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Cornucopia

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Hargraves, Patrick, "Cornucopia" (2020). *Theses, Dissertations, and Student Creative Activity, School of Art, Art History and Design*. 148.

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CORNUCOPIA

by

P.J. Hargraves

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

July, 2020

CORNUCOPIA

PJ Hargraves, M.F.A

University of Nebraska, 2020

Adviser: Peter Pinnell

I navigate the uncertain times we live in by creating positive, playful sculptures because focusing on joy is not only possible in times of hardship, I believe it is necessary in order to thrive. I go through life with a watchful reverence, finding beauty and hope in the abundance of life in the natural world. Using this inspiration, I reinvent and intentionally exaggerate landscapes and plant forms in clay with a freeing sense of whimsy. My fantasized pieces are an invitation to extend imagination to the joyous moments in the world around us, and to return to an innocent sense of wonder.

My studio practice is an overtly optimistic alternative to the pessimism that is present in many aspects of our culture, capturing simple joy and delight through the act of making. Using playful form language and intuitive mark making, I invent my own array of stylized plant life in the form of contained environments. The trees I sculpt are methodical and rhythmic, inspired by both wild and manicured plants, but constructed within the limitations of the process of coil building and the tensile strength of clay. I work with an emphasis on experimental spirit in the studio, constantly taking risks with aspects of my making process and the materials I utilize. I find beauty in the immediacy and materiality of clay, working spontaneously and playfully to imbue the pieces with palpable energy. My forms are embedded with awkwardness and honesty through my manipulation of ceramic materials, combining a reverence for craft with an overstated and garish flamboyance.

Having grown up between urban Philadelphia and rural Pennsylvania, I was surrounded by deep history and a respect for labor. I value having a strong work ethic and I developed a deep appreciation for humble, handmade folk craft objects. My philosophy is that art should be unpretentious and accessible to a wide audience because I believe art is an inclusive form of communication, meant to be enjoyed and understood.

My high-spirited objects draw inspiration from Pennsylvania Dutch folk symbols and metaphors of good fortune, perseverance, hopefulness, and strength. The most prevalent representations of these themes emerge in the form of various birds and flowers. Referencing this tradition, I adorn each of my pieces with stylized birds and flowers as a symbolic pattern of abundance and celebration. I use these simplified archetypes to foster a familiar, inviting sentiment to the work, celebrating a blue-collar sense of simplicity. These elements can shift roles from being representational plants and animals to repeated patterns of ornamentation within a single piece. Similarly, I use pottery and vessel forms in conventional and unconventional ways to draw attention to the objects themselves and what they represent. The foundations of my sculptures include vessels to suggest generosity and plentiful harvest through pottery's deeply rooted history as crafted objects intended for containing and offering.

I love glaze for its ability to hold a wealth of visual information in its varying levels of crystallization, depth and texture. When my work is being fired in salt or soda kilns, lavish colors and surfaces spring out from layers of glaze, enriching the repeating patterns of form. These kilns soften the bright colors and enhance various textures of glaze, slip and clay. Using these methods produces an added layer of surface variability,

creating alluring surprises through the labor of firing a gas kiln manually and introducing sodium into the ware chamber at peak temperature.

My imagined scenes are a celebration of life's abundance and a celebration of ceramic processes, offering delight through optimistic symbols and lush ceramic surfaces. I hope this work can be an opportunity to stimulate playful imagination and draw attention to the importance of finding moments of joy in our increasingly complicated daily lives.

























