Microscopic Giants

by

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MASTER OF FINE ARTS
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Scale and the Human Perspective

As humans we have a tendency to classify or categorize everything around us. It is a natural feeling to want to have a better understanding or to form a concrete idea of something. Somehow to place labels or quantify things eases our anxieties of the unknown. This lets us believe we know more than we actually do. When it comes to the categorizing size or scale of objects we tend to compare everything to our own bodies. A house is large because it is bigger than a human. A blade of grass is small because it is much smaller than one’s physical body. While this may be a true comparison and it is logical for a person to use oneself as reference, it is all relative to the perspective of the comparison. If a person were to change one’s point of view and look from a different perspective, a different vantage point, than everything would change. Grains of sand and pebbles could be boulders; grass and plants loom overhead like a forest. A drop of water could be an ocean. It all depends on one’s point of view.

Throughout my entire life I have constantly found myself surprised and in awe of the natural world. As a child I was always fascinated to learn about different types of plants and animals for the first time. It was incredible to begin to understand how diverse and specialized forms of life can be. Even as an adult when I thought I started to know something of the world there has always been something new to see and learn about it. I have experienced things in nature that I could only described as sublime. I watched the entire Gulf of Mexico steam on a first day of winter; the horizon disappeared and the water and sky merged as one. I swam
through a lake filled with bioluminescence. The water like black glass in the night shattered into hundreds of tiny lights from the slightest movement. In the same night I watched the moon set blood red into the ocean like a nocturnal sunset. These experiences were so powerful that they changed my entire outlook and perception of the world.

Even the small things, the everyday in nature has had a profound effect on me. Recently I stood in the front yard of my house here in Athens. It was the beginning of spring and everything was bursting with life. I was particularly observing a bush about the same size as myself. The closer I looked, the more I saw. Bees buzzed into flowers and chased each other. Insects hid perfectly, blending to the color of the leaves. A maze of branches and leaves intertwined, reaching for the sun. I noticed a spider and then another. The two intently mimicked each other’s movements. Like a mirror image they held two legs up high and outstretched. Back and forth they stalked each other, closer and closer, until finally they touched, and in an instant, a split second, one gave way and fled from the other. That little moment created a window for me into existence at another scale. I could see a whole other world just within one plant. It became a whole landscape. A living body became a geographic body, a world within a world.

The reality is that everything is both large and small simultaneously. Humans are in fact microscopic giants. We live in a world that is so vast and expansive from our perspective, but when we begin to compare earth just to the other planets the solar system we rapidly shrink. Mountains become merely ripples of the surface of
Looking even further out in comparison to the universe we become practically invisible, our whole planet, less than a speck of dust, forever, infinitely shrinking. This idea of infinity in relation to scale works in both directions. If we look towards the other side of the spectrum we find a microcosm, a microverse hiding within our own world. From bacteria to cells to the chloroplast of a plant, to chromosomes or the DNA that make us up, all the way to atoms, protons, neutrons, quarks, even now to the Higgs boson particle¹ there is always going to be something smaller. Whether or not we can comprehend it, scale is infinite.

There is something that can allow us to break free from our constructs of human scale and perception. I do not mean a physical vehicle or advancement in technology. It is not an enormous telescope or an electron microscope. Although these are wonderful things there is something that has a much greater potential than either and is accessible to every single person on the planet. Imagination.

"Imagination will often carry us to worlds that never were. But without it we go nowhere."-Carl Sagan

We can travel through scale, space, and time, simply with our minds. Our imaginations are invaluable and should be cherished and nurtured. It is incredible to think about how much our imaginations have contributed to the progress and

¹ "The Higgs boson is the particle associated with the Higgs field, an energy field that transmits mass to the things that travel through it. Peter Higgs and Francois Englert theorized way back in 1964 that this is how things in the universe – stars, planets, even people – came to have mass." [See: http://www.latimes.com/science/sciencenow/la-sc-sci-higgs-boson-nobel-explained-20131008,0,6808772.story]
accomplishments of human beings. Everything had to be imagined before it could be done. Someone had to think it up! Any kind of problem that was solved, any theoretical hypothesis requires the use of thought and imagination. Think about discovery throughout the ages, someone had to think “what if...?” and imagine something that wasn’t possible at the time. All the things we see as commonplace today; electricity, automobiles, cellular phones. Even the computer I am using right now to write this. It all had to be imagined to be conceived. Unfortunately I feel that the imagination is something that is becoming more and more underappreciated within our society. We live in a point in time where we are flooded with imagery. Constantly we are spoon fed every hyper realistic detail and at an astonishing rate.

Think of the past where radio broadcasts dominated, or a written literature, or even before when people transferred stories through memorization or song. A good book or novel can activate your imagination with descriptive writing, but it is your own mind that fills in the blanks, that begins to paint the actual picture. These are all forms of art and the beauty of art itself is that it can be the catalyst for our minds. It can provoke thought, and it is the job of the artist to provide an experience that not only depicts or describes something but does so in a way that allows you to see beyond and experience it further within your mind. To better illustrate just what I mean I want to share an excerpt from one of my favorite authors Ray Bradbury.

“He saw himself in her eyes, suspended in two shining drops of bright water, himself dark and tiny, in fine detail, the lines about his mouth, everything there, as if her eyes were two miraculous bits of violet amber that might capture and hold him intact.”
The words he uses and how he composes them are so beautifully descriptive and poetic. Such vivid descriptions give you rich visuals that spring to life in your mind. This is something that prompts your mind, it activates your imagination but you actually have to put it all together. It is this poetic sense of description that can be found in art.

Art can take countless forms and mean countless things. For me art is a way to try to understand life and everything around us. But it is not simply stating the facts in a scientific manner but poetically and beautifully. Through visual metaphors and surrealism I can compile my experiences and my thoughts. It is a way to put things together, to make sense of the complex world and even universe that we live in. It will never be all wrapped up into a perfectly quantifiable package. There will always be unknowns and questions left unanswered; however, it is a way to reflect on things visually to become mentally stimulating. One of the best qualities of art is that it can facilitate our imaginations; it can be that trigger or vehicle to the other world. Like Bradbury I hope to give the viewer something rich and full of detail. I want to give the viewer something that they can explore and come back to, finding new things, make new discoveries. But I want to give the viewer something that doesn’t just spell it out but activates their imaginations and lets them project into it.
Mysterious Island, 2014, Mixed Media
Details
Claw/water splash detail.

Back of shell landscape.

Close up landscape
Selected Supporting Works

*Cloud Column*, 2011, Carved Plaster.

This piece was one of the earliest works I created during my time here at UGA. It began with something that I had seen; billowing clouds mixed with a thick white smoke from a factory smoke stack. This was the beginning of my use of plaster as a material in my work that was beyond mold making but a primary material. Working with the plaster I developed a method of applying additively as the plaster set up to get the initial gesture and flow. Then I would react to the forms and subtractive carve in the detail. There was something about trying to capture a certain moment and through the material create something solid that would otherwise almost intangible of fleeting.

Within this piece I began to blend different imagery of landscape with that of the animal form. Here the back of the goat transforms into a mountain. Materials were left raw, as I wanted to let the viewer in on the construction. This was one of the first attempts at trying to create an image that could display the idea of infinity. The landscape depicted on the animal’s back is the environment where you would find it living. So potentially you could then find the same creature living upon its own back and another on that one’s back and so on and so forth. Inspiration for this piece comes from different forms of mythology like the Native American creation story of the turtle hold the first landmass on its back. I wanted to create my own mythology to describe my thoughts of infinity.
Self Portrait as a Landscape, 2013, Clay, Plaster, Plastic,

This piece felt like a certain turning point that began to describe what I sought after more accurately. Here the body the landscape become merged together much further and start to exist simultaneously. It began as a life size self portrait that I spontaneously began to encase or entomb it in layers of plaster. I wanted to almost imitate a process like the formation of a stalagmite. I was also thinking of naturally occurring large rock structures that start to look like recognizable images, almost like seeing images in the clouds. The merger of these images was also a way for me to try and describe some sense of connection between all things on this earth and that one-day I will die and physically become part of it.
Influences and Inspirations for Mysterious Island

I admire Salvador Dali as an artist, but if you were to ask me I would not normally consider him to be a big influence on my work. However, his painting titled *The Ship* has always stood out to me. I was always fascinated by how he merged the imagery of the human form or conquistador with the ship itself. The helmet becomes the bowsprit\(^2\) leading down to the figurehead of the ship, which becomes the actual head of the figure. The two images can be seen separately but yet are so intertwined that they are unified and seen as one. The viewer is also shown a vantage point that exposes what is happening under the water giving you the whole picture and not just what you would normally see on the surface. This is something I sought to achieve in creating *Mysterious Island*. I wanted the body of the crab to become one with the geographic body of the island and the legs becoming the body of water. Everything can be seen separately as individual parts but obviously makes up a greater image as a whole. In *The Ship* the combination of imagery gives life and emotion to something people normally think of as an inanimate object. Although we do not view it as the same type of life I wanted to describe the earth as a living force entirely comprised of other living entities. It may not breath or think like you and I but it is very much full of life.

\(^2\) A "bowsprit" is "a large spar projecting forward from the stem of a ship." (See: http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/bowsprit)
As an artist I am constantly making, experimenting, and collecting. Sometimes I will make simply to make and not necessarily for an end goal or finished product. I will collect objects and materials that I find visually interesting. All of these pieces then become amassed into a collection I consider to be like that of a painter’s palette. They are parts that I can pick and choose from to create a type of three-dimensional collage. These can become fine details, isolated moments, or accentuated bursts of movement. This process can be very formal and is based on placing objects in accordance to each other and to the overall image as a whole. This process has been heavily influenced by imagery from Japanese wood block prints.

Specifically the more bizarre images and shadow play depicted by Utagawa Kuniyoshi during the Edo era. The level of creativity it took to make these images is simply astounding. Within the fisherman crab image (above), it is amazing how an image of one thing, depicted of all kind of different materials and forms can then also be seen as something entirely different from the silhouette of the forms. This is something I directly wanted to imitate within the face of Mysterious Island. I wanted the pieces of the face to stand out as individual objects; some to even appear as a
human influence within the natural landscape. Together the pieces still accurately describe the details and anatomy of the crabs face when seen purely as form.

*Mysterious Island* is a film that I watched as a very young child. It is one of the first science fiction or fantasy based films I can remember that had a profound impact on me. The 1961 film takes place during the civil war and follows a group of imprisoned union soldiers and confederates that escape a siege in a hot air balloon. They are then swept away by a large storm and crash on an unknown island somewhere in the South Pacific. The island turns out to be almost forgotten and untouched by human kind and is inhabited by all kinds of creatures of unusual proportion. In particular there is one scene where the characters have to battle an enormous crab. This was at a point in time where special effects like this were done through stop motion animation. The man who animated the crab was Ray Harryhuasen who also did the animation for other movies like *Jason and the Argonauts* and *Clash of the Titans*. These were also early influences for me mainly because of the animation by Harryhausen. I wanted to give credit or pay homage to this film in some sort of way so I decided to name my piece after it in the idea that
the island they were marooned on was this whole fantastical beast as well (my sculpture). This was also something that really got me thinking about scale and how I could make something that would translate and be perceived as simultaneously enormous and microscopic. So I decided to use the form of an animal that is normally smaller than we are (the crab) and make it larger than we are. By including the landscape upon its back and integrating the body with the geographic body it created a shift in scale and projected it even further. The landscape is also a literal metaphor for the fact that our bodies are landscapes and inhabited by other smaller forms of life, similar as to how we occupy and live on the earth.

One part of the film takes place inside of a cave within the island. I always thought this was interesting as a kid and at such a young age assumed it was fictional as well. Later in life on a trip to the British Virgin Islands I found myself inside a cave within an island. Particularly at the island Virgin Gorda or also known as, the baths. This island is made of giant boulders that you have to navigate through and swim between. As I swam around the side of the island I came across a cave. This idea of multiple geographic features being combined really interested me. As I floated inside of this cave inside of an island I began to contemplate the fact that things are rarely singular object but a multiplicity and combination of other things. For instance your overall body is not just one solid mass but is comprised of all kinds of things from bones, to muscles, to organs. This is
the same way that I wanted to approach the body of the crab. The island was the shell, but the cave its mouth.

**Bipolar Studio Practice and Finding a Balance**

As an artist I feel that my process and working methods can at times be contradictory or opposing. It is not a consistency that I need necessarily to maintain a solid studio practice but a variety and a balance. The studio for me can be a chaotic environment. Floor covered in art making detritus, it is a space for me to let loose. To let go of apprehensions and follow intuition. It is frenetic, intense, and spontaneous. I believe it is important to let go of frustrations and anger in a way that is not harmful to others. To turn this energy into a positive thing through the act of making. It can be violent, but it is destroying to create. Sometimes things need to be broken or destroyed in order to give a certain feeling, life, or history to them. The chaotic studio is a nightmare for some, but for me it feels free. It is a space where anything can happen. Just as chaotic as it can be, the studio can be an extremely peaceful place. It is a place to be alone and to think. I believe making to be very much like meditation. When you become so caught up in what you are doing, so focused, it becomes like a trance. You reach a heightened level of concentration and every move feels right. There is something calming and soothing about repetition as well. Whether it is mixing batches of plaster, or painting a surface, or carving details, it almost becomes ritualistic and can be a calming experience. Both chaotic and meditative, art is my therapy; it is what keeps me balanced.
Experimentation Vs. Planning

In order to create something like a sculpture there must be a certain amount of planning that has to happen. How things are constructed to make sure it will be structurally sound, proportions of objects, assembly, disassembly, and reassembly. In my own practice I only want to plan so far. Even if I planned every single detail and aspect of a piece it would not end that way. I think it is important to leave some aspects open to change. I think of it more as a work evolving. A work may take many stages and forms of transformation like an insect molting before it takes a final form. This is a process of growth and development that is natural. Experimentation is a crucial part of my practice. It is a way to gain a greater understanding of materials and what is possible. I am always curious to see what else can be done. Working with materials in unorthodox ways can lead to discovery. It is the literal process of working that enables this to happen. The light bulb moment of discovery is such an amazing and wonderful feeling. I think it is one of the things that attracted me to art making in the first place. Constantly learning. Through experimentation things can happen that you wouldn’t expect nor could you ever plan for. Sometimes nothing comes of it, as it does not contribute to what you are working on, but it is now part of your repertoire and overall knowledge.


**Conclusion:**

I create fantastical or dream like imagery that verges on science fiction and the surreal. What I create is informed by my experiences and observations in nature and describes my personal philosophies on life as a whole. Through unifying a combination of imagery a relationship or symbiosis is depicted in a way to describe the astounding complexity of natural life within our planet. I create for myself as a way to better understand. Through working with different processes and experimenting with different materials I gain a better understand of the physical world. Conceptually it is a way to better grasp ideas like the infinite in a way that is comprehensible to myself as a human being. Within my role as an artist I create for others to inspire thought and to facilitate their imaginations. To give people a different perspective, and let them enter into another world. I hope to intrigue people and to provide them with the same sense of wonderment that I get from creating and from the world that surrounds us.