

ALTERED PERCEPTIONS

A THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE FIRST DAY OF APRIL 2019

TO THE NEWCOMB ART DEPARTMENT

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE SCHOOL OF LIBERAL ARTS

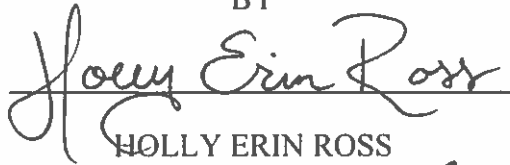
OF TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE

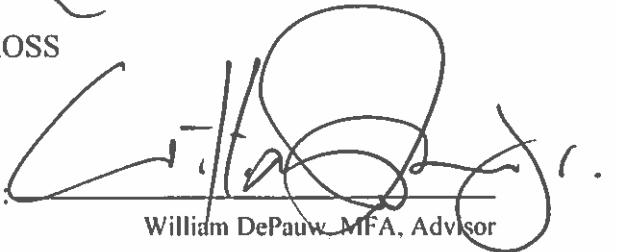
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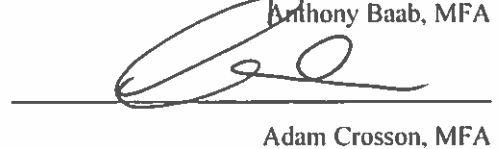
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Altered Perceptions



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the following people:

The members of my thesis committee at Tulane: William DePauw, Anthony Baab, Adam Crosson, and Aaron Collier, for being a constant, supportive presence while challenging me to extend beyond my perceived capabilities.

Members of the Tulane faculty and staff, with special mention to Anne C. Nelson, Laura Richens, Christian Stock, Gene Koss, and Jeremy Jernegan for the many studio visits that helped rejuvenate and refine my studio practice.

My ceramics community consisting of past and present students at Tulane, colleague and mentor Benjamin Lambert, and my undergraduate advisor Carrie Anne Parks, for guidance, perspective, and above all else, long discussions about all matters regarding clay.

The “Alma Family,” my cohort since undergrad, for reminding me that a life without living is no life at all.

My dearest friend, Emily Falicki, for her unwavering friendship, listening intently to every hardship, and cheering loudest for even the smallest of my accomplishments.

Last, but not least, my family. Through thick and thin, they remain a constant source of unconditional love and faith, believing in me even when I have doubts. Though where I live my change from year to year, they will always be my “home.”

I am dedicating my thesis to my nephew, Gavin Packard, who instills within me the importance of leading by example. May you find what brings you joy and never relinquish your hold no matter how difficult it might be. It’s worth it.

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I often find myself drawn toward objects that most would consider mundane. I am compelled to reevaluate subject matter that I have previously conditioned myself to disregard, investigate what I believe to know about the objects, and consider their new potential based on unexpected findings. My thesis exhibition explores my initial perception of repurposed cardboard boxes by fabricating realistic and formally exaggerated variations of them in clay. The three distinct categories of work within the show (trompe l'oeil¹ boxes, abstracted cardboard boxes, and fragmented wall pieces) are an embodiment of my analytical approach to observing cardboard with a fresh perspective. Trompe l'oeil boxes provide a frame of reference. Abstracted cardboard boxes utilize unexpected characteristics of cardboard—as well as recognizable traits of clay—to challenge preconceived notions of how a cardboard box looks and functions. Wall pieces that partially resemble torn scraps of cardboard questions what remains of objects incapable of serving their intended function, while also discussing cardboard and clay materiality. A one-dimensional perspective of cardboard boxes presents them as utilitarian vessels, manufactured without ostentatious appeal, designed to protect objects we cherish, and meant to ultimately be discarded without contemplation. Through unbiased observation, formally and conceptually multifaceted layers emerge from behind initial perceptions of the box.

My interest in cardboard originated with investigating the intended function of boxes as storage containers and the seemingly impersonal object-owner relationship. Cardboard boxes are not redeemed as valuable or precious, rather, the objects that they contain are the items of significance to the owner. Tchochkes and heirlooms—objects

¹ Trompe l'oeil is a French term often associated with art meaning to trick the eye.

that invoke a sense of familiarity, memory, and individuality—are packed carefully away in these boxes for protection when not prestigiously curated in the home. A guest may view these objects as manufactured knickknacks or decoration, devoid of meaning beyond aesthetic appeal, but to the owner, these objects embody a sensation of home. The way these totems are revered by a select audience, displayed for personal viewing and contemplation, and are carefully protected in boxes, establishes them as contemporary relics. I began to understand that if these objects were contemporary relics, cardboard boxes could be realistically perceived as contemporary reliquaries.

Reliquaries are containers that protect and often display relics. These relics consist of items associated with or literally fragments of highly regarded figures in Christian history. In her article “Relics and Reliquaries in Medieval Christianity,” Barbara Drake Boehm clearly describes the relation between these vessels and their contents:

Since the relics themselves were considered “more valuable than precious stones and more to be esteemed than gold,” it was considered only appropriate that they be enshrined in vessels, or reliquaries, crafted of or covered by gold, silver, ivory, gems, and enamel...

Reliquaries were often covered with narrative scenes from the life of saints, whose remains may have been contained within. Sometimes the decoration of chasses was not specific to any given saint or community but rather reflected common Christian themes, making them appropriate to the use of any community. (Boehm, 2011)

Utilizing incredibly expensive materials to protect and display a fragmented object indicated how valuable the relic must be, therefore establishing a sense of superiority over the viewer. Reliquaries are meant to protect and occasionally display a relic, but their dialogue with the viewer is an incredibly important function: they indicate how and why the object should be worshiped. Iconography and materiality critically operated as a language to communicate religious narratives to a primarily illiterate audience. Although the contents were precious items and believers utilized the reliquaries as instruction manuals for worship, the boxes themselves were incredibly valuable due to the use of gold, ivory, etc. to craft the ornately decorated vessels. As these reliquaries and their relics were transported to different cities, followers needed to fiercely protect the precious religious totem, but also the vessel for its individual monetary worth.

Cardboard boxes store totems of home during transportation, inscribed with information for the owner, and are protected for the items they contain, but are primarily disregarded as a solitary object. While a connection began to form between how cardboard boxes functioned similarly to reliquaries, one significant difference emerged: the apparent temporality/longevity of the material used to craft them. Where traditional reliquaries were crafted by hand to be a permanent vessel for the relic, cardboard boxes are manufactured without elaborate ornamentation and utilized to transport objects from point A to B. Writing on the surface may indicate what the contents are or where the objects need to go. After the owner deems a cardboard box useless—the move is complete; it is no longer needed as storage; the box is damaged beyond repair or worth—it is discarded. Although the box's individual purpose is temporary, its materiality can contradict this. If cardboard is sent to a landfill, it will take approximately 2 months to

decompose, (“Recycling Facts and Tips,” 2017) but even still most cardboard can be recycled, granting it new life as another box, cup, or copy paper.

As I began researching cardboard, I found myself analyzing the formal characteristics of the material. Once more, I discovered fascinating contradictions. While cardboard is manufactured to be relatively rigid and devoid of aesthetic appeal, it holds the potential to exhibit behavior and characteristics contrary to this. When subjected to abuse, layers of corrugation are revealed, and wrinkles mar the smooth surface. The boxes become individual records of human interaction where they previously seemed to be impersonal, manufactured products. Excessive moisture allows its rigidity to temporarily give way to more organic formations, expressing undulating curves and elegant curls as layers peel apart. Once the moisture evaporates, the cardboard regains some of its rigidity with stains, tears, and wrinkles as record of its interim impressionability. After discovering that this material, which a culture of consumption has conditioned me to disregard as disposable packaging, actually retains such fascinating characteristics, I became inspired to express this contradictory nature and disrupt expectations to develop a fresh perspective.

Utilizing clay’s materiality is a critical component to this body of work. Clay is both technically and conceptually plastic. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition for plasticity is “the quality of being easily shaped or molded.” (Oxforddictionaries.com, 2019) In regard to ceramics, this term is often used to describe a characteristic of a valuable clay body. The range of which the material can be manipulated before the surface begins to crack dictates which techniques can be used, and which forms can be developed. Given clay’s plasticity, with the right balance of

chemistry and craft, the illusion of nearly any object or material can be realized. The very nature of the medium permits the artist to replicate natural and man-made forms down to the most complex texture.

In order to realistically replicate the texture of cardboard, I needed to create a plaster cast of actual cardboard so that I could imprint them into clay slabs. The process of texturizing enough slabs to create several boxes is incredibly tedious; while I worked as a one-woman assembly line, factories could mass produce actual cardboard in less than half the time. Manufacturing cardboard, however, focuses on replicating multiples of indistinct products, whereas my method of construction emphasizes individuality and preservation of memory from the initial steps.

Replicating the cardboard texture helped establish a frame of reference and preserved the memory of destruction, but the memory of creation, present in the imperfect marks left by the artist's hand, speak to the expressiveness of materiality. Fingerprints and palm impressions from pressing and handling the clay decorate the surface along with the cardboard texture. Some records of these moments are subtle (primarily the ones present in the trompe l'oeil boxes) and only provide this information to the dedicated observer. The corrugated edge is hand pressed with a spade tool in order that a variety of spaces between implied layers of corrugation (more often found with reused cardboard) can occur. Occasionally, the clay was a bit stiffer and the spade tool cut through the edge, creating the impression of a tear in the outer layer of cardboard. The sculptures that begin to move away from recognizable cardboard boxes include more obvious physical interactions as fingerprints are deeply imbedded among aggressive

conglomerations of clay. With these variables in place, there is a more intimate connection to the construction of each piece.

These records of humanity imbedded in ceramic objects are tied not only to the creation process, but also historical function. Clay has a tradition of being used for vessel making. Throughout the history of art, various cultures have modeled and fired ceramic wares for a utilitarian function. Pots have historically been crafted as containers for food, liquid, and miscellaneous objects for both ceremonial and daily rituals. Even in today's society, ceramic urns can be purchased to store the remains of people we care about. Ceramics are intentionally designed to be handled, consistently utilized, and to communicate a narrative or message with the consumer.

The firing process is also pertinent to the content of the work. Similar to how environmental conditions (rain, excessive sunlight, etc.) alter the surface and integrity of cardboard, I utilized an atmospheric kiln to alter my work. Firing in reduction—a process that requires a higher concentration of gas than oxygen to raise the temperature in the kiln—produced the surface color on each piece. The chemical reaction that occurs within the atmosphere, pulls oxygen from the clay body and glazes, altering its color. As the flames licked across the surface, they left behind a record of their presence in the various warm peach to rust hued washes. By sculpting the work with two types of clay bodies I was able to encourage more variations that incorporated the natural stone complexion anticipated of fired clay.

These two different clay bodies also allowed me to influence the integrity of the sculptures under duress of the firing. While one clay body could mostly withstand the urge to warp in response to the environment, the other clay body was formulated to

encourage a violent transformation. As flaps would begin to fold in on themselves, the original appearance of the form was revealed through silhouettes created from the initial application of underglaze and oxide washes.² I promoted designated sides to warp by strategically placement in the kiln and prevented other sides to shift beyond a certain point by utilizing other pieces or bricks as supports. Occasionally segments would buckle so violently that they would crack. Much like cardboard, by utilizing environmental conditions, I was capable of allowing to work to be transformed by its surroundings, temporarily eliminating the rigidity of the material until those factors were removed.

I intentionally chose to limit scale to reference typical moving boxes and box remnants—boxes designed for manual use and most often reused for many purposes. Although the repetition of similar sized boxes draws ideas about waste, manufacturing, and consumerism, the individuality that each piece retains in spite of their anticipated similarities encourages more personal discussions about human interaction and observation. Various earthy hues of underglaze and oxide washes are utilized in surface treatments along with the highly detailed cardboard texture to temporarily convince the viewer of a false materiality. The positioning of the flaps on the trompe l'oeil boxes are also constructed to appear as if they've been opened and closed many times through wrinkles, tears, and indentations—furthering this façade. As curiosity consumes the viewer and entices them to touch and closely inspect the surface, the true materiality is revealed. Reevaluating with new information, cracks between separated flaps and sides do not expose layers of corrugated cardboard, rather, a smooth surface is visible. These

² Commercially made underglaze utilize stains and frit (ceramic glass ground into a fine powder) to produce a non-melting surface application that is typically fired at lower temperatures and coated in a clear glaze. (Hansen, Underglaze, n.d.) Oxide washes are suspended solutions of raw colorant minerals that are applied under or over glazes. (Hansen, Oxide, n.d.)

boxes establish a frame of reference when viewing the rest of the work—they function as a controlled variable for comparison.

The abstracted boxes move away from anticipated cardboard characteristics to exhibiting behavior more natural of clay. Each exaggerated vessel ebbs and flows as the slabs unfurl from a prescribed structure into formations similar to the unexpected capabilities of wet cardboard. Some sides maintain the cardboard façade through texture, color, and scale, while others introduce an indistinguishable, linear element. The striations, on their own, loosely resemble soil cross-sections as coiled segments are interrupted by other delineations. Some sides utilize this additional texture to distort a layer of implied cardboard. Round indentations, emphasized by underglazes and oxide washes rubbed into the surface, reveal the presence of fingerprints. In some moments the pinched segments mimic spinal columns while others invoke connections to wet paint, compiled in arbitrary clumps. The mark of human interaction, paired with the spongy quality of the striations and obscure texture applied at several contact points, resemble clay in its most malleable state. While the expected earthy hues present in real cardboard remain present on a portion of each sculptural vessel, I also employ plum, deep crimson, turquoise, and metallic finishes to introduce variations in formal characteristics. These moments when clay is allowed to retain its identity rather than be clearly designated as something else (i.e. cardboard slabs) they began to resemble something ‘other,’ allowing the viewer to draw their own conclusions about its presence, origins, and materiality.

The wall pieces move away from investigating cardboard boxes as a vessel to critiquing the perception of fragments as scraps. They function as a transitory step of observation, incorporating formal considerations indicative of both cardboard and clay in

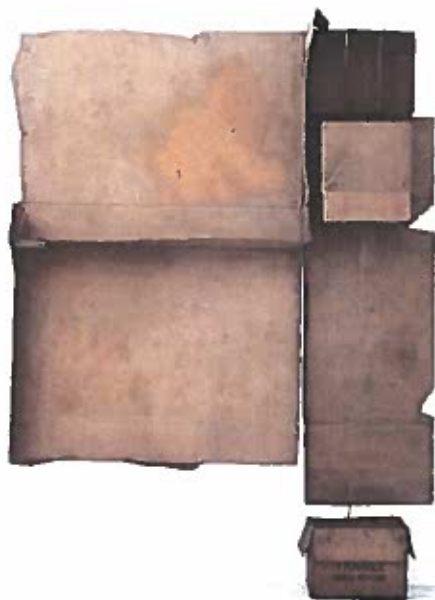
more array than the abstracted boxes. Several pieces directly reference cardboard, utilizing corrugated texture and anticipated earth-toned surface treatments to emphasize the wear and passage of time as a result of abandonment. For one piece, segments are highlighted at their separation with a vibrant yellow glaze, revealing a solid density instead of thin layers of paper. More drastic yet are the pieces that incorporate clay-like components—clusters of seemingly malleable mud, similar to those present on the abstracted boxes. These masses of mountainous slip and aggressive score marks reflect clay construction and plasticity rather than the machine-made process of cardboard manufacturing. Again, plum, deep crimson, turquoise, and metallic surface treatments are applied to increase the depth of these obscure components as a means of deviating from the anticipated cardboard nature.

Throughout the body of work are sections of brilliant red and yellow glaze swatches. Incorporation of this semi-gloss surface loosely references tape, paint splatters, and labels. They function as illustrative elements on a ceramic cardboard canvas, drawing attention away from the elegant earth-toned surface. As cardboard loses the ability to act as a container, it is not uncommon for it to be employed as a drop cloth when painting other objects. Eventually it is discarded after several uses, leaving behind the memory of those objects through layers of paint, and creating beautiful arrangements that are rarely recognized. The presence of the semi-gloss glaze on the wall pieces re-evaluates the perception of these ‘scraps’ and embraces their potential as individual compositions, whereas the addition of the glaze on the pedestal pieces poses a challenge for the viewer, necessitating them to scrutinize extensively to locate the elegant moments of preserved human interaction.

How the work is presented within the gallery space is devised to perpetuate the idea of disrupting expectations and encourage multiple perspectives for viewing. The pedestals, placed at various angles from the walls, were fabricated as a deconstruction of the traditional white cube. While the pedestals decrease the volume of the display, allowing the work to attract the primary focus, the viewer can discover how the design incorporates additional planes, captures light, and casts shadows in a captivating manner. Trompe l'oeil boxes and abstracted boxes are interspersed, the range of hues juxtaposed to create a dynamic composition. Some pieces are displayed together to establish relationships between depictive and nonrepresentational pieces. Viewers are required to circumvent the pedestals: the 'front' of each piece faces in differing directions, disallowing a single vantage point. Occasionally pieces are placed at eye level to confront the viewer, while others are displayed on lower pedestals, forcing the observer to bend over for close inspection.

I am not the first artist to be enamored with an object perceived to be mundane. In the early 1970's, Robert Rauschenberg explored a similar fascination with the formal characteristics of cardboard. In Rauschenberg's *Cardboard* series, he utilized found cardboard boxes to create wall sculptures. While he manipulated these boxes by bending or cutting them and attaching various segments together, he allowed their recorded history—stains, tears, and wrinkles—to dance across the surface. Due to its materiality, the cardboard remains vulnerable to environmental conditions, allowing the work to be naturally altered if unprotected. By altering the context and regarding its compositional potential, Rauschenberg challenged our perceptions of a "mundane" object. We begin to

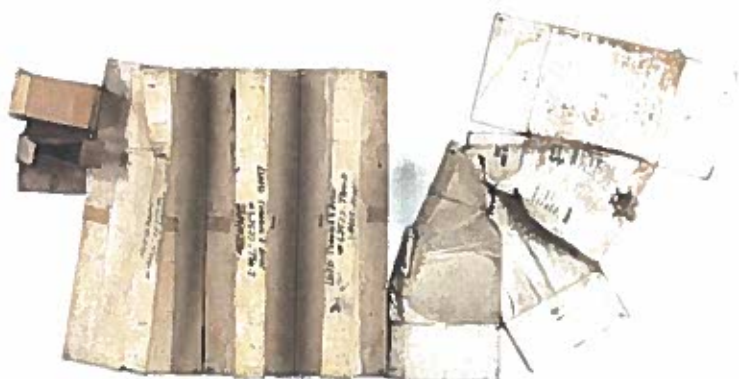
discover the individuality present in manufactured products and learn to appreciate their underappreciated formal characteristics.



½ GALS./AAPCO
(CARDBOARD)

1971

Cardboard and rope
112 ¼ x 78 x 10 ½ inches
Musée d'Art Contemporain,
Marseille



BATON BLANCHE
(CARDBOARD)

1971

Cardboard
67 ½ x 130 ¾ x 16 ½ inches
Private Collection

In Rachel Whiteread's 2005 installation EMBANKMENT at the Tate, she investigated the more intimate nature of cardboard vessels in regard to the objects they contain. Partially inspired by the discovery of an old cardboard box filled with personal possessions, Whiteread created positive casts of the negative space of assorted boxes, first in plaster, then recreated in polyurethane. She articulated their history of human interaction by creating a permanent record of every dent and tear. Her installation, however, focused on the boxes as part of a collective. By replicating thousands of these boxes, stacking them like mountains, and exhibiting them in Turbine Hall, which was once an industrial space, Whiteread connected to the manufacturing and consumerism tied to the origins of the cardboard box.



Rachel Whiteread
EMBANKMENT

© Tate 2005 Photo: Marcus Leith



Rachel Whiteread
EMBANKMENT

© Tate 2005 Photo: Marcus Leith

Due to clay's materiality, it is not uncommon for artists to appropriate its plasticity to explore trompe l'oeil. Drawn toward the underlying narrative of disregarded objects, Tim Kowalczyk creates realistic representations to encourage the viewer to look again. While Kowalczyk specializes in creating deceiving sculptures that imitate everyday objects, ranging from polaroids to packing materials, he is most noted for his cardboard cups, mugs, and tumblers. Playing into the novelty of its realism, he crafts whimsical drinking vessels and tableware complete with silkscreen transfers of fragile labels and blue painter's tape. The scope of his work is meant to leave the viewer playfully, enraptured by its true materiality.



POLAROIDS

2013-Present

Slab Built, Cone 7 Oxidation, Frost
Porcelain, Glazes, Low Temp Decals,
and Underglaze Washes



FRAGILE STICKER MUG #24

Handmade with ceramic, silkscreen and
glaze.

Collectively, *Altered Perceptions* utilizes materiality and connotations irrevocably linked to the media in order to challenge preconceived notions of value, function, and aesthetic appeal. Considering cardboard boxes as vessels, their value typically resides in their functionality as storage containers—once they can no longer hold objects, they are deemed worthless. Through analysis we can see the inaccuracy of this mentality. Broken ceramic wares are often protected in museums specifically because they are fragments that preserve imbedded information of the cultures they belonged to. Torn sheets of cardboard, however, are typically disregarded as unusable garbage whereas cardboard boxes could at least be considered for its functionality. Creating ceramic cardboard fragments challenges our concept of value based on an object's materiality and proposes the notion of the cardboard box as relic, rather than reliquary.

Separating cardboard boxes from their associated function as a utilitarian vessel to analyze its formal characteristics allows the viewer to reconsider what they previously 'knew' about the object. By creating the work out of clay, I was capable of establishing a permanence to the interim organic formations of wet cardboard that are often overlooked, allowing more time for observation. I was cautious to not focus too heavily on appropriating clay for mimicry like artists such as Kowalczyk embraces, as my intent has never been to entrap the viewer in a shroud of fallacy. Although some viewers will inevitably be caught up in the novelty of my ceramic cardboard sculptures, the dedicated observer will be rewarded with an enlightened perspective of the material.

Associations tied to ceramic wares encourages the viewer to contemplate and search for the human presence within every piece. Expanding on Whiteread's concept of domesticated, industrial packaging as records of intimate human interaction, I emphasize

the value of cardboard boxes (not just with the objects they contain) through limiting the number of replicated boxes. In this manner, the work has more room to breathe and be considered for its individuality rather than its role as a component of a collective. While I acknowledge the connotations brought forth by utilizing cardboard boxes as my subject matter, I address issues with consumerism and manufacturing similarly to Rauschenberg, focusing attention on the uniqueness possible in the mass-produced products and prescribe value to the mundane. Deviating from his approach, I avoid conglomerations of multiple boxes and allow the composition to focus on a singular vessel.

Overall, the work not only challenges expectations of formal characteristics, individual identity, and functionality of cardboard boxes as vessels, but as a material. I dispute the notion of quality with assigning value to cardboard waste and ceramic 'faults' with warping, cracking, and bubbling glaze. I ask the viewer to reconsider the world around them and explore the qualities and underlying histories of their surroundings beyond initial impressions. After unbiased analysis of materiality, an object created merely as a means to an end is capable of altering perceptions in enchanting ways.

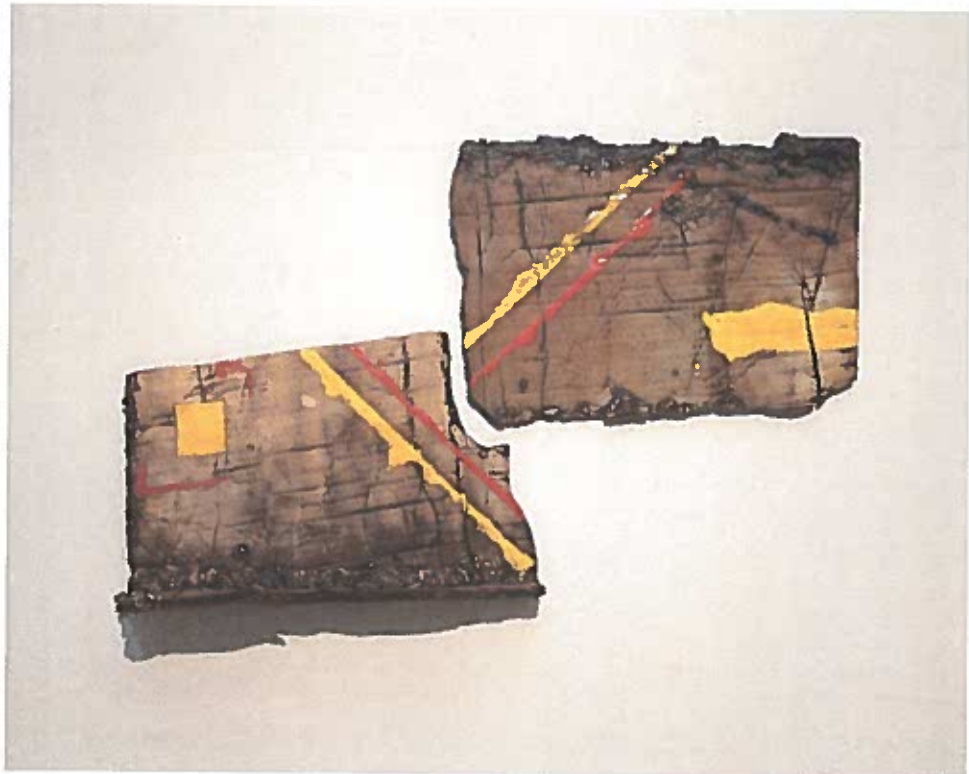
PLATES













Altered Perceptions
Holly Ross



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BIOGRAPHY

Holly Ross was born and raised on a farm in mid-Michigan. In 2014, Holly graduated Cum Laude with Departmental Honors from Alma College, receiving her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Ceramics. After furthering her studies through the Post-Baccalaureate Program at Studio Art Centers International in Florence, Italy, she held Teaching Assistant positions in Ceramics at Adrian College and Alma College. Holly actively exhibits her ceramic sculptures as she pursues a profession in teaching collegiate art.