Un-Earthed

William Austin McKinney

University of Mississippi

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Un-Earthed

A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Fine Arts
In the Department of Art and Art History
The University of Mississippi

By
William McKinney
May 2019
ABSTRACT

With this exhibition, I strive to create sculptures that reveal beauty and act as a visual reminder of the destruction we have caused by decades of industrial negligence and greed. Using the principles and elements of design I hope to create visually stimulating objects that resembles the beauty found in the hills of Appalachia. A dialogue is fostered that influences future generations by bringing to light the reality of our past transgressions.

My work addresses humanity's impact on nature. The mining of coal and natural gas in my home region of Appalachia has irrevocably damaged the environment. Unfortunately, this destruction in the name of profit is hardly isolated to Appalachia; it is a global epidemic. My ceramic sculptures are expressions of the tension between earth and industry. By contrasting abstract geologic forms and fragments of industrial objects, I attempt to engage the viewer’s curiosity of the neglected situations within the environment. My use of color, texture, glaze, and pattern convey a sense of both destruction and beauty of the earth. Drawing from my experience living in the Mountain State, I have forced contrasting imagery together to create tension and beauty within the forms.
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my sister Meredith McKinney, my niece Sadie Hilling, my nephew Wyatt Hilling, the people of West Virginia, and the future generations of Appalachia.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my mother Sheryl McKinney, father William McKinney, sisters Bridget and Maureen McKinney, as well as Matt Long, Brooke White, and Andrew McIntyre and the department of Art and Art History at The University of Mississippi.
PREFACE

I have always had animosity connected to my childhood home of West Virginia. Throughout this body of work I have attempted to examine and excavate this feeling of animosity, forming it into sculptures that question, and combine the beauty of the land, and the marks of industry. Witnessing the destructive fossil fuel industry, I began making work about my home state. I needed to better understand the significance and obscurity hidden from the public. The region in which I was born and raised seems to be repressed and misinformed. The people live in disbelief and praise these industries that continue the web of deception and ignorance. The lack of compassion for the land and the people created a destructive mentality that resulted in the contrast of industrial and natural environments.

Among the threats towards the environment, the people of West Virginia are among the country’s lowest in education and also have been heavily exposed to the opiate epidemic.¹ ² Thus sending the state into a vortex of doom. Keeping the people from the truth, and high on opiates is

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the perfect storm corporate America has produced and will continue to brew unless the Appalachian people rise up and take their land back. This catastrophe of a capitalistic agenda was created to provide inexpensive power for the nation.

However, it also created a work force among the people of Appalachia. Corporations from outside the state stimulated a conditioning strategy to ensnare Appalachian people in denial about their own worth. The people of Appalachia deserve better than what they have received. The destruction of nature for private gain in my home state of West Virginia inspired this body of work and will forever influence me and my artistic process. With aesthetics in mind, I use the conflict of Man vs. Nature in dual force deconstructing beauty. The tension created by pairing symbols of nature with elements of industry is a re-creation of beauty. My goal with this exhibition is to create visually compelling work, and to ask people to take a second look at themselves and the conflicts seen in the current society we live in.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ...........................................................................................................ii
Dedication ......................................................................................................iii
Acknowledgments ............................................................................................iv
Preface ...............................................................................................................v
Table of contents ...............................................................................................vii
List of Figures ...................................................................................................viii
Chapter I: Growing Up Weird in West Virginia ...............................................1
Chapter II: Effects and Damages .....................................................................3
Chapter III: Process ..........................................................................................7
Chapter IV: My Influence from Activist Art and Art History .........................9
Chapter V: Conclusion .....................................................................................13
Appendix A: Figures from writing ..................................................................15
Bibliography ....................................................................................................22
Appendix B: Figures from show ............................................................... 25
Vita ..................................................................................................................38
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FIGURE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appalachian Stone</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beyond Acceptable Limits</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coal Country</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Filtered</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fracked Rock</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mountaintop Removal</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(MVP) Mountain Valley Pipeline</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overflow</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reckless Practice</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rock Filter</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Runoff</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underground Leak</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

GROWING UP WEIRD IN WEST VIRGINIA

As a child I was exposed to the beauty of West Virginia. The wild and wonderful state is an outdoor enthusiast’s playground. Tourism is a leading industry in the state, yet it is no comparison to the fossil fuel industry that is forever changing the environment. Hiking, camping, and kayaking brings people to the region. It is common to stumble upon remarkable views and sometimes find the remnants of industry.

As an artist, I began reflecting on my past memories of the beauty in Appalachia and began imagining how I could make work about this region. I was forced to realize that the destructive tendencies of coal mining and fracking went hand in hand with the beauty of this place. It was not until I began getting lost in the forests of West Virginia that I unearthed abandoned coal mines and fracking sites hidden among the hills and hollers. Giant rusted steel structures scatter the landscape awaiting the next hiker to pass by. Often the signs of the coal and oil industry are in plain sight. Mountaintops shaved off and abandoned coal barges crashed into the banks of rivers are a common sight in the heart of Appalachia. When the natural resources are depleted the companies pack up and move to a new lush site, leaving behind the destructive remains of industry and pollution. Driving from town to town it becomes apparent that industry cares more about profit than the people and land.
West Virginia has always been a place of exploration and excavation. By the 1920's the majority of West Virginia's virgin forests had been depleted.¹ Along with the destruction of the land, industry found a way to exploit the people and gain monetarily through greed. In 1921, the battle of Blair Mountain broke out when miners became fed up with poor working conditions and unfair wages. 10,000 miners took arms against the mining companies and the government in the largest uprising in America since the Civil War.² Currently, the industry is waging a new war on the land by attempting to destroy Blair Mountain instead of preserving the mountain as a registered national historic site.

Coal companies have had their grip on the land and the people since the industrialization of Appalachia. These companies have created an ideology that nothing bad comes from coal, something I like to call the friends of coal syndrome. Companies like Massey Energy conjure up lies that keep the people of West Virginia supporting their greedy and destructive mission. As a child I was misled by these lies, but as an adult I can see the truth behind their destructive and money hungry agenda. Making work that points at companies like Massey Energy and EQT Corporation will hopefully bring light to the negligence found in their practices and exploit them as they continue to be major culprits in the abuse of the land and people.

CHAPTER II
EFFECTS AND DAMAGES

Little research had been done on the effects of coal mining before the creation of the EPA in the 1960's. The EPA was formed after contamination caused the Cuyahoga river in Ohio to catch on fire.¹ Today with our current political climate, research and codes of ethics have seemed to be put on the back burner. The people of West Virginia as well as people from other mining states are suffering from the harmful effects of the industry. Meanwhile the birth and boom in fracking the Marcella Shale under the Appalachian plateau 20 years ago has raised new concerns within this region.² The natural gas industry has taken over with a large legislative push, where the industry has been allowed to enforce emanate domain, thus allowing companies like EQT (a natural gas company) to take and use land for fracking or transportation of natural gas. Pipelines are being built throughout West Virginia with the mentality of exportation to foreign countries,

even though they will cross preserved national parks and the Appalachian Trail. The transportation and exportation of natural gas out of the country seems more important than the effects and possible disasters from fracking. Once enticing jobs now leave a toxic impression on the people and environment.

Water rights activists believe these pipelines are the dagger that will end the beautiful life as we know in West Virginia. Air quality as well as access to clean water are among the rising concerns in the Appalachian region. Lakes, rivers, and streams continue to be contaminated by the industry, and little has been done to reprimand these companies for their actions. My memories of walking in the forests of Monongalia, Marion, and Preston counties influences my work. Finding rocks in streams covered in an orange slime that smelled of sulfur was common. Water rushes over the rocks, but the slime stays. I remember picking up these rocks and scraping back through the sludge to find and expose the beauty hidden beneath the obvious greed of man. Industry has its rules and regulations, but do the companies actually follow and enforce them? This is a question that came to me while making this body of work and hearing of the current events back home. The companies that occupy West Virginia do not take proper actions while processing or disposing their fossil fuel of choice and their byproducts. This does not only occur in West Virginia. The mining of uranium along the Colorado river has produced concerns of its own. How and when do we hold these corporations accountable for their actions?

Many of these incidents could have been avoided, and events like these leave irreversible scars on the land and people. In 1972, communities in Logan County, WV, near the Buffalo Creek Valley, were flooded after a mine waste impoundment broke after heavy rains. 132 million

gallons of coal slurry flooded the valley with 20 foot waves. The slurry swept homes and business away, killing 118 people and causing 50 million dollars in damages. This was the largest and most destructive flood in West Virginia history. 6

On January 2, 2006, an explosion in a Massey Energy mine killed 11 miners. The investigation of the explosion revealed that the mine was not properly ventilated, and carbon monoxide gas flooded the mine, killing 11 miners. Massey Energy was found guilty due to prior cuts in the company’s budget and negligence in abiding to mine safety laws. Don Blankenship, the CEO of Massey, was apparently more interested in buying a second home than the safety of his workers. 7

In 2014, a container holding 10,000 gallons of a coal cleaning chemical spilled in the water of the Elk River, just outside of West Virginia's capital, Charleston. The spill contaminated the water and effected 300,000 people's access to clean drinking water. The communities affected were told not to even bath in the water. Through investigation, Freedom Industries was found guilty for its negligence to inspect and report issues concerning the container in the past 3 years. This is, once again, another accident that could have been prevented.

In most recent news, a newly installed Trans-Canadian pipeline in Marshall County, WV, exploded in June of 2018. 8 The explosion created a large fireball that could be seen from miles away. Thankfully no one was around, however this may be a warning sign for the people of West Virginia as construction continues on both the Mountain-valley-pipeline and the Atlantic coast

pipelines. These industries do not care about the land or the people; they are concerned with making money. They cut corners and allow for possible disasters. After observing the destruction caused by the fossil fuel industry, I felt the need to create work that had the beauty of the land but also the degradation. These companies need to be held at a higher standard than they have been in the past, to cut down or eliminate any possibility of future disasters. Holding the industry accountable is the only way to have change within the industry. Standing up and exposing the harsh truth of the fossil fuel industry, my work alludes to the liquidation of beauty by gluttonous corporations.
CHAPTER III

PROCESS

My creative process as an artist begins with observation. For me, that means getting out into nature and also seeking out industrial sites (i.e. power plants, coal mines etc.). After absorbing both I draw loose representations of elements from both nature and industry. Forcing these opposite components together in the form of sculpture, I begin to create a dialogue of the interaction of man and nature. After I have an idea for a piece, I make the objects out of clay. When making work about nature and man's interaction I start with a blank form. In most cases my work starts with rocks. This rock form is recognizable and represents the land that we all walk on. I chose a white material because of the ability to change the hue by adding other materials to transform the appearance of the rocks.

I primarily build with thick coils while forming the rocks. I then facet the form to create a rough, rugged textured surface that resembles cleavage seen in nature. From here the rock form is either ripped open or pierced by pipes and filters to show the shear destruction of industry. I emphasize tension by twisting or compressing the rock. This inability to return to its original form is a metaphor for the destruction of the land.

In geology there are characteristics that tell of the rocks physical properties. The
hardness, color, streak, luster, cleavage, and chemical reaction are all important in describing rocks. When making rocks, I purposefully focus on color, luster, and cleavage for aesthetic purposes. When determining the color of these rocks I make the decision by asking myself what happened to this rock? Is this rock being contaminated, blown up, or was it freshly excavated from the ground? If the rock was newly surfaced then the surface will remain somewhat pure with the addition of black underglaze to highlight the cracks and to give depth to the rock. If the rock is being polluted, I make the decision to add toxic, rust colors to the surface. This addition to the surface gives a luster that makes the work look oily. Blown up rocks get similar surface treatments. However, when building with the fragments of rocks, I glue them together with an oil-like black glaze to demonstrate the destruction from fracking and mountaintop removal.

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Neph Sye                 40</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>frit 3110                40</td>
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<td>silica                   10</td>
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Fired in electric kiln to Cone 3 or 2090 degrees Fahrenheit
CHAPTER IV
MY INFLUENCE FROM ACTIVIST ART AND ART HISTORY

I have always been interested in Artwork that falls under the umbrella of Activist and Environmental Art. Artists like Steve Montgomery, Richard Notkin, and Kahlil Irving use the medium of clay to express the need for acknowledgment and change within society that will affect humans across the globe. From the effects of Industry, destruction of war, and the injustice treatment of our fellow man, these artists take on the challenge of a conversation that not many would want to discuss. These scary subjects that seem unpalatable are subjects that need to be discussed to create a progressive and sustainable society. Without art that challenges society, humans will continue to destroy each other and the earth. My work falls in line with these artists as I exploit the negatives, and foster awareness of people's surroundings.

When researching these artists it was apparent that their use of symbolism was strong and engaged the viewers through recognizable objects or imagery. This use of symbols grabs the attention of the viewer and forces them to look closer at the subject on hand. Some are blatant and some are subtle, but all are carefully placed, and convey messages that need to be heard.
Steve Montgomery’s image sourcing stems from things he has seen. Being a native of Detroit, he uses imagery from the dilapidated buildings and tunnels that were left in the Motor city once the industry left. The images influenced by his surrounding is a similar tactic many artists use. In the book *Broken*, Montgomery says, “his installation titled “Test Site”

Fig.1, my 40-piece floor installation of over sized nuts and bolts (some of them 1.5 m in length) was built as a monument, not to the event itself, but the overwhelming responsibilities placed on such rudimentary components of construction as a bolt.” While using a simple and common object and playing with scale, Montgomery is able to grab your attention and create a dialogue between the viewer and the work. Montgomery’s use of simple objects referencing the events of 9/11 encouraged me to find something bigger than me to make work about.

In researching the history of my home state, I looked at how the fossil fuel industry continues to destroy my home in the heart of Appalachia. This research helped to create an honest and more compelling exhibition. My use of imagery in the piece Mountain Valley Pipeline Fig.2 was influenced by Montgomery's approach. I used a stack of pipes to represent the future effects new pipelines will have on West Virginia.

Richard Notkin also uses imagery from war to show the destructive mentality of man vs man. A quote by Notkin stuck with me as I looked deeper into his mission as an artist.

“If we can’t find more creative solutions to solving worldwide social and political problems than sending young men and women to shred and incinerate one another’s flesh with weapons of ever increasing efficiency, we will not survive to celebrate the passage into the 22nd

Century — the problems of human civilization are far too complex to be solved by means of explosive devices. And our country and too many of our world’s nations are now in the hands of right wing thugs and fundamentalist tyrants who are fumbling the planet towards World War III.”

His words are just as powerful as his work. In the piece “Men at Work” Fig.3 Notkin uses ceramic tiles as a way to convey his message about the destruction man has caused. The tiles carved in relief have imagery of ears, bombs, computer chips, and coins that look like US currency. The carved tiles containing ears surround a center set of tiles that portray bombs being released from an airplane hurtling to earth ready to explode and wreak havoc. Notkin's reasoning for making such politically charged work, is similar to the way I think of my work. We both are striving to find progressive ways to show issues within our society in hopes to create a progressive and better future for us all. I want my artwork to create an emotional connection, while expressing a meaningful message. Notkin's words and work do just that, and have influenced me in my journey to reveal the corruption of the fossil fuel industry. In the wall piece titled Filtered Fig.4

Kahlil Irving's work has influenced me in many ways. Irving’s antithetical decisions in making is complex and is a culmination of his surroundings. His work is a collage of common use objects, historical pottery, and imagery from the streets of busy cities. In the piece “Compact Mass – News; Nation Holds Breath for Death (Pride and Protest) – No Charges for Wilson “, Fig.5.

The viewer will find images of text from a newspaper crammed into a mound of what

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looks like rock and debris. I thought at first this work was about litter, and environmental pollution, until I interviewed him and asked what he was trying to convey. I asked him why a collage and how that helps influence his process and message. He stated

“How do you make things that are just as complicated as the reality we live in that talk about just as complicated situations and problematic issues like white people killing black people?”

This is an interesting view and made it clear to me that if you make something that is just as obscure as the topic in which you are concerned it can integer and engage the viewer in a different way. At first glance, Irving's work might resemble a pile of garbage, but when investigating the piece you can unearth pieces of newspaper that tell about an African American boy being murdered by white cops. Irving's work brings the audience closer, allowing him to unload the message directly. I also took this approach by adding industrial patterns and hazard signs to works like Reckless Practices Fig.6 that directly correlate the aspects of destruction to the beauty of the land. By hiding these industrial symbols, I encourage the viewer to investigate the work further.

Overall, these artists are using a duality of beauty to discuss a topic that is not so pretty. By grabbing the attention of the viewer with an object that is visually pleasing, these artists are able to form a space to discuss contemporary society. Through historical influence or familiar objects, artist will forever push the boundaries of making art and speaking their minds. It is a critique on society and could one day lead us to a solution on how to fix the issues we face.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

This body of work started with the concept of Man vs Nature in the Appalachian region, with an attempt to make activist art, that pointed the finger at the fossil fuel industry. To my surprise, the material pushed me to seek new answers to the question of what art is. This land is being manipulated, and sometimes ones concept has to be re-contextualized through the environmental tension that currently presides over the region. I found myself creating objects that reflected what I had been seemingly looking for the entire time, beauty. While making these objects I found the allure I truly longed for, albeit not what I had anticipated, nor did I realize that sometimes beauty is that moment when words cannot describe the experience.

The moment this show was fully installed it took my breath away. I was surrounded by objects that represent me and all my memories of West Virginia. Most importantly the work all spoke to each other, communicating the resolution of the work through beauty, even though the effects of industry lingered. Through my research and process I found a way to talk about the atrocities of the fossil fuel industry. It was not until I covered these man-made rock forms in a glossy oil like glaze that I discovered striking ascetics. My experience as a graduate candidate can be explained best through a quote by an experienced mountaineer Walter Bonatti: “The
mountains have rules. they are harsh rules, but they are there, and if you keep to them you are safe. A mountain is not like men. A mountain is sincere. The weapons to conquer it exist inside you, inside your soul.”

Graduate school was the mountain and the tools were within me the entire time. It just took the climb to Un-Earth the beauty that was hidden within my soul.

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12 Granowski, Damian. "Famous Inspirational Climbing Quotes about Mountaineering, Rock Climbing, Mountains and Also Funny Quotes :)." WinterClimb.com. Accessed April 27, 2019
APPENDIX A: FIGURES FROM WRITING
FIGURE 1, TEST SITE, STEVE MONTGOMERY
FIGURE 2. MOUNTAIN VALLEY PIPELINE, WILLIAM MCKINNEY
FIGURE 3. MEN AT WORK, RICHARD NOTKIN
FIGURE 4. FILTERED, WILLIAM MCKINNEY
FIGURE 5. “COMPACT MASS – NEWS; NATION HOLDS BREATH FOR DEATH (PRIDE AND PROTEST) – NO CHARGES FOR WILSON, KAHLIL IRVING
FIGURE 6. RECKLESS PRACTICE, WILLIAM MCKINNEY


Granowski, Damian. "Famous Inspirational Climbing Quotes about Mountaineering, Rock Climbing, Mountains and Also Funny Quotes :)."


APPENDIX B: FIGURES FROM SHOW
Appalachian Stone
Clay, Glaze, Underglaze
2019
Beyond Acceptable Limits
Clay, Glaze, Underglaze, Steel Pipe
2019
Coal Country
Clay, Glaze, Coal
2019
Filtered
Clay, Glaze, Underglaze
2019
Fracked Rock
Clay, Glaze, Underglaze
2019
Mountaintop Removal
Clay, Glaze, Underglaze
2019
(MVP) Mountain Valley Pipeline
Clay, Glaze, Underglaze
2019
Overflow
Clay, Glaze, Underglaze
2019
Reckless Practice
Clay, Glaze, Underglaze
2019
Rock Filter
Clay, Glaze
2019
Runoff
Clay, Glaze, Underglaze, Steel Pipe
2019
Underground Leak
Clay, Glaze, Underglaze
2019
VITA

William McKinney was born in Morgantown, West Virginia, on February 1st, 1993 he is the youngest child of William and Sherrie McKinney. William has been working in clay for six years. Upon his graduation from Morgantown High school in 2011, he attended West Virginia University in Morgantown for 5 years. William was a resident artist in Jingdezhen, China in 2013 while pursuing his Bachelors of Fine Arts at WVU. William Graduated with a BFA in 2015 and was accepted as a Masters of Fine Arts candidate at the University of Mississippi. While attending The University of Mississippi, William was selected as a delegate for the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts to attend the Autumn Ceramics Festival in Jingdezhen, China. William will graduate in May of 2019 with his Master of Fine Arts, with a major in Ceramics.