clearly the need to build depends upon the technology of building, and this will be affected continually as technology changes. My need to build large clay sculptures has also been dependent on my reality of what it means to dwell on Earth.
Conclusion

The industrial environment of manufacturing brick as well as the physical memory of stacking tons of brick by hand is absolutely recorded in my MFA final project, *Earth Divers*. The physical performance of building my large *Earth Diver’s* stoneware sculptures out of clay was as important to me as the finished work. The experiences in recent years of the deaths of close family members, including the ritual of their cremations, has altered my sense of self and can be found in my work, *Earth Divers*. Artists like Stephen De Staebler's symbolic use of clay referencing the earth and the human form is related to the meaning behind *Earth Divers*. However, my work has been influenced the most by professors who have worked with me at BYU.
Project Photos

Earth Divers I
19.5” x 15” x 36.5”
Earth Divers II
16.5” x 11” x 39.5”
Earth Divers III
29” x 20.5” x 22.5” (joined together)
Above: Greenware before firing Earth Divers IV
Earth Divers IV
18” x 13” x 41”
Earth Divers V
28” x 14.5” x 26”
Earth Divers VI
19” x 13” x 37.5”
Close ups of Earth Divers VI
Leland Prince working in clay up to his elbows in his B-66 studio space.

Prince Family

Left to Right, Back Row: Travis, Tirzah, Leland

Front Row: Grandma Ida Tolbert, Clara, Wende, and Rosie.