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## Iterations

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ITERATIONS

by

Thomas Lowell Edwards

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 J. Pinnell

Lincoln, Nebraska

May, 2014

## ITERATIONS

Thomas Lowell Edwards, M.F.A.

University of Nebraska, 2014

Advisor: Peter J. Pinnell

For millennia, pottery has facilitated the communal activities of eating and drinking. I use pottery as a placeholder, a metaphor for human interaction. The central core, the initial inspiration, of my sculpture is the diminishing level of connection our culture actively pursues.

I began to notice a trend of increasing disengagement in American culture after spending time abroad and observing the amount of time other cultures allotted for meals, coffee, etc. with companions. I make sculptures that comment on growing American disengagement using various formal principles of art (line, mass, scale, rhythm, and repetition). I am generally unsatisfied with a single solution to an idea, thus I create numerous iterations, a variety of ways to visually represent the inspiration. The resulting works move away from the initial concept to satisfy my aesthetic goals. While the idea that first inspired me is essential to my creative process, it is secondary to creating dynamic works to engage the viewer. Regardless, the pieces maintain enough of the original reference to be interpreted by individuals based on their own experiential references. This allows the viewer freedom to interpret and generate a personal narrative.

I use a variety of utilitarian forms in my artistic investigation. Wheel throwing provides a means of producing similar sized elements with a degree of variation that adds richness to the composition. This dissimilarity in the repetition, albeit subtle, is an

important factor in the success of my work, which will be referred to later. I use commercially produced objects, which have little to no variation, when a more consistent linear quality is desired for the specific iteration of the idea.

The ceramic components of my work are chosen for the inherent qualities provided by the material. Porcelain offers a stark contrast against the aggregate of the concrete. The same porcelain against gypsum cement gives a far more subtle contrast; when coupled with components fired in varying (reduction or oxidation) atmospheres, the tonal qualities of the fired clay provide a warm and cool appearance that is desirable for creating repetition and rhythm in certain works.

These ceramic objects, embedded in monolithic structures, are deliberately culturally ambiguous. The monoliths are memorials, fossils that symbolize the departure from shared communicative experience. Conceptually, I made the decision to deconstruct useful objects to evoke the idea of how shards of pottery are used by archeologists to gain insight into how a society functioned, its rituals, and how its society was structured. By grinding a portion of the vessel away, I deliberately create shards, pottery that is no longer able to fulfill its intended function. The purposeful denial of utility, created by erosion, is an additional reference to the initial foundation that began this work.

Using line, mass, shape, and scale, I create visually dynamic pieces that pull the viewer in for closer investigation. The linear qualities generated by repetitive forms create visual movement that holds the viewer's attention. In the pieces that include hand-made ceramic elements, the vessels themselves have subtle variations across the repeated forms that make up the composition. The variations within individual forms, a byproduct of the making process, add a very quiet human touch to an otherwise monumental work.

While I generally look for balance, with a sense of calm throughout the work, I add a slight tension to create visual interest. The more successful pieces have a focal point of fragility or obvious dissonance. Areas that deliberately catch the eye, causing what would otherwise be an unassuming sculpture, make the viewer feel slight discomfort. I create more visually dynamic pieces by increasing the scale of my works. A larger context or “canvas” simply provides more space for compositions wrought from more numerous components.

My sculptures are formal investigations that began by exploring the departure from utilitarian pottery’s role throughout human civilization. These works no longer rely strictly on that premise, but are growing in complexity through scale and subtle tensions built into every individual piece. The compositions rely on the similarities and differences within the pottery and the materials that encase them to emphasize line, shape, mass, rhythm, and repetition. My hope is that the subtle variations in the pottery components add texture to the overall composition in a way that sparks viewer interest and encourages investigation.



