

Touch: *What's in Front of You?*

Equipped with the most useful tools in the universe, we use our hands to experience the tangible world. We solidify our understanding of our three-dimensional realm through the touch receptors in our extremely sensitive fingers. Fueled by our inherent curiosity and need for tactile experience, we navigate the world around us and find each other; our bodies as tantalizing landscapes to explore. However, society's protocols on personal space inhibit us from freely indulging in our carnal desires. We experience these same restrictions when approaching the art object. The sacred space of the gallery and its pedestals keeps the viewer from truly experiencing the tactile nature of three-dimensional art. My work subversively uses these confining protocols to intensify the tension between the object and the viewer. Through the ceramic medium, I entice the viewer with a plethora of colors and textures, tempting them to break the sphere of propriety encasing the object. By using a medium directly related to the hand, I tease the viewer's inability to touch and put them on edge.

TOUCH

Our need for the tactile is driven by our senses. As we interact with the world, we wait anxiously for it to respond back to us. Our environment willingly responds with a great variety of sensations. "It's amazing," describes Dr. Tiffany Field, a child psychologist at the University of Miami Medical School, "how much information is communicable in a touch. Every other sense has an organ you can focus on, but touch is everywhere"¹. Located across the body's terrain, touch receptors are designed to measure change. "A constant consistent pressure register's at first, activating the touch receptors; then the receptors stop working," states Diane Ackerman in

The Natural History of the Senses, “when any change occurs, the receptors fire and we become suddenly aware.”² However, if a surface is no longer changing, we forget about it; our touch receptors carefully restraining from a sensory overload. “Touch allows us to find our way in the world of darkness... Although there’s no special name for the ability, we can touch something and decide if it’s heavy, light, gaseous, soft, hard, liquid, [or] solid.”³ With this information, we are able to clarify the materiality of the world we live in. I use these properties of material across the surfaces of my work in order to tempt the viewer with promises of sensation. With tension building, the viewer is impelled to experience the work through multiple senses.

Our hands give us a different kind of information than our eyes. Since our eyes are filled with misleading abstractions, our touch senses tell us more about a three-dimensional object in space than our eyes alone. As Frank Wilson describes in *The Hand*:

“The hands... obtain information that could be obtained *only* by acting upon the object being held. The information returned to the brain was written in the tactile and kinesthetic language of manipulation and was compared with information coming from the visual system, as part of a process through which the brain creates visuospatial images.”⁴

Our hands will always remain faithful to the world by telling us what our eyes don’t understand; the hands drive our longing to interact with curious, tangible objects. This inherent drive to touch is used to build tension at my advantage by placing the viewer in a gallery setting where they are kept socially distant from the art object.

Our hands are incredibly useful tools. With them, we are able to manipulate the world around us and discover its possibilities. The ability to touch our thumb to our pinky enables us to grasp an object between our palms. Equipped with the ability to hold something like no other

being, we grow interested in the objects in our hands. Observing through critical inspection with our fingertips and eyes, we begin to explore in search of tangible truths. We have a need to experience the tactile and a desire to use our hands to make an imprint:

“It’s a very little world – in your hands. Whatever you can do with your hands gives you a small world that you can actually cope with, as opposed to the big world, where perhaps you can’t.”⁵



Figure 1. Antidote (Pinch Series)
Porcelain with glaze, luster, flocking,
and masonite boxes. 2010.

In my work, I create small visceral hand objects that explore the psychological intimacy of the miniature and the impulsive actions of the hand manipulating material (Figure 1). These objects become some kind of “worry stone” that the hand is allowed to subconsciously explore. Our palms cusp while fingers find cavities to press into. Fueled by our inherent curiosity, we began to discover the niches we fit in.

However, touch is not limited to our hands. We have touch receptors located everywhere in our body. The

fingertips are the most sensitive, containing special nerves described as:

“tiny egg-shaped Meissner’s corpuscles, which are nerves enclosed in capsules. They seem to specialize in hairless parts of the body – the soles of the feet, fingertips (which have 9,000 per square inch), clitoris, penis, nipples, palms, and tongue...”⁶

By experience, we know these are the most sensitive parts of our bodies; however, the fingertips have the most direct contact with the world.

We feel everything on our bodies: the sun, the wind, and each other. We *need* to be touched and *need* to touch others.

“In the University of Illinois primate experiments, researchers found that a lack of touch produced brain damage. They posed three situations: (1) touch was not possible, but all other contact was, (2) for four hours out of twenty-four the glass divider was removed so the monkeys could interact, and (3) total isolation. Autopsies of the cerebellum showed that those monkeys who were totally isolated had brain damage; the same was true of the partially separated animals. The un-tampered-with natural colony remained undamaged. Shocking though it sounds, a relatively small amount of touch deprivation alone caused brain damage, which was often displayed in the monkeys as aberrant behavior.”⁷

Without touch we feel disconnected from the world and fall from the network of life. In my work, I attempt to bring the viewer closer to the art world by tempting them to be a part of the first hand sensations the artist experiences during creation.

BODY & LANDSCAPE

Our bodies are as mysterious as the universe and diverse as a landscape. Our curiosity continuously drives us towards the exploration and discovery of the unfamiliar. We approach the skin's terrain just as we approach the rest of the world – with the desire to experience. The skin of the “Other” is a tantalizing, foreign world, containing valleys, hills, and streams of hair. However, we remain limited by the sphere of propriety and the societal restraint that keeps us from indulging our carnal appetites.

Instead we scrutinize our own bodies – following every hill, every line, every area of neglect and comparing the prickly to the soft, and the beautiful to the grotesque. Some areas appeal us, while others repel us. With social pressures supplying us with “acceptable” standards, we are always questioning our body and the way it deals with all sorts of disgusting fluids and

processes. Straining to reach some unattainable consistency, we mask our “unappealing” aspects from ourselves and the public. However, our temporary masks are uncovered by our lovers, revealing the grotesque we so carefully hide. Through experiences of touch, we become comfortable with our bodies natural occurrences. Our lover’s glorify us and see through our perceived insecurities, constantly reinforcing our comfort in our own skin.

Our bodies are a landscape of intimacy where, with indulgence, we get to know every crevice. As Julia Kristeva describes:

A maternal authority shapes the body into a territory having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of the differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted. It is a ‘binary logic,’ a primal mapping of the body.⁸

We experience our bodies both as object – being touched, or subject – you are being touched.

Our objectified bodies are territories that belong to ourselves and to our lovers.

In my work, I explore the body as object by subjectifying the viewer as being touched. With the objects reaching out towards the viewer and beckoning interaction, the viewer is silently encouraged to intimately experience the tactility of the work. To the viewer, the forms recall the continuous flow of the body which is matched by the sudden disruption of the surface with new textural elements. These elements are meant to contrast the overly



Figure 2. fffLoom. Sandblasted porcelain with Human Hair. 2010.

manicured to the neglected parts of the body. In Figure 2, the surface has sandblasted stretch marks across the form. The hair “appendage” hangs off the pedestal disrupting the viewer’s space. As they walk by, the hair may brush their arm or they may move awkwardly away from it. The voluptuous form is reminiscent of the curvature of the body and contains the feeling of the body as an objectified intimate landscape.

SPACE: THE PUBLIC & THE PRIVATE

Personal space keeps us distant from those around us. Social authority restrains us by imposing specific rules about personal space, namely: the bubble. The bubble contains our private sphere which includes our bodies and all immediate space around us. We are only able to penetrate this law-enforced bubble by discrete mutual consent – *a pat on the back, hand-shake, hug, or kiss*. But when we finally share our bodies with our lovers, it’s the most beautiful thing in the world. When we approach the Other for the first time, we use the utmost tenderness and finesse – *just a small gesture at first*. The Other is so precious, so divine. We *slowly* map each inch with our fingertips, carefully inspecting and recording every mark. On this pilgrimage of the body, we discover subtle details about the Other's uncharted territory, never growing tired of the journey.

These bubbles do not only engulf people, but society also places invisible “bubble shields” over many objects. In the gallery space, a key support of the bubble shield is the pedestal. The pedestal signals a specific, sacred territory keeping the viewer distant. The object confined on the pedestal thus becomes too sacred, too precious, and too risky to become involved with – thereby making the viewer afraid to touch it. Yet all the while, a tension is

building. The awe-filled viewer *wants* to touch the work, but settles only for a thorough visual examination of the object after accepting that it is forbidden.

Through vision, we see color, and can discern the consistency of a material. However, the curious viewer experiences an intensity that craves more interaction and more information. With expectations building, the curious, anxious viewer awaits a moment of contact. For the sphere of propriety to be broken the object has to be seductive enough for the viewer to become increasingly tempted. If the work promises sensation, then desire will drive the licentious viewer to pass the boundaries of the propriety, and indulge in the primal sensation of the tactile.

FUEL

By providing a garden of color and textures, my work tempts our primal desires. Filled with temptation, the viewer reconsiders the space between themselves and the object. I create curious textures by allowing ceramic glazes to behave as a sculptural medium. As shown in



Figure 3. furvr. Porcelain with glaze. 2009.

Figure 3, the glaze emulates an action or growth, such as foaming or oozing, or acts as a skin-like coating. Its textural base stems from our ability to decipher sensations, i.e. wet, heavy, gaseous, etc.

This tactile catalog is enhanced with the inclusion of various other materials, such

as: wood, glass, silicone, rubber, plasti-dip, flocking, found fibers, etc. These textures are strategically placed throughout the angulating surface of the form, creating small surprises that

await discovery by the viewer who becomes impelled to move around the object and collect different points of view via eye and finger.

As I build with clay, I consider the relationships being formed: Does a wall reveal or conceal information? What is the difference between an orifice and an opening? Such questions ignite conversations between my hands and my materials resulting in voluptuous, curious forms that arise from my response to the ceramic material, its tactility, and to aesthetic relationships. Playing with clay's natural limitations, a dialog is formed between my influencing the clay and the material's response to my manipulations. From this initial playfulness, a true exchange of dialectical actions and reactions become possible.

Allowing intuition to create an object is absorbing; as I build, cell by cell, I become immersed. I consider interesting aspects of previous pieces when building something new. In recalling a cave space – *I liked putting my hand in there. I want to feel that again – the smooth, rolling quality of it.* As potter Yagi Kazuo describes, “It’s that feeling you get when you take soft clay and squish it between your fingers... That’s the essence of clay for me.”⁹ This visceral experience is enhanced by clay’s ability to immediately record every interaction with it. Clay, truly, has the most direct relationship with the hands of the artist. With clay’s ability to record, the memory of handiwork is visible over the entire surface of the final product. The viewer can feel the movement of the hand, providing a small taste of the conversation formed in the creation process.

Entranced by the object, the emboldened viewer looks around the room, gaining the courage to steal a small taste of what the object feels like. With building suspense, the viewer

risks being caught, or worse, while every vein surges with desire – *when to strike?* I offer my conversations with clay to any viewer who is driven to move around, discover the form, and become intimate with the object. Does it remind you of something tender you've once experienced? *I'll bet you can't fit your entire hand in there.*

¹ Ackerman, Diane. *The Natural History of the Senses*. New York: Random House Inc., 1990. pg 74.

² Ibid. Ackerman, pg 80.

³ Ibid. Ackerman, pg 94.

⁴ Wilson, Frank R. *The Hand*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998. pg 276.

⁵ Wilson, Frank R. *The Hand*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1998. pg 219.

⁶ Ackerman, Diane. *The Natural History of the Senses*. New York: Random House, Inc., 1990. pg 83.

⁷ Ibid. Ackerman, pg 76-77.

⁸ Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror An Essay on Abjection*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986. Pg 72.

⁹ Unknown source.