If Clay Could Fly

A Thesis Submitted to the
University Honors Program
In Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Baccalaureate Degree

With University Honors
Department of Art

By
Tara Malnar

DeKalb, Illinois
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Through this capstone project I sought a deeper understanding of the materials used in ceramics art and expanded upon existing themes in my work. The main theme explored was the winged human figure. I have drawn such figures for years, and have been working on creating successful representations in clay. I studied with Ron Mazanoswki at the NIU School of Art ceramics department over the summer to begin work on my capstone research and again this fall to finish this capstone project. I found that both the fragile and heavy nature of clay worked against the construction of the delicate figures I strove for. Now I have chosen to use mixed media in my final piece. The piece will still be mostly stoneware clay and will be a summation of my education in the School of Art.

During the 2007 summer course, I explored methods of building delicate wings from stoneware clay. Stoneware is durable clay that can be fired at high temperatures and dries/fires white, making true color painting and glazing easier. The pieces that I have made for this project are all hand-built. This means that other than using shaping, carving, or rolling tools (hand tools) the work is all done by hand. No wheel or machine is used in the creation of these works. I enjoy the hands-on challenge of hand-building and the control the artist can have over the clay using this technique.

My first summer piece, “Ascension,” is a small full-figure with wings. The wings were fashioned out of a single slab of clay. The rest of the body was solid-built, which restricted the size of the work. At the speed which the ceramics lab fires clay, the thickest a solid piece can be is slightly larger than an inch in thickness. I did not like the look of the slab wings and decided to attempt more realistic and delicate forms, which would require a larger scale body for support and a larger armature. The small
stature of “Ascension” was easy to support using newspaper armature. This along with the light, single slab wings allowed the full figure to be depicted.

“Ascension” gave me a chance to test different colors and textures of the new cone six glazes in the ceramics lab. Recently, the lab changed to firing at cone six, a temperature scale, rather than at cone nine. Cone nine is a hotter, faster fire than cone six and the switch was done in order to save electricity and money for the department. I applied a crackling glaze to the base of “Ascension” and colored glazes on the wings to see how the colors would turn out. The crackle was nice but not as rough and rock-like as I had hoped, and the colors were bright but ran and left some edges bare (see detail FIG 1B).

“Winged Bust” (FIG 2A) was built after “Ascension” and provided the chance to create larger, more intricate wings. The bust was coil-built; a process of rolling coils of clay and pinching them together in order to build up and create a form. The drawback of the coil process of hand-building is: the piece can only be built so high (depending on the width and thickness of the piece) before it can no longer support its own weight while still wet. This means that periodically the artist will have to line the top layer with a wet paper towel and allow the rest of the piece to dry and stiffen. Fortunately, I also had a complicated pair of wings to work on to keep myself busy during these times.

I began the wings with a thin slab of clay, and cut out and added feather-shaped slabs to this base. I built up layers of feathers and carved details into the “shoulders” of the wings. As the pair began to dry and I continued to handle them, I discovered the brittle nature of dry but unfired clay. By the time the wings were ready for firing I had knocked off and reattached half a dozen feathers. I was also unimpressed by the process
of support, which involved epoxying the wings to the bust. The epoxy took much too long to set and was difficult to work with. This paired with the unexpected weight of the finished wings (which cause the piece to tip back) drove me to create a pair of stand-alone wings in an attempt to make them lighter and more stylistic. I wanted to avoid or solve the problem of counter-balancing the wings' weight in the next piece, so that my final work would not be off-balance as “Winged Bust” is (see detail FIG 2B).

The pair of wings was the last piece I made before the summer semester ended (not pictured). I built a base for them to be mounted on in order to hang them on a wall. However, between the summer and fall semesters the mount/base was lost, so only the wings remain. I used rolled newspaper and plastic bags to curl and support the wings while drying, giving them an elegant, arched shape. The wings are larger than those on “Winged Bust” took about six hours each to build. The long build time caused the wings to dry out while still incomplete, and so even more feathers were unwittingly knocked off before they made their way to the kiln. Fired stoneware has a lovely bone-white color and a soft texture, so I left the pair of wings unpainted. I hope to use them in a future piece of sculpture, but for now they will remain loose and stored along with work from previous semesters.

The process of adding feathers to the base slab, as I had done in “Winged Bust” and the pair of wings, did not work as well as I had anticipated. No matter how well “blended” together the clay of the feathers and base slab were, some fell off simply from cracking while drying. Ron Mazenowski, my instructor for this capstone, said that the only way to combat this would be to use a mold. That way, the wings would be one solid piece and the clay would be more cohesive. Still, the larger wings were too heavy to
imagine trying to affix them to another ceramic piece, such as a figure. I wanted my last piece to be the largest in scale, and the relative proportions of the wings were impossible using my current technique and would be too heavy for my figure to support. I chose to abandon clay wings due to the multiple problems using clay and my growing interest in using mixed media in my pieces. The final piece would have wings, but they would be constructed from something lighter and more forgiving than stoneware. The rest of the piece, the figure, would be clay.

In the fall semester I began my work by creating small hand-built birds out of stoneware (not pictured). These birds allowed me to re-familiarize myself with various hand-building techniques and to experiment with different finishes after firing. The birds were created using pinch-pot and coil methods. The pinch-pot method is a simple technique in which the artist takes a chunk of clay and pinches it into a bowl-like shape. Two of these bowls are fused together to make a sphere. This technique was used to create the birds’ bodies and heads. After firing the birds, I used underglaze on them to experiment with color. I have never been impressed with the colors underglazes provide; I find them to be too pastel and washed-out. Such was the case with my birds, even with multiple coats of color. I prefer rich, dense color. Acrylics provide rich colors but leave the clay with a “plastic” texture and appearance.

Professor Mazanowski suggested using oil paints, an untraditional finish for a ceramic piece, but one that he claimed would yield more vibrant colors. Underglazes are simply colored clays that are painted on and so do not affect the surface of a piece, so I was able to paint over the underglaze. I repainted both my birds in oil paints and was impressed with the way that the paint “soaks” into the clay. Oil paint gives the clay a
velvet-like visual texture, although the real texture is closer to acrylic paints. Layering paint in several colors gave the small pieces multi-chromatic, dense color. I decided to use oil paints to finish my final piece.

The final piece in my senior independent honors study is titled “Take Flight.” I created this work using the coil-building process previously discussed. Due to the size of the piece, this was a long process. I could only add about five or six inches at a time before I would have to leave it for some time to harden slightly. Usually I would go have lunch or work on another unrelated piece and return an hour or so later. I ran into several more problems with “Take Flight” that I had not anticipated.

I began the figure from just below the hips, intending on adding legs once the torso was finished and stable. Trying to build up from thin, weak legs does not work, as I found in “Ascension.” The best method was to build the body and legs, then attach them when slightly dry later. Because the piece took so long to build, the canvas and base that it rested on was continuously wet. The canvas began to mold, and threatened to spread to the piece. Also, it became increasingly difficult to keep the bottom of the piece, which had been complete for some time, from drying out. I decided the best decision was to let the bottom-most portion dry and to have the figure without legs. When I made this decision I was two-thirds up the torso and beginning the chest, and the piece was already too heavy for me to move back and forth from work my table to my cubby. With all that weight, legs would have been awkward and difficult, if they would have worked at all.

The head of “Take Flight” was constructed using the solid-shape technique of hand-building. The head was shaped out of a solid block of clay. Then, after setting out for a short time the inside was hollowed out, like a pumpkin for Halloween. This allowed
me to carve the walls down thin so that the head would not be too heavy. This method was also much faster and easier than coil-building would have been. Solid-build allowed for a smoother surface that would not need as many touch ups, and the clay was all one cohesive piece. This prevented the head from cracking as it dried.

After finishing the shoulders and attaching the head, I allowed all but the arm sockets to dry out. I had slab-built a pair of arms during the week and allowed them to stiffen so they could support their own weight. However, when I attached the arms they continuously fell apart at the elbows or refused to stay on the shoulder, no matter how much newspaper I used to try to support them. I tried re-wetting one, and letting the other dry out more to uncover the problem. In either case, the slab-armature arms would not hold together, so at the end of the week I scrapped them and decided to go on coil-building the arms all the way down to the hands and fingers (FIG 3A).

I continuously added wet sponges and paper towels to the right arm socket and covered it in plastic while I developed the left arm (FIG 3B). When I was halfway done with the left hand I built the right arm down to the elbow and rewrapped it. I returned from the weekend to find the right arm had dried and fallen off, and the socket was completely bone dry and unworkable. Most likely the air inside the piece was far too dry for moist towels and sponges to keep it from drying out. The piece, now too heavy and large for my cubby and sitting at a classroom worktable, may also have been bumped or knocked by another student working at that table. In any case, the right arm was a total loss; the poor figure had merely a shoulder-stump. This is how ceramics is, I have learned: often the medium gives you more failures than victories. As Professor
Mazanowski has so eloquently said to his class: if all you had were victories, you would never learn anything. Failing is learning.

As I worked on the rest of the piece, I continuously turned and walked around it, paying close attention to form, proportions, and details (FIG 3C). Two years of life drawing experience made me able to create an elegant representation of the female human body. My foundations and drawing courses had taught me to pay attention to craft, or overall professionalism of a piece. I trimmed overhanging clay and sanded or carved spots that were too rough. The wings complete the composition. They are constructed from wire, feathers, and netting. I planned to paint the figure and attach the wings using epoxy when the piece was fired. I believed that the epoxy would work much better at supporting the lighter materials than it had with the stoneware wings in “Winged Bust.”

To start the wings, I bought two rolls of needlepoint stock. The plan was to insert the feather shafts in the small spaces between the fabric weaves. Hopefully the wings would have a more realistic look to them. I also purchased white and natural-colored feathers to vary the look of the wings. I stretched the fabric over some copper wire provided by the sculpture department, which I had bent into an arched shape. I used two pieces of the thick wire to support the top and middle of the wing. Then I trimmed the fabric to the shape of an unfeathered wing. I found that even with spaces designed for needlepoint built in, the weave was too tight for the shafts to be woven through the fabric. Instead, I used hot glue to attach the ends of the feathers to the lightweight material. The wings took about four hours each, and are strong but light and natural looking. I attached
the wings to the figure using glue and epoxy, after crafting her dress and cutting small slits in the back.

The figure seemed plain and unadorned without something draped over it, and so it was for added compositional interest that I created clothing for the piece. I chose a satin-like fabric that would drape well on the figure and on the surface it rested on. The color is a vibrant red, the color of passion. I chose the red because I feel very passionate about this piece, and I believe that strong passion can make someone feel as though she could fly. I wanted to create this feeling in the viewer, and perhaps make them more able to relate to my figure and understand her.

The clay figure of “Take Flight” came out of the kiln with a beautiful pale, almost skin-tone pink color and a soft finish. This was the result of my stoneware clay being fired in the same kiln as glazed or terra-cotta pieces. The red dust spreads and tints the stoneware in the kiln. Some would see this as a disappointment, but I enjoyed the look of the piece so much that I decided not to paint the entire surface. After sketching and brainstorming, I decided to give the figure dark blue tribal tattoos using oil paints.

I have long been interested in tattoos, both the history of tattoos and their presence in modern culture. Tattoos began as a strictly spiritual tradition, and were used to express faith or identify a person. Only religious elders were trained to give tattoos properly. Tattoos today have become so common that many people lose sight of their spiritual significance. I gave the figure in “Take Flight” tribal-like tattoos to try and return them to their roots. The piece is about spiritual passion and independence, and my own tattoos are symbols of my own spirituality. Thus, I gave them to my art to make
them spiritually significant once again. All in all, “Take Flight” took nearly fifty hours to complete, start to finish (see final version of work FIG 4).

In the future, I plan to attempt to “fix” the broken parts of “Take Flight.” Paper-mache may be the best technique to add on the missing arm and broken finger (which were broken off and lost during firing). Paper-mache is light and, if painted, can resemble clay in its appearance. This piece will continue to be a learning experience beyond the work of this semester.

“Take Flight” has been a culmination of my educational experience at NIU’s School of Art. Applying both what I learned in foundations and drawing classes and the techniques from Professor Mazesowski, I consider the project a success despite the difficulties I have had. Such is the nature of clay; it forces those who work with it to make success out of failures. Working with this material has taught me the importance of patience and experimentation in my work. Far too often we as artists become too wrapped up in our vision of the final project. In ceramics, a vision is a crucial starting point but the end result will differ in some way due to problems had or changes made while building a piece. The challenge is to help the piece speak even through all the hardships of its creation.
FIG 1A  "Ascension"

FIG 1B  "Ascension," detail
FIG 2A  "Winged Bust"

FIG 2B  "Winged Bust," detail
FIG 3C "Take Flight" in progress, detail

FIG 4 "Take Flight" completed
NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

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Through this capstone project I seek to gain a deeper understanding of the materials used in ceramics art and expand upon existing themes in my work. The main theme to be explored is the winged human figure. I have drawn such figures for years, and would like to research ways to create successful representations in clay. I began my research and first attempts over the summer semester under the tutelage of Ron Mazanowski of the ceramics department at Northern Illinois University’s school of art, and am continuing my capstone with him as well. I found that both the fragile and heavy nature of clay worked against the construction of such delicate figures, and now am working to find a solution. The works are significant on a personal level and represent a challenge in using clay as a medium.

The process used to create these works is commonly known as “hand building,” meaning that the pieces are created by hand (and hand tools) without the use of a machine such as a potter’s wheel. Simple design sketches, such as Figure 1, are used as a basic guide in creating the piece. In ceramics, though, the design sketch is not detailed as in graphic arts such as architecture, and is not strictly adhered to. The sketch provides a sense of direction and a starting point. The artist considers the process and possible problems in creating the work using the sketch. Figure 1 illustrates the possible problem of creating a strong joint at the meeting point of the figure and the wings, and in balancing the piece well enough to stand on its own. A base may be required and adjustments will have to be made while the work is in progress. Most likely, several supports will have to be set up around the piece to hold it in a stable position while drying.
Producing several pieces over the summer provided thesis materials and research by experiencing the difficulties with clay firsthand. “Winged Bust” (Fig. 2A) was the first to be made and was finished alongside “Ascension” (Fig. 3A). Making detailed wings feather by feather for “Winged Bust” proved how fragile the clay could be. While wet and pliable, the wings were rather strong. When they dried they became brittle and several feathers were reattached before firing. Attaching the wings after firing presented another problem. The wings were much heavier than anticipated and also heavier than the bust itself. Epoxying them to the bust caused the bust to lean back, resting all the weight on the fragile feather tips (Fig. 2B). Using a thicker, sturdier base or body in the next piece may solve this. A full-body piece (Fig. 1) may be easier to balance than just a bust. “Ascension” had simple wings that remained light, as well as a thick base. The piece is relatively well balanced and offered experimentation with new and different glazing techniques (Fig. 3B). Moving even larger, twelve to sixteen inches tall, is the goal of the next full-body piece (Fig. 1).

The challenge still remains in creating detailed wings that survive long enough to be fired. A second, larger and curved set of wings (picture unavailable) was created at the very end of the summer semester. The natural curve of the pieces made the feathers all the more fragile and so quite a few were broken off before firing. The piece awaits firing and the reattachment of those feathers, and overcoming the fragility of dried but not fired clay must be worked out through the creation of more works. This and other issues are commonly found in translating a two-dimensional sketch into a three-dimensional work, and are the reason clay is such an engaging medium. These problems are looked forward
to as something to solve and overcome and to learn from in order to apply experience and knowledge to future work.
FIG 2A  "Winged Bust"

FIG 2B  "Winged Bust," detail
University Honors Program
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Student Name (print or type):
Tara Forberg/Malnar

Faculty Supervisor (print or type):
Ron Mazanowski

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ABSTRACT (100 - 200 WORDS):

I seek to use knowledge gained during the summer semester to take on the challenges faced in creating larger, delicate works in clay. Problems such as introduction of new techniques, finishes, finding equal and stable weight and balance points for the winged figures, and fragility of dried clay all must be addressed in a proactive way while the work is in progress. Ron Mazanowski will and has shed light and suggested remedies to these problems.