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What Crawls Beneath

Brent Gneiting

A thesis 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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ABSTRACT

What Crawls Beneath

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Nature is full of mysterious creatures which fascinate and spark imagination. In my final project, *What Crawls Beneath*, I take a closer look at what drives my interest in creatures that simultaneously attract and repel. Drawing on inspiration from parasites and dinosaurs, I was able to create a piece that represents the danger and beauty that nature so masterfully brings together. The importance of process is discussed as I consider the traditional methods of working with clay and how they affect the outcome of the artwork.

Keywords: nature, creatures, mysterious, attract, repel, parasite, dinosaur

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Inspiration

The discovery of strange creatures, whether deep in the ocean, on land, or under the skin has opened up so many opportunities for my artwork to expand. I am fascinated by creatures whose appearance simultaneously attract and repel. The strange beauty of an unknown animal draws me in, while the thought of sharing the same space with some of these creatures gives me goose-bumps. These creatures demand my attention and beg for a closer look, while my fears remind me to keep my distance. I intend for my work to appear dangerous and beautiful to help engage the viewer. I am always trying to find a balance between the two and enjoy seeing this balance in nature.

As a youth I found it difficult to be more expressive and imaginative with my artwork; although I was a quiet and reserved person to others, on the inside I felt ambitious and adventurous. My artwork soon became a means of expression. In my high school art classes, I would often draw cars because I loved cars, but I felt afraid to be more imaginative with my artwork. I felt comfortable drawing from pictures and images that people could relate to, I didn't have to explain myself. I had the talent to recreate an image, but I lacked the confidence to express my daring and adventurous side. As I became more confident in who I was and my abilities as an artist, I started to make work that became more revealing.

Form Follows Function

As an undergraduate student I started to question the idea of what pottery and clay work was supposed to look like. While working on my BFA, I realized that I was following a traditional approach to ceramics. I loved throwing on the wheel, and all my work was made there. I did very little to the clay after it left the wheel. I started noticing contemporary ceramics (in magazines, books, online, and on a trip to San Francisco.) Most of the work that drew me in was more sculptural than wheel thrown, and often a combination of the two. The sculptural pieces seemed to focus on a deeper idea or concept, rather than the methods used to make them. The processes were new to me, and I liked the work even more for that reason. It became clear to me that my work needed a change of process in order to produce the aesthetic I desired. At this time in my schooling I had very little experience sculpting with clay. I didn't want the process to be the focal point of the work. Instead I wanted to use process to draw attention to the form. I saw that most of what everyone was doing in the studio around me seemed predictable and safe or had already been done before. There were variations or combinations of things that made them different, but when I started to make work that made people ask questions, I knew that I was making the work I wanted to make.

I started to question the importance of the functionality of the teapot as it shifted from how it pours water to how the overall form and different elements fit together to create an interesting work of art. For hundreds of years ceramics has been based around function and how it is used. If I made a teapot, it must have a handle, spout, lid, and trimmed foot in order to function as a teapot. If the function of a teapot becomes a strictly visual experience; what changes would I make to the work? The work I was doing soon left the realm of the teapot and entered into the unknown. Spikes, claws, and similar elements started to replace the handles,

spouts, and lids with the function and purpose changing along the way. The work was no longer ruled by utility. There was a definite continuity throughout all my work although I never felt driven by any single concept.

Attraction Repulsion

It is often the case that something can have two opposing qualities at the same time. I enjoy riding my motorcycle despite the warnings of friends and family about how dangerous it can be. Through my love of motorcycles I recently became aware of an interesting race. Once a year, on the Isle of Man, there is a motorcycle race called the Tourist Trophy, or TT. The oldest motorcycle race in existence, it has been going on now for over 100 years. Hundreds of people race and many die each year during the two-week period that the race is taking place. What makes this race so unique and dangerous is that the course was not designed for racing motorcycles. The roads being raced on are normally used for every-day traffic, and stone walls, fences, and houses line the streets at many points throughout the course. At several places along the course, spectators are allowed to step up to the edge of the road and watch as the riders pass by at speeds up to 200 mph. One wrong move and either driver or spectator, or both, could be killed, yet the race continues to be held. The sobering reality of being killed in the race is always there, yet people are drawn to it and continue to take part in it.

Another type of attraction and repulsion comes from the ceramic work of Jason Briggs. I was able to view his work during a trip to Seattle for an NCECA conference (National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts). Briggs is influenced by the surface and texture of objects like couches, shoes, flowers, and the folds in human skin that provoke the desire to touch. His

work resembles an unknown organic mass of texture mingled with human body parts. Briggs wrote in his artist statement:

...I strive to create an object I've never quite seen before - one whose inherent mystery and intrigue quietly insists upon viewer interaction. An object begging to be explored and examined in much the same way a child investigates the world: with wonder, curiosity, and also trepidation. It's very important that the work be challenging. A sense of unease is critical because it encourages the viewer to consider carefully what they are seeing – at what is compelling them.

The unknown and uneasy attributes of his work are the things that I find most interesting. In my own work, I am often trying to replicate the same feeling of unease towards something unknown. I like the sense of excitement and wonder I experience when I see something strange and new for the first time.

Friend or Foe

As my work progressed, I thought about the things that triggered my feelings of fear. I wanted my work to be carefully examined and not passed by. An unknown object that is possibly dangerous demands my attention more than something that I am familiar with and consider non-threatening. The reaction some may have to an insect or creature with spikes all over it may differ from a reaction to something seemingly more benign. The fear of something that appears dangerous can be powerful, but I think an even greater fear is that of the unknown. When I encounter something that I don't recognize, which looks dangerous, I may experience a greater amount of fear and wonder. I try to create forms that aren't directly recognizable or that appear unknown which open up the opportunity for imagination, exploration, and fear.

Macro photography began to inspire me as I searched for imagery that would give me new material to work with. The images gave me a new perspective of the microscopic world

which would otherwise be impossible to see, one that emphasizes the beauty and horror that many organisms possess. I could now focus on individual parts of strange looking organisms and break them down to better understand them. I began to see how different things affected the work, how spikes and claws made people a little more defensive. Tubes and segments create similar feelings, and they all fit together in creating a feeling of caution or defense. I often wondered what all these dangerous and beautiful creatures would look like if they were scaled up to life size or even larger. How would size affect the danger and beauty of the work?

Control and Liberation

My desire to explore the boundaries of form and surface continued in my graduate work. My explorations were guided by principles of design and the processes used to create the work. There was a bit of give and take when deciding how the design and process would influence the work. I would sometimes give up the randomly placed spikes for ones that were carefully placed. Repetition and variation helped give the organic shapes more flow and elegance. Sometimes the work seemed overly designed and I tried to allow room for more natural tendencies. I wanted to have complete control over every aspect of creating the artwork. The arbitrary placement of elements made it interesting and engaging. The most exciting part for me was watching a piece take shape and allowing it to change. These constant changes gave me opportunities to improvise and see things I never saw before. When a better idea came to mind, I followed the new plan and continued until a new decision or challenge arose.

Often the nature of clay and ceramics in general is unpredictable, and there are many things that I had to be aware of. Clay shrinks as it dries and in doing so it can crack. The firing process can often warp the work if it gets too hot or if the heat is uneven. Glazes can change

depending on how thick they are applied and if they are fired in an electric kiln or a gas kiln. Ceramic work can be very fragile and breaks much more easily than other materials, like metal. I was aware of all the things that could happen, and I was willing to accept the fact that the complexity and weight of the segments was going to cause cracks in the firing. As my work became more sculptural the imperfections of the clay became less of a worry to me. I was no longer devastated if a piece cracked in the firing because I had decided to fill in the cracks and paint over them. I saw the cracks as an opportunity for inspiration to influence the work.

Process plays a large role in influencing the shape and form of my work, from throwing cylinders and altering them to hand-building and finishing the piece. The organic and sometimes unfamiliar nature of my work gives me the freedom to make it however I please. It is exhilarating for me to create work without a specific plan for what it needs to look like. Not knowing exactly how my final project was going to look in the end kept me going and gave me the energy to finish the repetitive process of making 20 similar segments.

I coated the whole piece in multiple layers of wax to give the surface a translucent appearance, which helped it resemble the skin of a parasite. As I applied wax to my segments, it became clear to me that I was not going to get an even and consistent coat on all of them. This battle between control and liberation went on in my mind; I eventually gave in and allowed the texture of the wax to build and leave its unique mark on the surface. It was important for me to know the attributes of the materials I was using and to allow their natural qualities to affect the work. It almost seems that the work developed a personality as I allowed it to move and inspire me in decisions of form, shape, and design. The object remained in balance and motion until it was completed. The organic forms I create are an embrace of movement and freedom of form. I

was not trying to represent and copy exactly what I saw; instead I felt I was re-arranging elements to create something new as a way to break down my fears to better understand them.

Creating the Worm

This project differs from my other work in the way that I envisioned it right from the beginning. Typically I allowed my work to change as it developed and the outcome often differed from my original thought. The vision was important because I made this piece on a large scale for a specific place. I planned on filling the gallery 303 foyer with one sculpture rather than using multiple pedestals for individual works. By filling the gallery, I encouraged the viewer to share the space with the work. The placement directly in the middle of the floor allowed it to be seen from all angles. This project brought together two ideas: parasites and the methods used in displaying dinosaurs.

I became interested in parasites in my search for something that possessed an ability to be absolutely repulsive and misunderstood. My natural disgust of parasites led me on a path to learn more about the things that live inside and feed off of other organisms. Parasites have long been seen as disgusting and often misunderstood. In the book *Parasite Rex*, Carl Zimmer quotes the writer Henry Drummond, who wrote the following about parasitism:

...one of the gravest crimes in nature. It is a breach of the law of Evolution. Thou shalt evolve, thou shalt develop all thy faculties to the full, thou shalt attain to the highest conceivable perfection of thy race- and so perfect thy race- this is the first and greatest commandment of Nature. But the parasite has no thought of its race, or for its perfection in any shape or form. It wants two things- food and shelter. How it gets them is of no moment. Each member lives exclusively on its own account, an isolated, indolent, selfish, and backsliding life.

He is referring to parasites that degenerate in order to survive. The beauty of parasites being able to adapt and evolve at all costs from one host to the next is quite impressive. Another long debated question of whether or not parasites were created before man or with man is discussed in Zimmer's book. Parasites were never seen entering the body, but could often be seen exiting the body, thus strengthening the argument that they were created inside man. Until more recently, such things were mysterious and mistaken. I wonder if these mysteries and lack of knowledge added to the hate of parasites. Later studies would prove that they have complex life cycles and often take on multiple forms moving from one host to another.

The way I chose to display my piece was inspired by the dinosaurs I worked on at Fossilogic in the summer of 2012. Fossilogic is a paleontology laboratory where fossil preparation is performed from the beginning stages of scribing the bone out of the rock to mounting the bones in position to display the animal. The large size and scale of many dinosaurs is truly inspirational. I decided to create something on a larger scale and also mount it in a similar way. I saw how size had an effect on how I compared myself to a dinosaur that was considerably larger than me. I was no longer the one in charge. Standing next to an 80 foot dinosaur made me feel vulnerable and completely aware of how dangerous it could be if it were alive. The size seemed to increase the fear and allure of the dinosaur. The idea was to display the parasite like a dinosaur.

This was my first time building anything of this size; in addition, I was trying a new method to mount and display the work. I had a lot of decisions to make on this project that I had never been faced with in the work I normally do. My normal work is much smaller, and typically each object functions as an individual piece. In order to create something of this size, I would either have to fire it in a large kiln or create several segments that would later be placed

together. This piece was created using 20 similar segments that all fit together to create one large piece. I quickly came to the conclusion that in order to complete this project I would have to start with drawings to help envision the finished piece and then think my way backwards through the whole process to know exactly how to make the pieces and ensure that I wasn't wasting time, money, and resources. Building each segment without an opening in the center would force me to mount the work on top or beneath a steel support, and consequently expose the steel. I didn't want the process to become a distraction. My experience at Fossillogic had shown me that an early decision on how to mount the work would help me in designing the segments. Mounting them through the center allowed the main focus to rest on the parasitic-like form and not the steel structure.

Each segment was created using two wheel thrown cylinders, one inside the other. I altered the cylinders and hand-built the rest. In order to finish the work in one semester I started to keep track of how long each step of the process took. This usually meant that I had to spend more time in the studio to stay on track and finish on time. I chose to use paint and encaustic to finish the work for a couple different reasons. As I mentioned before, the glazes can be difficult to predict, and the glazes I like to use change color and texture depending on how thick or thin they are sprayed on. It can become problematic to get an even coat of glaze on all 20 pieces. There was also a greater chance that a glaze would have left the cracks exposed. Sometimes the glaze, during the firing, will pull away from the sharp edges of the cracks instead of coating over the top of them. Painting them all white ensured that I would have a consistent base and allowed me to fill in the cracks with automotive body filler. By painting and using wax I was able to create a skin-like surface. I wanted the piece to be white and to resemble something that has never been exposed to sunlight.

I decided to make a shape that would interlock together much like vertebrae fit together. The steel pipe which holds the pieces in place was bent to give the work movement and add stability. If it were in a straight line there would be greater chance of it tipping over. It was important for me to create the feeling that this thing is still alive, as if it were frozen in time. This hints back to how dinosaurs are sometimes displayed, in an action pose that shows off their movement rather than standing still. I wanted the side-to-side and up-and-down movement to add to the organic qualities of the work.

Continually Expanding

This project has given me new ideas and inspiration for future work and expanding content. I am beginning research into the possible links between early dinosaur findings and their influences in Greek Mythology. What does it take to create a myth? I believe there may be many things that connect my current work with Mythology. There is still much for me to learn about the influences that dinosaurs have had on past and current cultures. The ocean floor surely has mysteries yet to be discovered. I can never know exactly where my interests will take me. At the beginning of my experience as a graduate student I would have never guessed that I would find inspiration from dinosaurs and parasites. I want to know more about all the things life has to offer and not shut out the frightening parts. The bad reputation of parasites has proven to me that it is necessary to explore even the undesirable aspects about life in order to appreciate their value and hidden beauty.



Image 1: Parasite Rex, 25'x4'x4', Ceramic, enamel, encaustic wax, steel.



Image 2: Parasite Rex, 25'x4'x4', Ceramic, enamel, encaustic wax, steel.

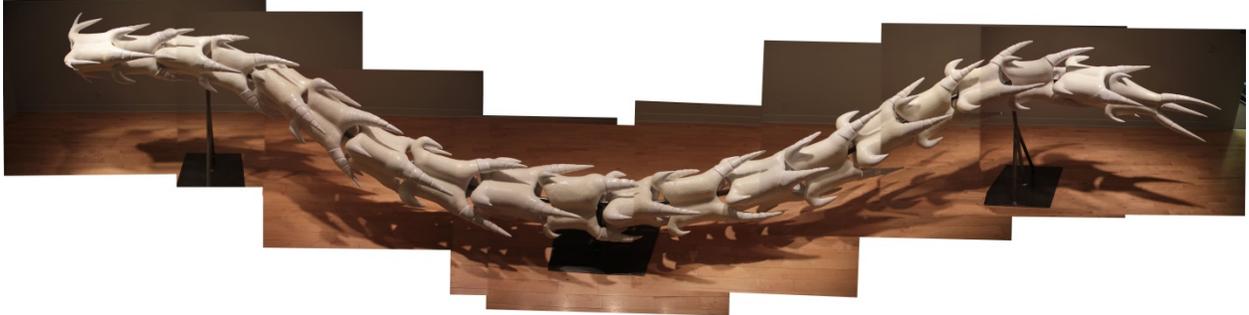


Image 3: Parasite Rex, 25'x4'x4', Ceramic, enamel, encaustic wax, steel.

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