Figurative sculpture and drawing, a summation of a year's work

Matthew Burke
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/seniorscholars

Part of the Art Practice Commons

Colby College theses are protected by copyright. They may be viewed or downloaded from this site for the purposes of research and scholarship. Reproduction or distribution for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/seniorscholars/36

This Senior Scholars Paper (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Scholar Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby.
Figurative Sculpture and Drawing, a Sumation of a Year's Work

by

Matthew Burke

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Senior Scholars' Program

COLBY COLLEGE
1989
APPROVED:

Harr...[signature]
TUTOR

C. Abbott Meader
CHAIR, DEPARTMENT OF ART

Michael J. McCleneghan
READER

Diane...[signature]
C. Abbott Meader
CHAIR
To my mother and father, Harrett Matthews and the third dimension
I pursued the senior scholar project under the title and thought, Figurative Sculpture and Drawing. While studying sculpture and drawing, I spent time coming to know their basic languages and exploring a variety of media in each. Throughout the year, I worked with a figurative subject, addressing ideas proposed last fall; including sculptural elements like volume, mass, line, and balance; and various drawing techniques. I set up the proposal within a loose framework which allowed the project to evolve as I pursued the work. It also encouraged me to think freely and without reservation, because I was not bound to any planned pattern. As a result, the project evolved far beyond the original conception.

I explored new techniques of building sculpture such as, linear and massive construction; and pushed the drawings to include issues such as, the creation of illusional space and controlling the value. Also, this year's project demanded I work from both inspiration and discipline. But ultimately, I realized the process of creating sculpture was most important because it formed the pieces and gave them life. As, such when a piece is complete, the process becomes the piece and the piece the process.

I pursued a full year's study of the figure because I am intrigued with the body's messages as communicated through its gestures and actions. For instance, when people are sad, they tend to hold their body in a 'sad' posture, by folding in on themselves. If a person were being self assertive, he/she would stand and make the boundaries of his/her personal space very clear. People's deeper messages can be understood by observing their postures.
rather than the spoken word. In a sense, I am pursuing a "body language" in my work.

A full year study of the human figure also was another step toward my goal of understanding the human form. In work prior to this year, I often used the figure as my subject but never attempted anatomical studies. Though I have involved abstraction in this year's work, I have also pursued anatomical studies in drawings and sculpture.

There are a few terms I would like to define in order to make their use clear. For the sake of clarity, these terms are not related specifically to my work in this section. These terms seem to be defined in relation to things outside my work, but I have only come to know their meanings through a direct dialogue with the project.

Line can be applied to either sculpture or drawing. In both, line serves to define an edge or contour of a form. In sculpture, line is only a hypothetical idea. One may talk about the "lines" of a sculpture, but in reality line is nothing more than the joining of two surfaces to form an apparent edge.

"Implied or actual lines act to separate planes and give rhythmic unity and continuity to the whole by directing the eye within and around the form." ¹ In a sculpture, line leads the eye rhythmically and continuously by assuming a vertical, horizontal, or diagonal position. A line may also direct the eye through a change in thickness. For example, if the thickness of a line were decreased from end to end, the eye would naturally follow from the thick to the thin.
A line that defines the edge of an object in part is called a **lost and found line**. In a drawing, this line describes an edge rather than a surface. By the nature of its title, this line appears to stop short of the form it is defining. By doing so, the eye is left to complete the shape. It is through suggestion that the lost and found line sets up the illusion of space and three dimensional form.

A **contour line** is one that "delineates the edges of forms, separating each volume or area from neighboring ones." A contour line communicates a message about the surface of an object. In traveling along the surface of an object, a contour line also helps to set up the illusion of space.

**Mass**, like line, defines boundaries in a sculpture or drawing. It differs from line in that it produces an edge through the ending of a surface. A drawing or sculpture defined by mass would appear as a solid object, in which the surface might seem impenetrable.

**Form** varies slightly from mass as an idea. A form is the result of working in a "massive" way. For example, by rolling clay into a ball, the result would be a form, a ball. In this manner, form functions as a noun similar to the word "shape". The shape of the head could be described as the form of the head. But shape and form do not mean the same thing. Shape is more commonly used to describe a two dimensional, rather than a three dimensional object. For example, one would talk about the *shape* of a leaf, and the *form* of a ball. Form, therefore usually implies the third dimension.

As a verb, form is synonymous with the term "to mold."
The term value most appropriately relates to drawing rather than sculpture. The value in a drawing refers to the lights and darks in the work. A heavy value is darker than a light value. The range of value in a piece, means the amount of difference between the darks and lights.

Volume, or Enclosure, is an area of defined space and can be realized through any one of a number of properties. For example, one may use line to suggest volume. In this manner, the form produced would be hollow, with only its edges defined. Simply speaking, it would be similar to defining the edges of a cube with pieces of wire.

Volume (enclosure) can also be defined by working massively. Using the example above, one might define the cube through mass by creating its form out of surfaces of paper. Because the cube would seem impenetrable, it would be a "massive" shape (or form).

An armature is a structure that serves as a support for material that is added to a piece. Its structure is composed of wire or steel rods. The armature is one of the first steps in the process of building a sculpture.

Sculpture and drawing can be worked either additively or subtractively. Working additively in sculpture involves assembling parts onto a structure (armature) to form a volume; in drawing, medium is built up on paper. The subtractive process in sculpture involves taking away material from its source. While in drawing, it involves removing the medium from the paper with an erasure or solvent.
One might also refer to the movement in a sculpture or drawing. The movement of a sculpture or drawing does not imply that either are in motion; rather, it implies the forms give one the feeling of an object in motion. Movement in all forms of art hinges on direction of lines and surfaces. While a horizontal straight lines will be perceived as a "calm", diagonal sketchy lines will be perceived as a more "hectic" line. By incorporating a horizontal surface in a sculpture or drawing, there stands the appearance of only slight movement. Likewise, a vertical surface suggests still more motion while a diagonal surface gives the illusion of having the most. So, by combining these three basic ideas, I can give the work either a sense of dynamic or a sense of stasis, depending on the direction used.

Another element I use in my work is balance. A balanced drawing offers a solid composition, (be it symmetrical or otherwise.) More commonly, balance is an idea used in sculpture. A balanced piece is one that relates directly to gravity. My figurative sculptures that embody balance first, do not fall over and secondly, stand as to accurately represent the force of gravity on the posture of a body. The goal of a balanced sculpture would be to support itself under the strain of gravity. The piece would not work to suggest more violent movements as it might through vertical or diagonal principles.

A sculpture can go beyond balance to grace. In such a piece, the first purpose would not be mere survival under the strain of gravity. Rather, the movement in the sculpture would be avoiding strain at all costs. For example, think of graceful lines of a
building. Obviously, the building would not be in motion, but through the suggestion of its lines (say the roof line), one would get a sense that the lines were traveling from one point to another in the least strained manner. A graceful sculpture is one that works in a least strained manner. In a graceful drawing, the same principles are at work.

**Scale** refers commonly to the size of a sculpture. There are three basic sizes in which I worked my pieces; pedestal, in which the piece rests on a stand as its base. The second size, life size, usually operates without a pedestal and most often rests on or near the ground. The third size is larger than life, or monumental. Of course there are finer ways in which to define sculptural scale, but for the work I've done this year, these definitions have served me well.

The concept of the **cantilever** is another important device used to communicate messages. A cantilevered sculpture is a one that extends over its base. It is opposite to the "pyramid" style of building, where everything above the base is at the same time directly over the base.

These terms are in part, my vocabulary of sculpture and drawing. They are simple ideas, capable of transmitting my messages.

In a letter written by Seurat, he relates the formal aspects that convey emotional messages in his paintings. I believe these same elements are applicable to sculpture and drawing. The meaning of art is to communicate feelings and other human experiences through formal aspects like those outlined above. For
example, In Seurat's journal he describes lines "above the horizontal" in terms of "gaiety" and lines that travel "downward" in terms of "sadness."

Gaiety in terms of tonal value is a luminous dominant tonality; in terms of color, a warm dominant color; in terms of line, lines above the horizontal

Calmness in terms of tonal value is an equal amount of dark and light; in terms of color, an equal amount of cool and warm; and in terms of line, the horizontal

Sadness in terms of tonal value is a dominant dark tonality; in terms of color, a cold dominant color; and in terms of line, downward directions.

It is first through an understanding of the terms discussed above, and second, an application of them that I have increased my technical capabilities in making sculpture and drawing. I have evolved my technical capabilities through the application and re-application of these terms to my work, a trial and error process. By simply trying techniques, my technical abilities have advanced since the beginning of this year.

In drawing, I have suggested the idea of depth and illusional space by manipulating the value of a line. To the eye, as an object moves farther away, it also appears to become less distinct. By working with value to increase or decrease an object's distinction, I have created believable spatial illusions.
With the use of linear perspective, an illusional space can be created through the suggestion of a vanishing point. This device works by leading the eye back into the drawing. One's eye follows the converging lines into the background of the drawing, much in the same way one looks at converging railroad tracks. Illusional depth and space in a drawing can also be created by reducing the size of an object. As an object appears larger in the foreground, smaller in the background, the eye perceives this change as the result of spatial depth.

In learning to control these elements, I have also discovered they can work against me. For example, if I use a dark line inappropriately in a drawing, it can create an edge. This may serve to flatten out my form, removing any hint of spatial illusion. This occurs because the dark line or edge of the object is more prominent than the surface. When I flatten out the drawing with a heavy edge, the form is not allowed to function properly by "rolling back" and creating spatial illusion.

In my sculpture, I have employed thin metal rods and in this way worked in a "linear" manner. The rods in the sculpture, like the lines in a drawing, function to define areas of space. In sculpture, these lines allowed me to define an area without covering a surface. This has served useful for instances where I wanted the sculpture to take a large scale, but also I wanted it rather light. (see figure A., p.17.)

Usually, a large scale implies a weightier piece and the effects of gravity become more an issue. When I set up a sculpture defined through mass (with a covered surface), a heavy armature was
necessary to accommodate the additional weight. While I was willing to invest the time in such a project, I felt that working linearly was to my advantage because it was quicker and enabled me to work from my impulses rather than from second or third thoughts. It also allowed my ideas to flow more freely.

A "massive" sculpture, or one defined through covered surfaces, requires extensive support. Common sense dictates that an object's base be heavier, more dense, than an object's middle or top. So, in the weightier pieces, I have developed a method of forming support systems, or armatures. Last year, as my sculptures began to center on a figurative subject, and as my interest in the surface (and mass) evolved, the need arose for sound armatures. The work I was doing utilized 1/4 inch and 1/2 inch steel rods. First attempts were to build the armature completely from the 1/4 inch metal rods though, the virtue of their flexibility also failed to provide solid support. I then arrived upon a truer method of working these materials. While the 1/4 inch rods served most importantly as a medium for "sketching" my armature, the 1/2 inch rods best functioned as the heart of the armature, shouldering a majority of the weight. (see figure B1., B2., p.18.)

One of the virtues of defining area through mass is it easily suggests a force of powerful motion. Though my linear sculptures embody motion, my sculptures worked through mass more effectively transmit a powerful motion. This occurs because there is more defined surface in "massive" pieces. The more
surface, the more energy it can carry and suggest to the eye. (see figure C., p.19.)

Mass was also useful for my drawings. By turning the charcoal on its side, I was able to define areas through hearty "massive" marks. This method best captured the desired motion and emotion. This method also appealed to me because I was able to work more rapidly than I could have with line, mass defines more area in less time. Working rapidly in drawing keeps me loose and more in touch with my subject because I work from instinct.

The additive process as applied to drawing bestows a worked, energetic nature to the piece because I build upon layers of medium. The layered medium transmits an active, life-full character as it seemingly "evolves" before the viewer. The additive process also adds an enriched element to my sculpture with the suggestion of evolution achieving the same worked, energetic feeling.

As well as the additive process, I have relied upon the subtractive process this year in both my sculptures and drawings. The sculptural work went through stages of "built up" forms (additive/constructive) and reduced or "trimmed down" (destructive) forms. Through this process, I exacted desired shapes and forms. Through building and taking away, the additive and subtractive processes have allowed me to work in progressions toward my goals of conveying emotion. It allowed my sculpture and thoughts to expand and contract.

The additive and subtractive processes were vital in forming the armature of my pieces. I was able to add to the armature
where I felt the sculpture needed support or take away where I felt sections were not needed. From a reference point, I developed my sketched armature to maturity through the additive and subtractive processes.

As my pieces developed, attention shifted from the inside (and the armature), to the outside or surface of the sculpture. I worked toward embellishing the surfaces of my pieces so as to engage the eye. I attempted this through bending the sheet steel and exaggerating the metal's flexibility. Because such fluidity is not usually considered one of the qualities of metal, the flexible element moved beyond merely engaging the eye toward visual deception and surprise. (see figure D., p.20.)

As work continued, so too did my attempts to re-define an engaging surface. Both hammering and painting work to disguise the surface and the medium, each in particular manner. As a result of the humps formed through ballpeen hammering, there is a suggestion of forces pushing out from beneath the surface. In my more recent pieces I have used paint to disguise the medium. Whereas a year ago I would not have felt comfortable painting the surface, now I feel it is the next logical step toward engagement. Paint creates a more powerful and engaging surface than hammering could because I can call on the virtues of color.

The paint has offered an opportunity to create a life-like image without being too literal. I've found that pastel colors like peach, red, pink and even purple serve to form a connection with the viewer (and me) that feels like a human contact. The emotional temperature of these colors in color theory is mild to warm; I feel
they closely relate to the temperature we ascribe to the human being.

I have not only produced an illusion of character through paint, but also I have drawn upon the diagonal to suggest movement, tension and life. When the diagonal is used in conjunction with the human form, the result expresses a feeling of both physical and psychological tension. The phenomena also produces a sense of the dynamic. In a piece I built for a friend, entitled The Gardener, I extended the figure of the gardener far out over its base. The figure is pulling on a flower that is rooted in the ground. The tension produces a message that was funny. The humor arises when the viewer relates the consequence with the action, the gardener will go over when he wins his battle. The consequence is fictional, I hope. (see figure E. p.21.)

Throughout the process this year, I have drawn influences, inspirations and understandings from many sources. The art history classes I took served as an inspiration. However, I rarely produced reproductions or worked from any as a starting point. Instead, the classes served to stimulate my excitement. I felt a relationship with the artists and through an historical perspective, I also saw the influences each of these artists made. I began to realize that I too participated in this flow of history.

However, my art is my interpretation of the world, I do not feel that working directly in the manner of someone is beneficial. It is this feeling of independence that led me away from art history as a source of inspiration. Through this I realized, if I were going to make art then the influences should come from instances that
directly related to me. As a result, I've pushed art history to a comfortable arm's length, and consider it only secondary to how I feel and what I think.

I've been able to work my knowledge of art history into my travels allowing me to forge observations on historical art. During my trip last year to Italy, I saw some of Michelangelo's sculpture. In his compositions, I noticed his figures stood independently of what occurred about them. His work was often based on the spiral, which he considered to be the most powerful of shapes. This year, I also attempted to display the figure independently. Though I did not work my figures according to the same conscious principle, I tried to be aware of the energies each possessed. For example, an energy is the aim or central theme of a piece. Through an existence of a central theme, I can know which qualities of the work lend themselves toward my end. I chose not to include those qualities that did not work toward my interests.

The city, as an experience, has been another important influence on my work. In some of my sculptures, my first attempt has been to create an environment that engages me as I am engaged in the city. In this manner, I consider the city to be a living sculpture with space created and destroyed at every instance. Many forces are at work to create and destroy this space and I strove to include the same kind of energy into my sculpture.

One of the biggest factors at work in the city is chance. I believe chance bestows riches upon my work. Often the solution I sought to a problem came about as a result of an accident. For example, when I was working on a sculpture, it may have tipped
over and landed in a better position for my intentions. Or I may have run out of a certain material and found the alternative better than the original. At any rate, though I did not rely upon this method to solve my problems, it was an advantage when it occurred.

I have related my work in relation to the countryside as well. Hiking has broadened my understanding of spatial relationships in the landscape. When I was on top of a mountain last summer, the hills and valleys, that I had driven through were much easier to understood from above, at the height of a few thousand feet. It would be difficult to specifically discuss how this worked into my art, but I can assert that it has added to my spatial vocabulary.

Not only places, but people have offered me perspectives through which I’ve seen my art. Co-workers make the difference of adding a dynamic to the sculpture room. A co-worker also allows me to pace myself. Most importantly, with a co-worker I do not lose a sense for my work. Because the discipline of metal sculpture is small at Colby, working with someone allows me to share the experience with him/her. In a sense, I do not feel my pursuit is something that refers only to myself.

The process of creating a sculpture is the most important feature of my work because it is what forms the piece and gives it life. As such, when a piece is complete, the process becomes the piece and the piece the process. Around each sculpture swirls the stories of its design and in a sense, its spirit, and I am reminded of this by the sculpture itself. It serves as a milestone, or marker.
Through the process, ideas are formed, challenged and reformed. An idea exists in the mind; "process" applies not to things in the mind, but to action. As I stated earlier, the figure and body language serve as the main source of my ideas; but the works, my actions and processes, are also unique within themselves. With each piece there is a particular idea I want to communicate; the process allows for elaboration on the original idea. As I elaborate within my process, that is, experiment with various ways of working, techniques arise that help define that which I wish to communicate.

During the process I am constantly testing decisions I had made previously in the piece. If I grow tired of a realized idea, (one brought to action) this indicates I was not challenging myself and therefore not growing. I base these tests on the knowledge I've gained through previous processes.

The process is also important because it allows time for ideas to surface which may be irrelevant to the present piece, yet important to my body of work. Like any art, sculpture must work toward a central theme. No part of a sculpture can exists and function properly if it does not work toward the central theme. If, as a result of the process, I discover an aspect of the work that does not lend itself toward my desired end, then I save it, often unconsciously, and use it as the basis for a future piece.

The process most importantly serves as a translation of my feelings into the forms I sculpt. I consider the level I am at in my work to effectively fuse the elements of sculpture with who I am. In representing my personal ideas and feelings, I have chosen
basic forces and components in which to realize them. The elements of sculpture I've most frequently worked with are scale, space, balance, weightlessness, enclosure, and so on, as explained. The forms these elements inhabit transmit my feelings because I have studied the elements' virtues and use them as they most effectively function.

Through empathy the viewer may come to perceive that a certain form I sculpt represents a certain feeling but these responses by the viewer are not my main concern. The real force behind my effort is what I feel and how I relate to the forms. What is finally essential is that I know how my sculptures work.

The focus of my sculptural process is ultimately on the work, the ideas behind the work serve to guide my thoughts. While all the intentions I've discussed are a reality in my art, their importance lies in their contribution to my process. (For other pieces within the body of this year's work, see figures F. p22. and G. p23.)
Notes

pages 2-7

1. Bone, Robert; Ocvirk, Otto; Stinson, Robert; Wigg, Philip. *Art Fundamentals*; WM. C. Brown Company, Publishers; Dubuque, Iowa; 1962. page 34.

