Evolving Collections

Nathan Thomas Williams
*Brigham Young University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd)

Part of the Fine Arts Commons

**BYU ScholarsArchive Citation**
[https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/8799](https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/etd/8799)

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.
ABSTRACT

Evolving Collections

Nathan Thomas Williams
Department of Art, BYU
Master of Fine Arts

My art practice begins with the collecting, processing, and organizing of materials. Through experimentation, I have developed processes centered around a commitment of time and devotion to the plainest beauty of these found materials, their inherent properties, and related systems, making the resulting objects of order possible. Through my application of these personal ordering systems, I strive to bring intrigue and focus to the common and discarded.

The process of finding and organizing common surplus materials has given me an understanding of myself, seeing things that may never have occurred were it not for these experiences. This practice has taken what might have been an unhealthy obsession and converted this energy into what I consider a positive outcome and an avenue to living a good productive life.

Keywords: hoarder, order, process, minimalism, glass, clay, understanding, encumbrance, perfectionism, indecision, avoidance, collection, recycling
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my committee for their suggestions, advice, and their example, which has given my work context and voice. I thank and express gratitude for my friends and associates that have aided and supported me throughout this experience. I would like to thank my family for their service and sacrifice for my benefit, especially my mother and father. Most importantly, I would like to thank my wife who deserves this degree as much as I do and has believed in me through everything.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TITLE PAGE</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGMENTS</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hoarding</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins of Clay</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Origins of Glass</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deconstructing</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizing My Work</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description of Installation</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix of Figures</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF FIGURES

Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass on Wall................................................................. 13
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass on Wall................................................................. 13
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass grid.................................................................... 14
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass grid.................................................................... 14
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass discs .................................................................. 15
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass discs .................................................................. 15
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass discs .................................................................. 16
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass Vessel................................................................. 17
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass Vessel................................................................. 17
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass Vessel................................................................. 18
Nathan Williams, Untitled Clay stacking .............................................................. 19
Nathan Williams, Untitled Clay stacking .............................................................. 20
Nathan Williams, Untitled Clay stacking .............................................................. 20
Nathan Williams, Evolving Collections Show Documentation 1......................... 21
Nathan Williams, Evolving Collections Show Documentation 2......................... 21
Nathan Williams, Evolving Collections Show Documentation 3......................... 22
Nathan Williams, Evolving Collections Show Documentation 4......................... 22
Nathan Williams, Evolving Collections Show Documentation 5......................... 23
Nathan Williams, Evolving Collections Show Documentation 6......................... 23
Nathan Williams, Evolving Collections Show Documentation 7......................... 24
Nathan Williams, Evolving Collections Show Documentation 8......................... 24
Nathan Williams, Evolving Collections Gallery Map............................................. 25
Understanding

Growing up, I spent a lot of time working with my father and his landscape business. I always enjoyed watching as he fixed things and tried to understand why he did what he did. I remember many experiences fixing sprinkler problems. It might have been a different place and set of circumstances but each time, the process worked out along pretty much the same script. Opening a valve box full of flooded spider webs and a tangled discord of sprinkler pipe, we then seemingly spent as much time trying to understand the sense behind what was in the valve box as we did to correct the problem. Looking back on those and other similar experiences that all centered on understanding, I think of a quote I like from a motivational speaker, “Purpose is understanding why you do what you do”.

Understanding is the purpose behind my artwork. It often starts out with me trying to understand other people, events, and surroundings, but in the end it gives me a greater understanding of myself. Everything I make starts out with a question or a desire to understand something; I am and have always been very curious that way. Being driven by curiosity and intrigue, my questions often do not necessarily form around a direct or specific problem, but simple fascination—like a cat discovering something new. The quest to learn and understand is important to me.

As I have been producing my current body of work, I have struggled internally with how to articulate what my work is about because I have not always understood it myself. For some time, I thought my work was about reclaiming, redeeming, and revaluing materials because of the ideology that recycling provided as a vernacular and context to explain my work. But this philosophy felt like an older siblings’ hand-me-down clothes—they fit, but they were not my

---

own. However, even with this uncertainty about my work, I have always had strong compulsions to collect materials for my artwork. I consciously knew it was not just about recycling for me. As I have looked at recycled or reclaimed art, although I have understood what I have seen, I have never really connected with it.

Many artists when they are working in their studio space have personal private rituals, routines, and procedures they go through while they are working. I am no different. As I work with my chosen materials, I fall into a methodical process and a systematic way of working. I have come to see time as a tool and resource, and I go through a lot of it. I find a lot of my process to be a therapeutic and personal escape. I find that I prefer solitude while I work and isolate myself from distraction and interaction. In my isolation, I often play in the background music, books on tape, television shows, or movies to fill the silence and create a sense of separation. My twin brother recommended I watch a TV series about hoarders. At first, I found it fascinating and very entertaining. However, the entertainment factor wore off when I looked around my art studio and started making comparisons between the environments these people had created around themselves and what I had done myself. I only made it half-way through the third episode of the first season before I had to stop. As I watched, I identified with those hoarders more than I felt comfortable with, and it scared me. It shocked me to see what hoarding could become. I stopped everything I was working on and I spoke aloud to myself, “I am hoarding, I am a hoarder!” I repeated this to myself several times. With each chorus, I more firmly accepted this new reality. I am a hoarder! I remember this not as a moment of clarity, like a light switch flipping on to supply illumination, but as a wave of understanding like finding the cipher for a code. With each new bit of information decoded, everything begins making more
logical sense. I looked around my creative space and I recognized my collections for what they were—hoards.

Hoarding

Once I realized I was a hoarder, it became clear that I was using recycling as a vehicle of description for my work as a front for hoarding to hide behind. The recycling ideas were driven by my hoarding and the need to collect and prevent materials from being wasted.

But what is hoarding? While I can relate to the people in that hoarding TV program, my hoarding does not look like theirs. The Mayo clinic gives a description of hoarding disorder that summarizes what I picture as hoarding. “Hoarding disorder is a persistent difficulty discarding or parting with possessions because of a perceived need to save them” (Mayo Clinic Staff 2019). I think I had a challenging time seeing and accepting this about myself because, up until recently, I did not realize what I was struggling with. I think it must be said that while many artists collect a great deal of materials to work with, I do not think every artist is a hoarder. While I do hoard materials to work with, art has given me a constructive outlet for this behavior. I can justify my hoarding tendencies through the positive way art provides an outlet for self-management and regulates the potentially negative impacts of hoarding in my life. I have noticed an interesting trend with myself and my work. When I am collecting materials I want to save, I have a tough time letting go of them until I have organized them in such a way that people will appreciate and value them once more. Simultaneously, once I have organized my collections, I do not have any issue letting go, and I enjoy sharing my work.

My process is quite simple. I start out by collecting materials, and I briefly organize them, then I stop and sit with them for a while. By letting time pass, and having all this material around me, ideas start developing, and I have a chance to create and explore while
experimenting. My hoarded collections go through various stages of deconstruction, processing, and rearranging until I have organized them to a point of resolution. Once my work reaches that point of organization, my compulsion is satisfied, I am finished, and I can let go. I believe my selectiveness in hoarding results from what I have learned as an artist and the skills I have gained through my experiences. Because of this, I consider myself a high-functioning hoarder. Through my process of collecting, deconstructing, and organizing, my art work helps me manage the encumbrance of excessive collecting and accumulation.

As I reflect on and accept my hoarding tendencies, I have a new understanding about myself, and I have recognized some interesting connections. Now, when I look at my work, it makes sense in ways I struggled to understand before. The idea of recycling that I thought was the focus of my work was in fact me dealing with my hoarding tendencies I had not recognized. As I have studied more about hoarding, I have learned that many of the things I struggle with are classic symptoms of hoarding disorder. I was able to find the following list of signs and symptoms for hoarding from the Mayo Clinic. Signs and symptoms may include the following:

- Excessively acquiring items that are not needed or for which there is no space
- Persistent difficulty throwing out or parting with your things, regardless of actual value
- Feeling a need to save these items, and being upset by the thought of discarding them
- Building up of clutter to the point where rooms become unusable
- Having a tendency toward indecisiveness, perfectionism, avoidance, procrastination, and problems with planning and organizing.

Excessive acquiring and refusing to discard items can result in:

- Disorganized piles or stacks of items, such as newspapers, clothes, paperwork, books, or sentimental items
• Possessions that crowd and clutter your walking spaces and living areas and make the space unusable for the intended purpose, such as not being able to cook in the kitchen or use the bathroom to bathe
• Buildup of food or trash to unusually excessive, unsanitary levels
• Significant distress or problems functioning or keeping yourself and others safe in your home
• Conflict with others who try to reduce or remove clutter from your home
• Difficulty organizing items, sometimes losing important items in the clutter

(Mayo Clinic Staff 2019). As I go over this list, I can mentally check off most of these symptoms for myself to some degree and see the influence of many of these results in my life. It is not known what exactly causes hoarding disorder. Some possibilities being studied include genetics, brain function, and stressful life events such as the death of a loved one, divorce, eviction or losing possessions in a fire. While life is not easy for anyone, there are things that put people at a higher risk for hoarding, and I have dealt with most of them. Growing up, I do not know if I could pinpoint a time, place, or event that served as “the fork in the road” leading to my hoarding. I have been collecting things for a long time. While I struggle with most of the aspects of hoarding—to the point that I feel like I am a textbook case—there are three things I recognize as my greatest personal struggles. These are perfectionism, indecision, and avoidance. When I look at my work with this new understanding about myself, I can see how my work reflects these struggles.

Origins of Clay

I first experienced ceramics in high school. While I enjoyed that experience, I did not think I would pursue it like I have. It was not until years later, while pursuing an undergraduate degree
at BYU-Idaho, that I had the opportunity to again work with clay. At that time, it just clicked for me. I am a tactile learner, and that has led me to develop as a maker and a creator. While I enjoyed the process of taking raw clay and turning it into something of significance, I also enjoyed learning about the process. While at BYU-Idaho, I had the opportunity to work for the ceramic studio as a lab tech. This provided me opportunities to experiment with the materials and processes while working in and helping run the studio. One of my biggest responsibilities working in the studio was to collect all the scrap clay and recycle it back into a usable clay body for students to use again. It took a lot of energy to do this. I was a poor college kid that embodied the cliché “starving artist”, and so I kept all the free materials I could get my hands on and reclaimed them for myself. When I started producing work on a large scale, I kept a substantial portion of what I made. However, as a student, I did not have space to keep that up for long and I think I subconsciously shifted from hoarding my work to hoarding materials to work with. I think this was when my hoarding as an artist first took on a physical manifestation. When I left BYU-Idaho, I took my hoarded clay with me to Texas and then on to BYU-Provo. The cost of transporting and storing the clay exceeded any physical value it might have had, but that did not matter. I had worked hard to get it and I was not ready to let it go. To me, that clay hoard felt unresolved. There are remnants of that clay in my master’s thesis show a decade later.

After receiving my Bachelor of Fine Arts degree, I moved to Dallas, Texas with my wife to be near her family. While there, I had the opportunity to work for Eastfield Community College as an instructional support associate in their art department. I ran the art studio, fixed equipment, purchased materials, and helped faculty and students as needed. While working there, I became immensely frustrated with the amount of waste students created in their studio practice and their overall disregard for materials. I began thinking of what I was doing in my art practice
as recycling, and my focus as an artist shifted in response to the waste of materials I witnessed, while working at Eastfield College.

Origins of Glass

Growing up, I remember going to the mall as a kid. For me, the highlight was seeing a kiosk that specialized in and sold handmade glass trinkets and figurines. I was mesmerized by the clarity, color, and fluidity of the glass. That glass was more fascinating than anything else in the mall. I remember every time I walked past that glass shop, thinking about how much I wanted to work with glass. However, it was not something I thought I would ever get a chance to do, and for the longest time, I believed I never would. That changed during my first summer at BYU-Provo as a graduate student when I had the opportunity to learn about and experiment with blowing and kiln formed glass. Around the same time, I found a source for scrap glass that allowed me to work as much as I wanted by reutilizing glass that was going to waste. As a result, glass has become a significant medium in my hoarding and artwork.

Deconstructing

In my work, I prefer a more minimalistic philosophy in what I do. I identify with a minimalist artist, Carl Andre, who said about one piece of his work, “There are no ideas under those metal plates, those are just metal plates. They’re sitting there on the floor minding their own business, they’re not thinking, they’re free of ideas and it’s just an experience” (Andre 2014). For myself, what I make is very crystalline and minimal in its formalism. Only after I finish making the physical work do I really start to see meaning for myself. My work for me is about the experience that led to my results. When I collect, I look for objects and materials of potential and familiarity. My current methodology developed around simple materials and resources, like clay and glass, which I have found readily available, in excess, and generally free.
Like the British land artist, Andy Goldsworthy, when I start out, I do not often know what I am going to be doing. My process starts with a fair amount of reflection and a response to the day at hand, how the materials feel to me, and a lot of time spent seeing and learning while I wait for a spark of connection to occur (Goldsworthy 2007). I see a lot of similarities between myself and Goldsworthy in our process and appreciation for materials. Andy Goldsworthy said, “The energy and space around a material are as important as the energy and space within” (Suzanne Jacquot n.d.). We both collect materials existing in a passive state. Then, by acting upon and organizing them, we give them new meaning and significance. In doing so, I find purpose and joy for myself. Just as Goldsworthy does with his work, I am always pushing things to the brink of collapse to see how far I can push my work (Riedelsheimer 2001). In my work, not everything goes according to plan, and often my failures lead to success.

Many times, I have fallen into the trap of avoidance by waiting for inspiration to strike. I believe it does happen, but like the sculptor Tara Donavan, I believe real artists—or at least good artists—just “sit down and get to work” (Donovan 2015). Once I start working, I react to what is happening in front of me, and the work begins to inform and guide itself. When you look at my work or the work of artists like Goldsworthy, Donovan, and Andre, you do not see collections of hoarded things. You see refined objects that result from our learning through trial and error. In our processes, Tara Donovan, and I both take our selected materials and work them over, break them down, and isolate what we want to focus on as we organize them. Through this, our work starts to transcend itself and shows the potential for complex beauty hidden within common simplicity. In my own work, as I organize and compose the components I work with, I find that the simpler I can make things, the more significant they become. Our work is also alike in that it can be flexible and adaptable for almost any space.
Within my work there is embedded a certain archaeology about myself. Like ancient rock art or graffiti, it acts as a marker saying, “I was here.” When I chose these materials to work with, recycling served as an enabler for my hoarding. In retrospect, I could have written for a grant and purchased new materials to create my work, but it would then be sterile and void of significance to me. I believe there is a psychological connection to my hoarded objects that is a result from my personal investment in them. I call them mine because I had to work for them. I would not have that same feeling of ownership if I had used new purchased materials. As the painter Mark Bradford said, “It’s ok if your materials come from the street, they have potential too. I’m not interested in where something comes from, but where it’s going. We shouldn’t take away something’s meaning just because we don’t understand it or its background” (Davis 2017). Like Bradford, as I’m collecting, experimenting, and organizing, I put my work into a repeat and hold pattern. I may play with an idea exploring different renditions and variations of form, then if they do not seem to be developing, I leave those objects and ideas on the shelf for a while so that later, I will have material to pillage from as needed. I can go through some resources more rapidly while other materials I will hold onto and live with until I figure out what I want them to become.

Organizing My Work

As I collect and wrestle with my tendency to hoard, the slow tediousness of my process helps me curtail and control what I collect while supplying a customized personal therapeutic escape. I do not mean to imply that this functions as a prescribed form of art therapy. This has all been self-centered and internally driven, like an automatic response of an injury that begins healing by itself. For me, the making of art from my hoarding has been a natural automatic response to the problem. My work was made for viewship, and my level of organization invites
rational observation while making connections to minimalism. I have made some interesting observations along the way as well. The processes behind these mediums seem to be pushed forward by a craft-driven mindset in which everything is assigned a value by the virtues of skill, tradition, and utilitarian value rather than conceptual innovation. This maker-driven mindset is beautiful. I strive to bring intrigue and awareness to the order, processes, and systems of these mediums and show how material and form can evolve beyond inherited traditions of craft and obvious function. My work, once finished, is highly edited and does not evoke hoarding at all. Rather, my work shows a fascinating transformation from chaos to order, not unlike much of art or even recycling. It is set apart by the way I collect and live with my hoarded materials until I bring them to order and then given back to the viewer.

My work finds expression through my experiences of gathering, preparing, and organizing what I see as “unassigned potential,” hidden within obscurity and lack of obvious purpose or value. Once I have rendered materials into basic units, I then systematically reassemble the materials into simple minimal forms that highlight the enticing characteristics of the materials themselves and the beauty of their new organization. Sometimes the simplest things, when put together, have beauty within their order. The forms and patterns I mirror come from my observations of systems and order found in nature and daily urban life.

When the viewers look at this work, I want them to see the different layers of systems and order within the work. Order has always been important to me, whether I am stacking units of clay and glass or ordering and cataloging my hoards for storage. It might be a result of a subconscious obsessive-compulsive disorder, but I prefer to think it’s a result of my mother and her influence to keep things clean and tidy because, as she would say, “Cleanliness welcomes a spirit of peace and happiness” (Williams 2018).
Description of Installation

As you enter the gallery, on the wall of the exhibition space is a piece comprised of individual units that were assembled to create whimsical forms. This work is hung on the wall, giving the viewer a perspective like what a bird might observe in nature. It is my intention that this piece be viewed from multiple standpoints. From up close, the viewer will see the system within each individual piece and from a distance, their outcome.

Near the center of the gallery is a grouping of grid forms arranged in a self-reflecting network. Each piece consists of forty-eight strips of glass arranged to make a woven pattern. When viewed from a varying distances and angles, the network and curves are intended to be visually dynamic.

On the east floor of the gallery, there are multiple discs made of steel rings packed tightly with glass strips, creating a wood-like end-grain appearance that changes depending on the perspective of the viewer. As I assembled the glass within these steel rings, I let chance control the resulting image.

On the north end of the gallery is a collection of ship-like forms. As is with all this work, these have a strong visual record of their construction process. These begin by assembling glass strips into a mold and fusing them together. The glass leaves the mold looking like an arrangement of mismatched puzzle pieces and forms elegant ships, not unlike wooden boats of old.

On the west wall of the gallery is a stacking of unfired reclaimed clay. The clay in this piece was collected from scraps that were considered by the studios I have worked in to be unsuitable for reclamation. This clay was collected in studios located in Idaho, Texas, and Utah.
Conclusion

This body of work was driven by a need to find self-understanding and value hidden within obscurity. This need is revealed by my tendency towards hoarding and resolved through reflection on systems of order and experiential investment. This work in its state of simplistic minimalism has offered clarity, honesty, and opportunity for contextual adaptation. For me, the beauty and value of the finished work lies within the experience and process of refining and organizing my obsessive collections into a cohesive whole. When the artwork feels complete, it is resolved, and I can let go and move on. What I have learned from my artwork has supplied illumination and insight giving me a better understanding of my identity, who I am, and why I do what I do. My artwork also serves as an archaeologic record that I made something positive come out of my hoarding, and hoarding does not have to prevent me from having a good life. With what I now know, I am ready to move onto the next “sprinkler valve box” art project. We all have something like hoarding we carry with us. When we look within, we can learn about ourselves from these things and better find and value why we are who we are.
Appendix of Figures

NATHAN WILLIAMS, UNTITLED GLASS ON WALL

NATHAN WILLIAMS, UNTITLED GLASS ON WALL

NATHAN WILLIAMS, UNTITLED GLASS ON WALL
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass Grid

Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass Grid
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass Discs

Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass Discs
NATHAN WILLIAMS, UNTITLED GLASS DISCS
Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass Vessel

Nathan Williams, Untitled Glass Vessel
NATHAN WILLIAMS, UNTITLED GLASS VESSEL
Nathan Williams, Untitled Clay Stacking
Nathan Williams, Evolving Collections Gallery Map
Bibliography


Williams, Clarinne, interview by Nathan Williams. 2018. *personal correspondence*