Thesis of Chris Fennell

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Of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment
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Master of Fine Arts

Athens, Georgia

Approved:

[Signature]

major professor

5.02.02
date
I remember proudly expressing during my thirty-hour review that I could graduate in another year. Larry Millard, the chair of sculpture, narrowed his eyes at me, “Mr. Fennell, we will keep you here until you have demonstrated a master’s level of work. And from what I have seen so far that will be a very, very long time.” So within these pages I will try to show work and thought of caliber. As my writing wane compared to my skills with chainsaw and hammer, I will stick to two dialogs: a chronological written account and a series of sketches from my journals.
I began throwing pots. I loved throwing and soon pots surrounded me. I also loved caving: crawling in and out of the ground to witness nature's grand demonstration of erosion and calcification. So it seemed natural for me to carve into these vessels the impressions that the cave left in my head. In some caves you get this cupping on the walls that is caused by high velocity streams passing over the rock. This cupping sets up a wonderful pattern. The pattern of the intersecting underground streams is one you can
walk through. This, I am sure, is what led me to build my large architectural structures. But at the time I was still in a small studio, carving pots, and loving it. I carved about eighty of these vessels. At that time I was also canoeing through the swamp and bicycling through the woods on a daily basis. Therefore, I began to carve through the pots with the rhythms that I found in nature: the arches of the cypress trees, the angles in a thorn bush, the patterns of the leaves. Unconsciously all this was going on. I was seduced by clay to such a degree that I didn’t ask why I was doing this, only, “When can I do it again?” In an effort to do more of this, I went to grad school and proclaimed; I am making Art about God. You can imagine how well this went over! Larry Millard starts his speech about all beginning students trying to fit heaven and hell in one piece. I half listened and continued to carve these large totems out of wood about the Holy Spirit, because I want to transcend. It’s really quite funny when I look back on it. I wanted an epiphany, so I carved the symbol. Still, the months of carving released my subconscious. The hind brain who had been locked away, who was about the canoeing, caving and things I could only guess at, produced the healthier aspects of Doorway.
Now, I have been in Georgia a year now, and one of the more profound things I did, looking back, was to help tear down Jimbo Buonaccorsi’s barn. I found a wonder in the old barn that brought me back to my childhood of growing up on a small farm. I remember looking at all the old tack and wondering what it was used for. The barn was filled with the past and I could feel the power of it all around me. If I could harness this feeling in a sculpture...

First I would need to be freed of my main misconception, that I was making Art about God. For this I would need the guidance of Larry’s class and a painting grad, Daniel Finch, to prod, push and demand, why? I would also like to add that my art history classes helped and on that eve of my revelation, I was studying two artists and I would later proclaim that I had been saved by Manzoni and Kline. Now, this does not mean that I sprinkled blue pigment over my crap and canned it. In fact, I can’t tell you how they made me ready, but they were the ones. Perhaps it was Kline’s spirituality and Manzoni’s understanding of the audience. Their irreverence of what Art is supposed to be; yet I felt they had hit Art dead center. Daniel pushed and pushed, and I proclaimed and proclaimed it was about the epiphany, the realization of God in the world, but the more and more that we argued the more and more I was forced to admit, it was about the Ah!

What is the Ah? There is a barn on Route four forty one just north of Madison that is beautiful. It is up on a hill beside the road and either end of the barn is blown out. The roofing is all that still holds the mammoth structure up. The peak of the barn’s roof has been pulled down into a graceful arch. It is obvious that the barn is going to fall, but currently it is in a peculiar state of balance. Aihhhhh! If I could show this, no, if I could
share this experience with others, that would be worth while. At first I wanted to rebuild the barn but, hell, that wasn’t going to work. People would just see a falling down barn and miss the point. I had to isolate the grace and show them in such a way that anyone could understand. Here is where my engineering studies came in handy. I knew that the concept of the arch and the effect of a cantilever were holding up that barn roof, but how to show it? And so I went to bed.

The gumball machine: a little explanation on how my mind works. I am an idiot! It’s true. I listen to things I say at parties, comparing the sit-com Seinfeld with Modernism. Yes, I am an idiot. But my subconscious is pure genius. I will toil over a problem all day, come up with stupid solutions and go to bed. The next morning while taking a shower it all comes into focus. There like a gumball out of the machine is a vision. A clean simple solution.

So I woke up and took a shower and there was my vision, a wave. It’s a simple form that embodies the coiled up power caught in the top of that barn. Leaning the back of the wave off the pad would produce even more tension, great! How high should I make the wave? What direction should it crest? I looked at the pad and it was fourteen feet wide, a circle. Good, the wave would have a fourteen-foot diameter crest. That made sense. Also, the building behind the location had a weird roof that was made up of three rising triangles with little flat roofs protruding such that they looked like waves. OK. My Wave would crest to the left. Luckily, when I helped Jimbo tear down his barn I salvaged a good stack of wood. I decided I would not use a saw. I would just pick them up and nail them in. I just had to remember to place them all at thirty degrees to each other, like ripples on the surface of water.

In three days, I had the Wave. It was right next to a very busy bus stop and I had my first hit. Very exciting. One of my review committee, Ed Lambert, liked the Wave and noticed how sensitive I was to the site. He suggested that I talk to Dexter Adams who is in charge of the grounds on campus.
In back of the main art building there was a great tree on the side of the cemetery that looked out over the parking deck and Thomas Street. It had a long tall narrow hole into its center that rose forty feet and was topped by two branches that had crossed, grown together and been trimmed so that they formed the lintel to a beautiful gothic doorway into the tree. Such magic and now it was gone. I would try to put it back. Dexter gave me permission and I went searching for boards. I needed bark on the boards and they needed to be irregular twisting boards to build the structure I had envisioned during my productive morning shower. So I went out to Lowery Gallery where the owner, Robert, said he needed some trees taken down. He was concerned about this one hitting his barn. I looked at the stream cutting under the root system of this seventy-foot tall sweet gum and agreed.
Dog Skull. I argued that I should top the tree. Robert said that the tree would hit the magic dog skull. I pointed out the physics of center of gravity. Dog Skull. I stopped three times. Dog skull. Now, I must make this clear, I was holding the chainsaw when the tree fell and ripped through the barn. It fell like a samurai sword, straight through the barn. There was a beautiful sunset behind what was left of the barn as I stood there, my mouth agape. It was one of the more unforgettable photos in my memory. Robert walked up to me and said, “Did you hear that? That was incredible!”

I spent the next month fixing the barn with Robert and cutting the tree up into boards. The tree fell over the creek, so I would sit on the log, a leg over each side and plunge the tip of the saw into the tree. If you place the saw in backwards, it will pull itself towards you and try to rise up out of the log and shoot up your groin. Not a pretty picture. I kept my attention on the cutting, letting the blade wander from side to side, reminiscent of a branch growing up to sunlight. Soon I had a stack of twenty-foot long wavy boards with bark on one side. Perfect.

Back on site, I walked around the five foot in diameter ring that was left. The center of the tree was eaten out and there was this slot on one side where bark had curled in around the edges. There would be the door. I cut notches around the outside and slipped in boards. Pushing them up into place I nailed them together. Now I wove in members that tilted to the right and nailed them in place. Damn, this was fun. As I worked my way up I had to climb up onto the structure with the next twenty-foot board in tow. This was very heavy and very satisfying as I would balance precariously and nail it in. At times I would be hanging off of the outside of the structure, some fifteen feet off the ground, swinging the hammer for all I was worth.

Two sculptures done, and I had still not figured out that I was building large architectural structures off the thrown and carved lattice vessels done years previously. It would be another year before Robert Stackhouse pointed out the obvious. At that time I did know that I wanted to build a tornado out of old houses. While in line waiting to vote, I started up this conversation with one of the vice presidents of the university. I said tornado, she said Wizard of Oz. I paused and gaped; “I am going to build a tornado out of bicycles!”
Up to now I firmly believed in limits. Stupid me. Even with that harness on myself, I threw the challenge out to the world. I would tell everyone about the Bicycle Tornado. If it was meant to happen, the bicycles would come, and they did! Steve Arnold, the sculpture shops tech, told me that Dixon’s Bicycle Shop was moving and I went there. Lawrence Stueck, a former sculpture grad, suggested I go out to AC Peck who builds these twirly things from bike wheels. Then I received a grant from the grad school. This was going to happen! I spent the ideal summer. I would bend each bike into a curve so they would stack and add rigidity to the structure. Once again I found myself climbing up one of my unfinished sculptures with an element over my shoulder, this time a bike, and weaving it into this rising vortex. I would then weld the bike into place. This became an adventure, a mountain to be climbed, and I savored it. I had begun working nights to beat the heat. I remember one night, I was up on the structure and a thunderstorm was moving in. It was midnight and the wind was blowing. I stood on the swaying top. The wind rose, and with lightning and thunder I felt like I was on a ship in a storm.
When it was completed, Phil Golding, another former sculpture grad with a boom truck, moved the Bike Tornado onto site in front of the Ramsey Center. As Phil expertly moved the upper arms into place, Rick Herzog (You guessed it, another former sculpture grad. These guys are great!) helped me wrestle them into place. The two of us were on top of that shaking mass until we got the bolts in! It was stupid, but damn, it was fun. Now I should tell you, if you hadn’t guessed: I am an adrenaline junkie. It’s sad and quite juvenile, but that too, is part of the work.

Imi Hwangbo, sculpture professor, suggested that I build one of my big tree pieces inside. Hmm, well, I had been thinking of the relationship between truss bridges and trees. If I could find a huge fallen tree (I didn’t want to cut another down, for I remembered the barn and I feared more bad karma), could I cut up all the Y’s of the tree into ten-foot sections and then bolt them together into upside down tripods? Could I work them into my exit show coming up in the museum?

It turns out that my friend Rick Herzog had a huge tree come down in his next door neighbor’s yard. The owner let me have it and the tree almost killed me. Once again I was stupid, really stupid. The tree was down on its side. It was an easy eighty feet long and twenty feet tall (On its side!) and weighed around three to four tons. I didn’t listen to Rick’s warning. I ran right to the top and, straddling the limb, I started cutting. The top branch was about forty-foot long and weighed about a ton. Halfway through, it cracked but was still attached. Everyone was yelling at me. I stopped and we tied a rope around
the limb. These two huge guys pulled on the limb while I cut. The falling limb, easily weighing a ton, just missed my toes. Everyone yelled and I waved signaling that I was ok. Then the tree began to roll. I don’t know where my chainsaw went. I remember turning and riding the tree like a surfboard, and when it rolled a good forty-five degrees I slid off of it and ten-foot down, through brush, to the ground. I remember vividly the tree rolling over me in the green twilight. It was like when I was a kid, caught in a wave at the beach. It was awesome. The huge mass was rolling over me and it was like I was in one of my huge sculptures, but it was alive. I was caught in the vortex and all was in flux.

This is my sculpture! Interesting, Robert Stackhouse recently had my slides out on a slide table and was discussing my artwork. He moved them around like Tarot cards and began the story. He said you are making large architectural skeletal pieces that are about being in danger. These vortexes are unsafe places: huge waves, bonfires and tornadoes. Yet, the viewer can approach and stand in and under them safely. This is what you are doing. There in the turning of the tree, on top of the tornado in the thunderstorm, hanging off the side of the reconstructed tree, I am. It was all about the edge. Not the fall, but the edge. The Ah I am trying to impart!

Huge pieces of the tree came to rest on either side of me. The tree vibrated above me. I could hear my friends yelling. I jumped up like Steve Martin in Parenthood and shouted, “I’m ok!” and walked out in a daze. Awesome, stupid, you bet! I was building sculpture. I was alive. For the month of December, I was out there in the cold and rain sawing up the Y’s of the tree. I got sicker than a dog and wore a respirator and cursed and cut and climbed up that mountain. So much for the physical challenge, how about the mental challenge, you might ask? Well, turns out that an upside down tree in the museum would not be enough. The boards were massive and as I bolted them together they were awesome, wonderful minimalist sculpture, but I was still trying to write pop songs. “What?” you say.

Pop Songs: On my fist visit to the university I met with Rocky and joined him in a critique of one of his student’s work. The student’s work only functioned if you knew that Duchamp made his money from sweatshops. I pointed out to him that he had a very limited audience. He expressed that he wanted more people to get the meaning and I agreed that I did too. I wanted to make sculpture that everyone could experience. I explained to him that I wanted to make sculpture like a pop song. I wanted the simple to enjoy it for the beat, the melody. I wanted the average to like it for the words, to understand its direct meaning. I wanted the intelligent to understand its mixed meaning. I want to build large outdoor public sculpture that will be embraced by all. Currently, I see these large outdoor public pieces and hear the common man say, “What is it? Why am I paying for this?” Minimalist art is made for people who understand art. It is art about art, and like any joke, only those in the know get the joke. Therefore, the common man is left looking at these large orange cubes in front of city hall and, not getting it, is offended. I came to school building large pieces that the average viewer liked. I still use small children as a litmus test for the base success of a sculpture. If a small child will stop and stare at my sculpture, then it has that root appeal. The next would be adults that have nothing to do with organized art coming up and telling me some personal story based on the piece. I could do the two of these when I came to school, but I could not get the art-educated audience to take a second look. In hindsight, I could not get them because I was uneducated in art. I knew little of what art was about, and therefore could not
communicate to the educated. After lots of art history and many dialogs with my professors and fellow grads a light came on. I don’t know when or where or how, but in the Barn Wave I saw the evidence. When a little kid stopped and stared up at the Wave, I knew it had the basic stuff. When Dr. Firestone, Art Historian, nodded that the wood thing looked nice in front of the Lamar Dodd Art Building, I knew I had achieved my pop song.

So here I am back in the Georgia Museum with my dilemma, of how to show the great power in these log/beams. Again, I am an idiot, so I eat, drink and sleep on the idea. The inner mind does its computing and I wake and shower. Gumball! There in the shower, relaxed, I have a vision of my huge walking trees pushing up through a deck under the museum ceiling. I ask Greg Benson, the MFA show curator, for the hallway but he directs me to the Dodd Gallery. This isn’t going to work. So, more sleep and another gumball, this time a pagoda of sorts. An upside down rusty roof is suspended by the giant walking trees. What does it mean? Now I am troubled. My computer is kicking out stuff I don’t even understand. The original platform idea was about the emotion I felt when I was a little kid walking under the big kids’ tree fort in this jungle. I wanted to go up there and see what was there, yet I feared if the big kids caught me I would be beaten. Desire and fear. Now there was a sculpture I could understand, but my new vision was of an upside down rusty roof supported by these trees. Did my new vision satisfy that desire and fear? I would have to have faith on that inner machine. I built Tree Roof a half-hour before I began tearing it down again for the move and installation.

Did it work? They tell me it did. I barely got it up before a group of visiting eight graders wanted to climb all over it. If you are reading this I graduated. (I liked it. It gave you the feeling of being under this huge belly. Some said it was like Noah’s Ark in the treetops. Others… well there was excitement.)

During the show people asked me if I would build more museum work. No. I am trying to convert those that don’t look at art or even consider art. I want them to see not only that art is important, but that we should be building it all over the place. Actually, my dream is that I can inspire the masses to make art. To search in themselves for their dreams and make them solid, to do with their lives what they want above and beyond art. Wow. Talk about Heaven and Hell. This is probably my next lesson, to find out that I am not really trying to save humanity, I am just playing. Finding the repeated patterns in nature. Building vortexes. Carving abstractions of the human form. Throwing and carving pots just for the sheer fun. Hmm, to be only Chris Fennell and nothing more.

On to building Barn Mother!
Thanks to everyone who made the building of these large monoliths possible, for permission, raw materials and most of all, strong backs: Rick, Joni, Heather, James, John, Andi, Brian, Mike, Ashley, Rusty, Roger, Neil, Kelly, Shane, Benny, Trai, Carl, Robert, Jen, Jim, Phil, Lawrence, Bob, Larry, Jimbo, Jack, Horace, Evan, Steve, Dexter, Rocky, Imi, Ted, Art, Mike H, Carol, Wade, Jerome, AC Peck, Rick the printer, Jean Dixon, April and the dozen passing cub scouts. I am sure the list goes on where my memory fails. Please forgive me and thanks.

One final lesson:

After my final final, Stackhouse brought me back to his studio and we had one more talk. I mentioned I might get an architectural degree someday and he bit my head off. “This is a terminal degree!” he stated. “If you need knowledge, go get it. YOU NO LONGER NEED SCHOOL!!” I also made some flippant comment about needing to dust off Engineering Chris; this really made him crazy. “Engineering Chris has always been here. He is the guy that figured out the Bicycle Tornado, that loaded all that wood on your little truck, that first saw the repetition in the trees! Wake up, Mr. Fennell, you are all these things, ONE CHRIS, stop compartmentalizing yourself. Embrace who you are and get to doing what you were made to do, now!” Ok! I’m off to gather cedar and build Barn Mother, and so many other things.
Artist Statement

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I build architectural skeletons from discarded objects. The elements in the structure swirl about a center and lean forward. They are typically from something society has cast out, for example: old barns, old bicycles and downed trees. I carve or construct these elements into swirls and curves and connect them into recognizable shapes, for example: waves, tornadoes, a pillar of fire. I construct these sculptures for specific sites taking advantage of surrounding architecture and flora. I place the sculpture for maximum effect of discovery and scale.
Appendix B- Veda

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EDUCATION

EXHIBITIONS
Bicycle Tornado. Outdoor installation, Ramsey Center, University of Georgia, Athens, GA. 2001.
Solo Show. Lamar Dodd School of Art Gallery, University of Georgia, Athens, GA. 2001.
Flea. Outdoor installation, Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, GA. 2001.
Tree House. Outdoor installation, Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, GA. 2001.
Barn Wave. Outdoor installation, Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, GA. 2000.
Solo Show. Lamar Dodd School of Art Gallery, University of Georgia, Athens, GA. 2000.
Group Graduate Student Show. Thompson Gallery, University of Georgia, Athens, GA. 2000.
Group Graduate Student Show. Thompson Gallery, University of Georgia, Athens, GA. 1999.
Solo Show. Teaching Gallery, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL. 1999.
Solo Show. CAE Systems, Tampa, FL. 1999.
Solo Show. Teaching Gallery, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL. 1998.

WORK EXPERIENCE
Instructor. Lamar Dodd School of Art, University of Georgia, Athens, GA. 2000 -2002.

AWARDS AND GRANTS
Design Award. American Society of Mechanical Engineers. 1990.