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4-2014

## Carrying Water: A M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition by Aaron Sober

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Sober, Aaron M., "Carrying Water: A M.F.A. Thesis Exhibition by Aaron Sober" (2014). *Theses, Dissertations, and Student Creative Activity, School of Art, Art History and Design*. 44.

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CARRYING WATER

by

Aaron Sober

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of  
The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska  
In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Peter Pinnell

Lincoln, Nebraska

April, 2014

# CARRYING WATER

Aaron Sober, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2014

Advisor: Peter Pinnell

For all of us, everyday life is punctuated by moments of victory, defeat, pride, and vulnerability. The process of welcoming gain and tolerating loss is a basic lesson in proportionality. My work is a personal reckoning with the contradictions that define this very human experience. Through animal imagery, symbol, and metaphor I explore the unpredictable circumstances that form a life lived.

We engage with, and understand our own place in the world through stories. By doing so, the avatars we create reflect the scope of our experiences, both sublime and damaged. The animal protagonists who inhabit my work are placeholders in my own personal narrative. They act as I do: sometimes facing challenges with resolve, at other times disarmed by circumstance.

In life, misfortune can strike with apparent randomness. Our strength is tested by loss, the failings of our own physical bodies, and the other countless demands of the day to day. Although the chains which bind us to the human condition are far different than the bridling of a mule, the will to shake free of the harness, either actual or metaphorical, is basic. Animals are used in my work to describe a human corollary and provoke feelings of vulnerability, powerlessness, and calamity. By placing them in impossible and dangerous situations, I avoid the trappings of sentimentality. My work describes an imperfect world. However, I allude to the hopeful: Flags and banners symbolize a pride and self-identification amidst the wreckage. There remains an admirable grace in tools that are broken, patched, and put to rest after their labor is complete. The contradictions found in both nature and the human experience guides my work.

The symbols and images I select are meant to create a language that expresses a *Rural Noir*. An established genre in literature, *Rural Noir* describes the hardscrabble, gothic, and punishing environment that can occur far from the last stoplight or gas station. This place, of promises broken and the threat of violence, locates my work

psychologically. Symbols such as the mule, axe, and tree stump describe a feral and basic existence: Hand tools are both implements of violence and also essential to constructing home and hearth. They symbolize both the urge to violently tear down obstacles and a willingness to build upon a foundation of strength.

The imagery in my work is a personal vocabulary about the experience of surviving misfortune and finding grace within adversity. Related in tone, these images are abstracted, dark, and sometimes uncomfortable. As symbols, they often carry multiple meanings: The depiction of banners and flags represent both self-identification and the tearing of garments associated with funerals. This multiplicity of meaning is essential throughout the work by rendering the narrative opaque. Each piece is a personal parsing of ideas and symbols. The definitive meaning is an act of discovery, sometimes completed, but not obligatory.

The forms I employ are intended to reference the visual language of basic physical labor. Although the implications of rural decay can be threatening, weathered tools, unused barns, or abandoned wells hold a narrative rich in associations. These forms not only provide context for the images on their surface, but also act a lure to draw the viewer in. I intend for my work to exist in the mind as both an object of use, and as a vehicle for content. With its long history of utility, clay is uniquely amenable to this goal. By using vessels as a vehicle for content, I provide a sense of familiarity and comfort to the viewer, while simultaneously creating unease through form and imagery.

My work is an act of catharsis and communication. I labor to make tangible the experience of confusion, mystery, and difficulty that are an honest accounting of life. In doing so, I hope to communicate with the viewer at an emotional level, transcend a small measure of the seemingly senseless whims of circumstance, and embrace the contradictions that make each of us flawed and weak, but ultimately perfect.