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For Future Reference, UCD Studio Art MFA Thesis Exhibition 2014

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UC DAVIS 2014 MFA STUDIO ART EXHIBITION

for future reference

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In today’s culture, a fine art studio practice has never before been so potentially compromised by the beeps, bells, and whistles of technological distractions. Never entirely free from the necessity for communication with outside entities, an artistic practice goes hand in hand with text and email correspondences balanced with the potential and excitement of studio visits. Within a two-year intensive studio program, the task of balancing and filtering all these guiding voices is tantamount to successfully pushing an artist’s work to the next level.

In my experience at UC Davis, never has a graduate group been so tightly knit as to keep each other to task and held accountable for their actions. To some degree, the artworks exhibited in For Future Reference are the culmination of a great collaborative effort. Not in the traditional sense of the word collaboration, as each work is born out of the individual energies of the artist presenting, but rather, through a nurturing support and mutual respect for each other’s similarities and differences. While their mediums are as varied as their methodologies for making art, some distinct connections can be made.

Both Joyce Nojima and Daniel Harano use systems of repetition in their practice that echo with reverberations of macro and micro worlds. However, Harano’s module forms are additive and invite the viewer to ponder abandoned cityscapes or geologic phenomena found in crystal caves or the rock formations of Fingal’s Cave in Scotland. On the other hand, Nojima uses techniques of burning away holes in plastic materials to create complex patterns that recall the expanse of the universe or the organisms found in a petri dish.

Rachel Gelenius and Alyssa Lempesis are both inspired by the body and work sculpturally with a wide array of materials. Gelenius’s ambiguous forms hover somewhere between abject figures and architectural ruins while often leaving the artifact of the artist’s own visceral engagement with the materials intact. Meanwhile, Lempesis sculptural explorations explore a bold use of texture and color inspired by medical textbooks, science fiction, and organic processes, which imply the possibilities existing between alien imaginings and paleontological reconstructions.

Less obvious connections exist between Jamie Dunn and Jeff King, who both embrace elements of indeterminacy grounded in structural frameworks. Traditions of wall drawings and performance art are echoed in Dunn’s site-specific assignations, which are often ruled by simple found or built props that impose limitations upon her body in the work’s making. King’s strategies are, at times, set by self-imposed temporal or spatial constraints, but leave open an ability to engage spontaneous thought as his subjects are often inspired by found pieces of texts, doodles, or photographs that he has come across randomly.

Lastly, both Jacob Greenlund and Brett Davis engage fragments of psychological narratives within their works through very different mediums. Greenlund’s use of performance and video explores the complexity of persona within a critical dialogue with forms of popular culture, like advertisement and hip hop. Cinematic and literary references abound in Davis’s compositions that fracture narrative semblance for the evocative pleasure of substantially thick and layered painterly surfaces.

In times tested, this group of young aspiring artists, despite their diverse practices, has exemplified creative camaraderie and together has created a model for themselves of a potential way to engage and interact with future creative communities. While the bond may not be literally evident in the individual bodies of work, the proof lives in the ambitions of the art on display.

The Master of Fine Arts degree in Art Studio at UC Davis offers a unique opportunity for study across a wide range of visual arts. The focus is to hone artistic and perceptive abilities, build technical skills, and foster intellectual development for individual students in their pursuit of careers as practicing artists. Students are strongly encouraged to explore whatever medium best serves their expressive needs. The Art Department has facilities for drawing, ceramic/clay sculpture, painting, photography, printmaking, video, and sculpture (we do not have a foundry). Graduate students are also given large, individual studios on campus, which are located near the main art building with 24/7 access. The MFA Thesis Exhibition is an opportunity for our candidates to present their best works reflecting the culmination of their creative research into a cohesive exhibition.

Art Studio Faculty

TOM BILLS (sculpture) | MATTHIAS GEIGER (photography)
MIKE HENDERSON (painting) | DAVE HOLLOWELL (painting)
ROBIN HILL (sculpture) | DARRIN MARTIN (video, media) | HEARNE PARDEE (painting)
LUCY PULS (sculpture) | ANNABETH ROSEN (ceramic sculpture)
YOUNGSUK SUH (photography) | GINA WERFEL (painting)
Brett Davis's recent work explores the ephemeral nature of both medium and subject. Moving from abstract to figural, from monochrome to increased coloration, his process is one of constant rediscovery and reinterpretation of both existing and imagined forms. Building off of previous works that experimented with the relationship between color and light, Davis probes the multifaceted nature of medium and texture via canvases of varying sizes and stylistic approaches. His work includes large paintings that explore the human figure and its visceral, sometimes violent qualities, as well as collections of Polaroids that serve as catalysts for some of the more abstracted forms found in his compositions.

The Polaroïds in some sense function as partial “clues” that inform aspects of the artist’s other paintings. A combination of the planned and improvised, Davis's painting experiments with texture through a process that results in constant emergence of new forms. His work includes large paintings that explore the human figure and its visceral, sometimes violent qualities, as well as collections of Polaroids that serve as catalysts for some of the more abstracted forms found in his compositions.

The larger paintings, which are a combination of older and newer works, examine different dimensions of the human form and how color can communicate shifts in expression, emotion, and interpretation. Davis’s multimedia approach to figurative painting uses paint as both a medium to be controlled and as an active participant in the shaping of his forms. While paint and color express abstract ideas and concepts in a tangible way, the artist’s Polaroïds only hint at the content of his larger paintings. The artistic process is at once concealed and revealed to the audience; Davis does not see it as his obligation as an artist to fully articulate to the viewer what they are “supposed” to see.

Due to his changing process and his inclusion of seemingly random, unexpected elements, Davis’s approach is always in flux. He often combines two paintings together, scraping away the surface of an older work, or uses a Polaroïd as sudden inspiration for a new shape to emerge or a scene to develop. Davis works to find the concealed forms within his chosen media and free them from the expectations and confines of traditional figurative painting. The artist’s creative agency is captured through his material process and approach to varied subject matter, yet his work still allows for individual interpretations to be formed by the viewer.

The mindful, self-aware nature that makes humankind uniquely also imparts a continuous internal narrative of conflicting emotions. This challenge of self-awareness is the impetus for Jamie Dunn’s body-centric performances, drawings, and video recordings, which express the process of coming to terms with inner struggles. In the performances How Long It Takes Me to Learn I Don’t Need Something and Up Soft High Far, Dunn uses her body to enact mental conflicts in an attempt to find liberation from their grips. Likewise, by embodying the internal narrative that we often conceal, Dunn merges the disparity between her mind and body in an endeavor to communicate and understand unspoken needs and fears. Dunn begins each performance with an intuitive need and accompanying motion. For example, in How Long It Takes Me to Learn I Don’t Need Something, the artist starts with the repetitive actions of kneeling and standing in order to understand the source of her original impulse. At the beginning of the performance, Dunn rolls her pants up above her knees and places her hands, face up, on the small of her back. In the video recording of the work, Dunn reveals the source she had been looking for when Dunn ceases action, moves out of the camera’s frame, or paints over layers of drawing. It is at this time that the artist allows herself a reprieve from fear and encourages the viewer to do the same.

In order to communicate and understand the fleeting nature of her artwork is most prominently outlive her physical motions and transient thoughts, Dunn considers her drawings and performances completed when she has fully released the original conflict she set out to express. Her path to finding this acceptance, through drawing and action, may last for minutes, days, or even weeks. However, the fleeting nature of her artwork is most prominently exposed when Dunn ceases action, moves out of the camera’s frame, or paints over layers of drawing. It is at this time that the artist allows herself a reprieve from fear and encourages the viewer to do the same.

How Long it Takes Me to Learn I Don’t Need Something, Dunn limits her ability to move or perform outside of restricted parameters in Up Soft High Far. Derived from the desire to sleep elevated next to her studio wall, the artist constructed a wooden perch just large enough to accommodate her body as she lies on her side. For this piece, Dunn combines lotions with graphite and charcoal to make large, gestural wall drawings from her position on the perch. The layers of gestural black marks, created with the artist’s lotions-covered hands, illustrate the physical and mental struggle Dunn endures before she allows herself the sleep she needs. Although the drawings outlive her physical motions and transient thoughts, they too are ephemeral. Dunn considers her drawings and performances completed when she has fully released the original conflict she set out to express. Her path to finding this acceptance, through drawing and action, may last for minutes, days, or even weeks. However, the fleeting nature of her artwork is most prominently exposed when Dunn ceases action, moves out of the camera’s frame, or paints over layers of drawing. It is at this time that the artist allows herself a reprieve from fear and encourages the viewer to do the same.

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Looking at Daniel Harano's work, massive geometric sculptures composed of countless individual ceramic pieces, it is clear that there is a lot of "work" in his works. At first glance, his pieces may seem like an amalgamated heap of tiny sculptures, but upon closer inspection, patterns, rhythms, and intricate networks of color and design are discernible. Repetition of color and shape is the most readily apparent aspect of his composite sculptures in Harano's most recent work, a series of five basic ceramic elements—blocks, pods, cones, and square and cylindrical extrusions—are reproduced seemingly countless times, and compose the entirety of the greater sculpture. At the same time, a limited color palette of warm earth tones lends visual cohesion, bringing the pieces and sets of elements into a machine, while square extrusions penetrate small openings or "windows" in the cones' walls, integrating compositions on the large scale, a clear demonstration of his embrace of both the cohesive structure and vibrant disorder found in the natural world.

As one might imagine, these sculptures are incredibly time consuming and labor intensive, yet Harano relishes this process. He enters a state of artistic flow, a meditative state in which global crisis stands shoulder-to-shoulder with the language evokes a media-saturated contemporary reality in which the opposites are fused. This use of color and repetition in painting becomes a tool and a language of itself; negative space is made positively solid and unrelated words coalesce into phrases. Often, these verbal tics appear at first nonsensical or random, become imbued with a kind of relational rhythm—the quality of different voices wearing together somatically in the same room. In their emotional multivalence, we find the truths in our own relationships: fragmentary, sensitive and present.

Many of the paintings verbally reference King's colleagues, friends and wife; he cites these personal connections as a vital aspect both of his experience and his stream-of-consciousness marking, which is characterized by a process-driven commitment and vital emotional connection. As a result, the paintings, though stylistically disjoint, become imbued with a kind of relational rhythm—the quality of different voices wearing together somatically in the same room. In their emotional multivalence, we find the truths in our own relationships: fragmentary, sensitive and present.

Yet what is perhaps most compelling about King's use of text is its ability to go beyond the legible, its paint handling in working with text assumes an almost exploratory quality, pushing the boundaries of positive and negative space to shape the spaces around text that viewers usually see as voids. As a result, the presumed negative space becomes a solid, impenetrable positive, which projects into the viewer's space as the letters themselves recede and lose literal meaning. It becomes possible to plumb the depths of the letters themselves, searching among delicate grays, murky plums and abrasive, dark reds as though another image entirely reveals itself only through the text—as looking through a stencil. This limit—"cut-out quality activates both the space of the paintings and our visual vocabulary, drastically expanding the range of meanings that we take from the text. Letters transform into windows, and our ability to read is waylaid by our involvement, literally, with what's between the lines.

This sense of presence-within-absence pervades the Daily Paintings project, and indeed sits at the heart of King's MFA work. 'Text becomes image, legibility becomes a tool and a language of itself, negative space is made positively solid and unrelated words coalesce into phrases. Often, these verbal tics appear at first nonsensical or random in the individual paintings. Yet when King juxtaposes ditto and ambiguous words like "THERE IS NO EXCUSE (for everything you've done and everything you will do)" with a careful, almost elegantly executed Wife E Coyote on a chartreuse ground, their emotional multivalence, we find the truths in our own relationships..."
Although her work plays with the dividing line between creation and destruction, Rachel Gelenius's practice exemplifies unity of both material and form. The transparency of her process and the honesty of her chosen materials result in engaging and spirited works that are left open to interpretation. She does not wish to create something that the viewer will immediately recognize, but instead explores concepts of curated accumulation and constructed decay, a strategy that imbues otherwise static media with new life.

Gelenius combines materials—found and purchased, old and newly fabricated—to create sculptures that simultaneously recall the past and look toward the future. Her work establishes a personal history through the preservation of process marks; the resulting forms underscore a physical relationship to structures of the Classical past. The architectural quality of her work, coupled with a primarily white palette, intimate Greco-Roman ruins as they stand for us today: fallen, restored, and hinting at their original grandeur. The accumulation of varied media in Gelenius's sculptures alludes to the heavy presence of time and gives an impression of constructions gradually submitting to its effects. By acknowledging the conceptual power and manipulations have on the viewer. He mimics these operations of print and broadcast media aims to raise challenging issues of race and stereotypes. The artist wants to unmask the media's manipulation as a form of implementing negative associations at a widespread scale. In particular, Greenlund examines the tricks hip-hop artists are viewed, and common assumptions of mainstream video production such as editing, narrative and psychological layers of truth obscured by mass media and highlights misconceptions about the nature of hip-hop presented in mainstream media.

Gelenius's combination of plaster, steel, and delicate fabrics seems an idiosyncratic mix, but in her hands these various, static media are formed into cohesive sculptures illustrative of her process—an experiment of opposing forces at play. Fabrics seem an idiosyncratic mix, but in her hands these various, static media are formed into cohesive sculptures illustrative of her process—an experiment of opposing forces at play. Fabrics are left open to interpretation. She does not wish to create something that the viewer will immediately recognize, but instead explores concepts of curated accumulation and constructed decay, a strategy that imbues otherwise static media with new life.

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Jacob Greenlund focuses on film and television media in his installation and performance pieces. Greenlund demonstrates a multifaceted viewpoint regarding issues of race and racial stereotypes while revealing multiple narratives through his own character development. The artist targets how popular, mass media alters the viewer's perspective and attempts to underscore the subconscious bias of media production within his works. In For Future Reference, Greenlund provides the viewer with an experience that cohesively develops his sociopolitical and aesthetic interests.

Gelenius's inspiration comes from the underground hip-hop movement. Having been interested in the movement for more than a decade, he appreciates the quotidian, personal, and universal messages of these poetic works. The raw expression and unedited honesty present in much underground hip-hop drives Greenlund's desire to demonstrate a similar level of honesty within his own work. His use of stream of consciousness generates questions related to mass media influence, race and oppression, how these hip-hop artists are viewed, and common assumptions associated with hip-hop culture.

Greenlund's method of deconstructing the role and operations of print and broadcast media aims to raise challenging issues of race and stereotypes. The artist wants to unmask the media's manipulation as a form of implementing negative associations at a widespread scale. In particular, Greenlund examines the tricks of mainstream video production such as editing, the control of music, lighting, and the impact these manipulations have on the audience’s awareness of contrived illusions.

For Greenlund, performing is an evolving process, the vulnerability and authenticity hip-hop artists project propels the artist forward in his own character development. His performances advance new personas that emphasize particular roles within hip-hop culture. Through his performances Greenlund exposes cultural and psychological layers of truth obscured by mass media and highlights misconceptions about the nature of hip-hop presented in mainstream media.

Greenlund's installation piece in For Future Reference provides the visitor with the opportunity to experience a mediated dialogue between the artist and six local Sacramento spoken word poets. The works to the forefront a mixture of question and answer, stream of consciousness, and dynamic wordplay as created through a carefully edited aesthetic production. Greenlund's work is powerfully emotive and invites the audience to address questions of race, hip-hop, expression, and their own societal role for “future reference”.

**Enduring Change**

by Arielle Hardy

**A Retrospective for Future Reference**

by Kristen Koch
Of Play and Palpation
by Alexandra Craven

Material narrative connects art and viewership in Alyssa Lempesis’s sculptures through plasticity and fragmentation in her use of varied media. Lempesis’s use of plastic, fabric, and rubber creates skeletal, vegetal, and fleshy forms that, despite their synthetic origins, appear organic in design and texture. The organicism of the sculptures bonds the viewer to the work, producing a sense of familiarity with the sculptures and giving rise to ideas of tactility and life. This intimacy is exemplified in the sculpture Nice Parts, a three-part work that evokes touch and breath. The column of the piece serves as both base and sculpture, supporting a green bean-shaped abstraction, which is foiled by a rubber mold of the artist’s hand. The column looks like it is breathing through its uneven textured surface, revealing muscle-like forms under its “skin.”

Intrigued by the human body, Lempesis works her materials to understand the relationship between the internal and external of the organic form. The external and internal worlds of the human body take shape in Lempesis’s sculptures, blurring the division between the outside and inside, conveying elasticity and vulnerability. The barrier that separates the visceral from the skin is the skin; if damaged, the barrier is weakened and the rawness of the “body” exposed. Lempesis contorts, cuts, excises, and adds material to each sculpture she makes; often the original form is no longer recognizable in its last stages of creation. Though the pieces are inanimate objects, their proximity to the viewers walking through the gallery space makes them vulnerable, thus imbuing the sculptures with a sense of vitality. Lempesis’s organic shapes develop bodily associations; these associations range from disease and decay to growth and healing.

Rather than using deep hues of reds, purples, and blues as she did in her earlier work—colors that most resemble blood, veins, and innards—Lempesis now takes colors from the world around her; colors she deems friendly and inviting. Her palette is meant to evoke an open and interconnected interaction in the viewer to experience the object positively. Because her chromatic choices are unthreatening, the viewer is more willing to visually explore the sculptures’ surfaces. The organicism and malleability of Lempesis’s sculptures excite the senses with playful design, encouraging the viewer to decipher the connective tissues between color, texture, and form, and to come to her own conclusions about the symbolic meaning of each piece.
The manner in which any reflective human gathers evidence and input is not much different at any given time than groping about in a pitch-dark room. There are findings and assumptions, more findings and then more assumptions as the room is navigated. Space is measured with the body, footing found, forms are recorded and internally distorted.

I paint these groping spaces. Forms are found and get moved around in psychological light. As the surfaces of the works accumulate paint and begin to get messy the space becomes coagulated. I forcibly intervene with forms that lag in development. I scrape paint around, gouge it out, disinter some nearly forgotten passage buried in the skin. New air enters, the space takes up recharged navigability, and the forms become mobile again.

My mind shifts and scrambles for traction in the surface of the work. I record the ebb and flow of thinking in the surface. The space depicted quickly becomes personally sacred and objectively confused. Consequently, the bulk of my painting procedure is negotiation with the material to find form. Any accounts or images or notions whether taken as truth bend under the fiction of my individual gravity as I paint.

There’s a telephone, there’s a tree, then not anymore.

The marks are little imprecise memories that make the figure or forms or space warp in the body moored psychology. The one-time facts and records of memory embedded in my body lay claim to new information, and all of my investigations are automatically altered.

It is a corrupted report.
Interview Excerpt, Rachel Gelenius and Jamie Dunn, 1/20/14

R  Why is it important to do what scares you?
J  It’s important because there is something underneath of it that I want or that I lack and I don’t want to own up to needing.

If you could only ask me one question, what would it be?
R  What is your biggest fear?
J  In my life or in my work, it’s the same. I fear hiding, being alone, being dishonest and not doing what I actually need to do.

II

SLEEPING
What do I need? When do I get to rest, I am warm
KNEELING
What is it? Do I know what I am doing? (No, I didn’t need to)
RUNNING/CATCHING
It’s okay to stop, I am real even if I only have a little
YOU COME HERE
I am awake and admit what I need
LOVING JAW
Speech felt by other senses, touching curiosity and touching care
HELD
Comfort, no running

III

Transitioning, the right to rest and stop and move, awareness without avoidance, I need you to be open to my attempts at communication, transformation, no need to make whole if never separate.
Ecology, the forces of nature, the macro and the micro, nearly anything and everything dealing with the chaotic harmony of nature are my interest. Through the plasticity of clay I throw, extrude and cast parts to assemble and arrange. With this I create my own ecosystems.
right now I’m writing an artist’s statement. la di da di da. it’s April, 2014, the day of the 18th. this will be a placeholder for my statement in the catalog, roughly 300-400 words. it will be poetic and dull, like my life, but full of excitement: like my life. occasionally!

one of the projects I’ve been working on for thesis is an ongoing Daily Painting project. it’s exactly as it sounds – I make one painting every day (that I step foot into my studio). 16 x 20 inch store-bought canvases, all the same. can’t paint on them the next day, that’s the only rule, which I’ve broken only once, on the first painting. the paintings have generally gotten better since then, I think.

I have doubts about certainty. I’m stiff enough as it is. I suppose knowledge can’t be avoided within a practice, but it’s probably not a bad exercise to incorporate. http://youtu.be/2Hp-EAxW6s8 I believe there’s some value in keeping yourself a little at arm’s length, slightly at bay.

did you know that butterflies taste with their feet?

“I’ve been trying to find a good answer. I also put up a Nerf basketball hoop to practice trying to hit a target, as my painting practice had been likened to a golfer tapping putts on the green, no cup or target in sight. I think it helped. At least, it got me moving around in the studio again.” – Jeff King, excerpt from artist’s statement for seminar critique Fall 2012

“and then yet again, maybe this is myself opening to possibilities. as I sometimes find myself backed in and brought to some narrowed cynical view, a new way emerges. a thing is found and I go again. moving along. happily clucking in the wind.

because I am a big chicken. and I am a delicate flower. at least, that’s what I’ve been told.” – Jeff King, excerpt from artist’s statement for seminar critique Fall 2013

right now I’m writing an artist’s statement. la di da di da. it’s April, 2014, the day of the 18th. this will be a placeholder for my statement in the catalog, roughly 300-400 words. it will be poetic and dull, like my life, but full of excitement like my life. occasionally!” – Jeff King, excerpt from placeholder text for thesis catalog artist’s statement
Materials expose the flaws in my logic and building capabilities but show me possibilities and lead me forward. Molds break, wax chips, plaster crumbles and I have to respond. Chance and mistakes are important. I respond to spontaneity and unpredictability. I excavate and combine materials building from the inside out, drawing out a form that becomes figurative. Pieces fumble and awkwardly attempt to be graceful and elegant. Sheer and flouncy fabric contrasts the heavy messy crumbling mass it is trapped in. With a simple steel line and curve there is a hint of upward movement and downward spiral. I want opposites to work and exist together, something sturdy but fragile. Delicate and frumpy. The feeling of being complete in incompleteness. Pieces indicate the passage of time and have a history that is layered and lived. Hints of a past life peak through the current state and remnants are tattered, they taper and cling. Marks and actions are erased and worked over but still manage to have a presence under layers of time spent. Color is a means to unify. The heavy things want to be light, to twirl and grow but the action of collapse is captured. Pieces fall apart in their formation. It sheds any need to be static and exposes the cyclical nature of my practice. Each piece can be broken down, repurposed, reconfigured and revitalized into the building blocks of something new in their next life.
My work is influenced by an ethos found in independent hip-hop music, in which honesty or “keeping it real” is the highest priority, and manipulative messages are held under intensive scrutiny. In exploring the embedded layers of authenticity and artificiality in mainstream video production, character has become a powerful tool in my practice. Consequently my own identity and intentions have become essential subjects of examination.

Who am I? Who can I become?
Fragmented personas can show a portion of one.
Connect reflection of awareness from another point of view.
Pursue constructed comparison to discover the truth.

Through non-fiction fabrication, self-inflict interrogation
To penetrate defense mechanism; intent dissemination,
But I’m impatient.
A character engulfed in embracement:
A prompted impulse to make statements…sold

And it’s only just a part of me, but he is only partially
The person that I start to see projected as apart from…me.

As a white male researching identity through hip-hop, I am critical of the fact that I am embracing this form of expression without the foundational struggle of being oppressed in America. Inner View: Sacramento Speaks facilitates an improvisational round of questioning with members of an urban spoken word community in attempt to reveal and correct naiveties about the roles I play within hip-hop culture.
My biomorphic sculptures are inspired by the qualities of mysterious organisms and alluring insides. I am attracted to materials that mimic bodily behavior, and make textile skins to stuff and stretch, soft foamy fragments and hairy extensions. I hope to create objects that stimulate the tactile senses of the viewer and provoke curiosity. The desire to touch results in close examination, a heightened awareness of shared space that results in a performative intimacy.

Lumpy hunks and rubber fingers rest, while slimey resins settle in hollow fragments. They are filled with the energy of their construction and become props of studio play. Activated by imagination, I see them fumbling and wiggling long after you leave.
With my hands, I grip the plastic and pull it apart. Puncturing, disfiguring, welding, and drawing with a heated iron rod. Tentative gestures are interrupted by thick yet translucent scars. These marks echo the dichotomy between rhythm and atonality, thoughtfulness and impetuousness. The more I manipulate the material, the more volume is revealed. I search for beauty in destruction and become lost in the surface I create.
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2014 Master of Fine Arts Exhibition May 31 - June 21

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Jacob Greenlund, Alyssa Lempesis, Joyce Nojima
