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Duality

Brian Laskowski

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Duality

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DUALITY

By

Brian Laskowski

A Senior Thesis Submitted to the
Eastern Michigan University
Honors Program
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for Graduation
With Honors in Fine Art
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The End
The creative process is an animal writhing among the folds of an artist's brain. It is a chaotic beast of nine venomous snakes connected at the tale and unified into one. It writhes and hisses and levitates just above the ground, trying with all its being to reach down and touch, for only a moment, the cold ground beneath it; the concrete ground of our roads, parking lots, and sidewalks. If I've learned but one thing from studying and creating art, it is to let that animal loose upon anything around it. To let it change direction at whim and search for the one way that it might defy its negative gravity and slither a path to firm ground. To our ground. Because it's trying to reach us; to connect with us, to become a part of the ground we walk on. But fear not, for there is no unified ground to reach, and the beast shall not reach its destiny.

Do you like cubism? I do. You will soon understand what I mean.
My senior honors thesis is not focused on contemplating the nature of art. The paragraph above is simply a necessary statement of how I look back at the art I’ve created during my time here at EMU and the time spent on my senior thesis. -A project in which I try to communicate one of the most essential experiences in my life. It’s an experience that in its few years contributed more to who I am, the aura behind the mask of “Brian Laskowski,” than any other part of my existence. And yet, it is an experience that I have avoided trying to repeat in art until this year.

In this project, I want to illustrate my conversion from Catholicism to Buddhism. That one event, or rather a series of events that lasted a little over a year, freed me from the pattern of always following the path that everyone else expects me to walk. Being Buddhist enabled me to better think on my own. It encouraged me to not simply act in accordance to dogmatic tradition and others’ opinions, but to act by understanding and considering all my options and personal intentions. It allowed me to think freely, without such razor-wire fences of “commandments” and “sins” restraining me. Yet, with that said, ironically, I don’t even consider myself Buddhist anymore. I am who I am; and it has taken me about seven years since my conversion to this day to truly understand what such a simple phrase could even begin to mean.

So if I am no longer Buddhist, why is my conversion into Buddhism so important to who I am today that I base my senior thesis on it?

Because the morning after I read my first book on Buddhism, I woke up with a rash on the back of my neck. To make it stop itching, I shaved my head with a dull, two-
sided razor blade. When I was finished, I dropped the bloody razor into the sink. The white porcelain was lined with specks of blood and clumps of my blond hair. As I stared into the mirror, my lacerated fingers bleeding slowly and silently, drip by drip, from at my sides onto the blue tile floor, I noticed that something more had to be done.

I went outside and I poured most of a three gallon jug of gasoline all over my body and meditated for the first time on what it felt like to feel pain. (I remember now that the gasoline was eighty seven octane mixed with two-cycle oil for my dad's lawnmower.) The almost orgasmic stinging and burning pain only too quickly faded as the cuts on my hands and scalp became numb and the gasoline slowly evaporated. Yet, somewhere between where I sat and where my desires wanted to run to follow the fading pain, I lit a match and smiled as fire quickly rolled up over me. It was almost an explosion but almost silent. I became weightless, dizzy, I couldn't breathe.

I knew I should have stopped, dropped and rolled, but instead I stood up and calmly walked to school. It was two miles away but I walked fast and arrived just before the first bell toned and sent all the other, less enlightened, students scurrying toward their classes. (I was in high school at the time if you didn't infer that yet.) And as I walked through the halls, a walking burning torch, my friends were suddenly not my friends. I barely even recognized their faces.

The fire that was then burning my insides to ash became stronger and hotter and it set off the fire alarms. But before everyone in the school could even think to react to it, the brick walls crumbled around me and dissolved into sand. My whole town soon after fell as well. And there I stood, nothing more than an empty flame, surrounded by an endless desert of dunes. Soon, I began to feel pain when I realized that all my classmates
and neighbors were now trapped and suffocating beneath the sand, rocks, and pieces of metal. I could faintly hear their screams. But instead of digging them free, I walked above them and tried to not hear their cries slowly fading away.

After a while, I became lonely. I severed my head off with a shard from a shattered cross that I found in the rubble of an old church. Then, while a flock of blue birds devoured my spine, piece by piece with their shiny little beaks, I chanted a mantra and bought a train ticket to a small town in southern Scotland.

I enjoyed the train ride. It sailed on sparkling calm seas just off the coast of Norway into the Arctic Circle and the light of the midnight sun. I ate chocolates for what I thought my last time. I bought fish and chips wrapped in yesterday’s newspaper just like everyone else. But what I didn’t realize was that I had gotten off in Africa by mistake and was immediately devoured by a lion that was already dying of thirst.

Then, things seemed a lot more peaceful. I joined a group of silent low cloud vapors and spent all my time since floating peacefully through a lush green forest. I am a warm fog; a soothing and placid essence. With condensation, I leave only smiles behind me.

And so here I am, typing my thesis and trying to tell you about my project. You know, trying to reveal to you just how I illustrated what the event above actually felt like.
It’s a difficult thing to imagine; how such a small change in a mathematical equation can alter the laws of physics. And it’s just so damn amazing to me, that it actually happens, that I sit here typing these words dumbfounded and numb from the effort to conceptualize it all.

But it’s simple. And so, I decided to use ceramics, my favorite medium, to give form to how simple the subtle reversal of law is.

To begin the project, I first fed the idea of my conversion to the beast. (The lock of Medusa’s hair explained in the first paragraph.) And in that beast’s excrement, after a week or so, I found a little blue tulip-like flower growing. It was just a few inches tall. I gently plucked it and ate the petals one by one. Within minutes I envisioned making a chess set with one side Catholic and the opponent Buddhist. The Catholic pawns holding bloody swords, and the Buddhist pawns offering their love. Grimacing faces against open smiles. That was my initial project plan, the first draft.

Here is the thesis abstract I wrote while in the throes of this vision:

Throughout the teenage years of my Buddhist conversion from Catholicism, I was spiritually torn between two contradicting ideologies. And at the time, I was also mentally torn between choosing a faith to live by or a family to live with. In those years and that conversion, my life drastically changed. And so, for my
honors thesis, I want to create a work of art that will communicate the tensions and confusion I experienced during that period.

I propose to create a ceramic chess set and board to represent the mental struggle I went through and the perseverance that has made me who I am today. I will compose the board with individual tiles inlaid on a slab of Birch wood. (I love working with Birch.) For the actual pieces, I will create 32 individual abstract figures. One side will represent Buddhism and the other will represent Catholicism. For the pawns, I will create eight different monk figures to battle the eight unique catholic missionary figures. For kings, I will have a Dali Lama/Buddha figure to duel a crowned pope figure. A lotus Queen symbolizing Buddhist perfection will fight against the parallel perfect Virgin Mary, and et cetera. The pieces will be abstract yet fairly representational. They will be oversized at approximately six inches high. (Pawns will be slightly smaller and power pieces will be a bit larger.) The board will also be larger than most to accommodate the bulky pieces.

Thus, because the finished product will be a usable chess set, it will also represent a struggle of humanity: The struggle to decide what is superstition and what, if anything, is truth.
But then, I was in a gas station in Tennessee and I saw a wooden chess set exactly as I envisioned the one I was in the process of making. It had a price tag for five dollars and ninety-nine cents. It was marked down from nine dollars and ninety-nine cents.

I left the store and went around back, next to the humming air conditioners. There, I whipped the beast inside me, and I cursed its creator. Soon after, I envisioned another reason to hurt it, then another, followed by a beating, and then another, and another. Until I beat it senseless with a club in an open empty plain somewhere in Nebraska. Standing above it afterward, I felt pity for a moment, but then it suddenly came to life and bit my wrist before I reacted and hit it one more time, leaving it lifeless and limp, levitating in front of me. But it was too late. The venom took hold, and I crumpled onto the dry dusty ground.

I dreamt of a series of platters. Ones that could hang on the wall. Ones that could begin to show the weight of the fire that long ago consumed me. They were simple and beautiful and rang with an existence that reflected peace and harmony while at the same time the hatred and pain I once felt. And so, it is from that dream that I proceeded to begin my revised project; a series of platters.

The process of working the beast was a gradual process that took place in my scrap book. It consisted of a series of sketches. The first sketch was a simple square platter as it related to a chess board. (Completely letting go of the chessboard-concept took a while.) Then the board melted into a variety of different shapes. But each shape still had the checkerboard square design.
As these shapes developed, I realized that during my whole conversion to Buddhism, neither I nor the other people around me were any different. What changed was my relative understanding of reality. My landscape changed as did the ground I walked on. Thus, the next series of platters I created let go of the chessboard concept entirely, and instead began to communicate how the landscape of my inner-being changed.

My new platters represented both the landscape and how I fit and adapted myself to it at various times of my conversion. They are abstract. And as the creative beast writhed inside me while I worked on them, I began to create other, non-platter, pieces.

In the end, my project that began as a chessboard with thirty-two pieces ready to play has emerged as an abstract body of work with platters, plates, bowls, cups, a drum, and even abstracted flower forms. But, they are not the usual platters, plates, or bowls.
For the remainder of this thesis, I am going to select five of my favorite pieces and explain the essentials about them; what they helped me realize. In my descriptions, you will likely notice something quite peculiar. I will not provide a reproduction or image of the actual pieces. In fact, I'll try to not even describe the piece with anything more than a sentence or two. I do this for two reasons. The first is that what I experienced and what I wanted to communicate in the visual form of my ceramics does not have visual or even physical form. It is a completely cerebral experience. And two, as I look back at the time I spent on the project, and consider what I just explained, I realize that the process of my art making, was about anything but the art. It was about a process. My thesis was about executing a process.
It was the act of manipulating cold damp clay into a shape that would create a…
to create nothing. But the motion and friction of the clay against my skin pacified all else inside my mind. It seduced me and left me floating above the tables in the ceramic studio while caught in the blissful throes of reliving the past without having to reexperience the pain.

During that simple and calm act of forming the clay into shapes of my past, I released an explosion of a single spark. It fell lazily onto the surface of my clay and was quickly wedged deeper and deeper into the very center of that clay’s potential. There, it joined with either a random grain of feldspar or maybe just a common clay particle. (I could never know for sure.) Yet, from that union an endless void was conceived. -The void, a dark, empty, and hungry thing, expanded outward in all directions. And into it I fell, each and every time, as helpless as the spark that created it.

It was then, while I tumbled deeper into that void that I let my hands create shapes with the clay as I closed my eyes and re-lived a certain moment of my conversion. The emotions and details became as lucid as the first time I experienced them. I could feel the searing heat of my burning skin. I could hear the cries of the people around me suffocating under their dogmatic wasteland. I could even feel the wind as it blew across my scabbed, shaved, head. When the moment passed and I opened my eyes to exist again in the present, I would take another deep breath and then get up and leave the studio. Behind me on the table were the remnants of my experience.

Before we continue, I need you to do something. I need you to imagine a visual image. Ok? Good. Now think of what you’re wearing right now, your shoes, your pants,
your shirt, whatever. Now imagine that you stood up from where you are sitting and all
of it burst into flames. Wait, forget that image. I’m sorry; I meant to give you a different
one. It’s an image so relevant to the rest of this paper, that I will use it over and over
again. Are you ready? Ok, good. Now imagine that you are in the middle of the Atlantic
Ocean. You are floating above the water like a balloon. You are just a single little
oxygen molecule. Far beneath you is the constantly separating continental ridge. But
that’s not important. It’s way below the surface. What is important, is that you are
surrounded by miles and miles and miles of perfectly flat, perfectly calm, perfectly placid
water. It is as smooth as a mirror. Still as death. There are no waves or swells or
anything. It’s just a completely undisturbed expanse of blue stretching off in all
directions. Good.

Now look upwards into the equally peaceful blue sky. You see a tiny little dot
that seems to be moving or something. Actually, it seems to be getting bigger. Then you
realize that it’s a meteorite larger than the average house rushing, thundering, and
streaking though the sky, a burning thundering mass of violence, speed, and stone. As
your heart flutters and stops, imagine that meteorite smashing into the very center of the
ocean right next to you. Imagine the fiery explosion mixed with the water splash that
tunnels upward like a tube of water only to mix with the trail of smoke and debris falling
around you, blocking the sun and darkening the sky as if it were dusk. Then imagine
how a second or two afterward, a tidal swell, a perfect circle, expands outward in all
directions.

Wait. Imagine again the moment right after the meteorite struck the surface, (just
as the tidal wave begins rushing outward.) Right then, you put up your hand as if you are
god and you stop everything. The wave, the noise of explosion, the smoke and debris
behind the meteorite, the water drops in the splash... everything is suspended in air and
time. Everything is as still as the surface of the water was only a moment ago.

That image applies to the second piece that I’ll explain.

The first piece I want you to understand deals with an event earlier than the above
scene. An event that in reference to the image above could be considered the creation of
the gravity that pulled the meteorite into the earth. In clay it looks like a flower, but more
of a little rolled up spiral thing with glaze only on the inside and still then sprinkled with
grit and sand before it was fired. It’s ugly yet enchanting. And the event occurred on a
day sometime in my sophomore year of high school.

I was sitting in my car, next to a river, with a cigarette in one hand and a book on
Buddhism in the other. It was a beautiful day. I was skipping class. And the cigarette in
my hand had actually burned its way out long before you just came to the scene. Now
what I held was just a cold cigarette butt with the entire length of the cigarette remaining
as a long, unbroken, slightly bent, ash.

You see, after lighting the cigarette and opening the book, the first sentence or
maybe it was the four hundred and seventeenth sentence paralyzed me. I wasn’t even
breathing. And as time passed, the cigarette smoldered away and became cold between
my fingers.

But then, later that night, after the sun had set, a police officer walked up beside
my car, and when he tapped his flashlight on the hood of my car and said something to
me, I awoke and the ash fell apart and drifted in a tumbling little clump to my jeans. He started asking me what I was doing but all I heard was the sound of a blue bird across the river singing because it was happy. It didn’t even realize that it was night time. It sang because even though it was going to die the next day by a little kid shooting it with a “bb gun” in his back yard, the bird was happy to have existed and it was happy to just be there singing on that cedar branch overlooking a beautiful moon-lit little river.

Have you ever wondered what was so poetic about an old grandmother humming and smiling as she presses summer flowers in books so that she can capture their beauty and preserve them just a little longer? Have you ever wondered why? -Maybe to spare the flower from withering and dieing in the winter? -Maybe because the inevitable reality of life is not as comforting as the possibility of it being somehow altered? Have you ever realized the significance of that? I think it’s beautiful, the sound of her humming. -Beautiful like the shimmering surface of the calm river surface. -Beautiful like the reflection in it of the fire ball above.

Have you ever fantasized about the poetry behind purposely setting one’s self on fire? Don’t. It hurts a lot and the scars never heal.

Oh, and so for the second ceramic piece I chose to explain.

Do you still have that image in your mind of the tidal wave frozen in time just after the huge fire ball meteorite rushed down and smashed the perfectly smooth and
peaceful surface of the water? That is what my second piece looks like. It's a platter, green with a yellow stripe, and it is exactly the image of the wave you had in your head. Are you ready to watch the birth of that wave?

It was a friendly slap on the back. It was a beautiful day too. Rainy and cold. And I saw my old priest in the grocery store. He's one of those people whose eyes are always welcoming and warm. His blond hair just shaggy and unkept enough to tell everyone around him that he has a lot of love energy in his heart helping him live. Helping him help the little boys who have to bear the burden of his bare weight. "Hi there, haven't seen you in a while, are things ok, I see I see, life is indeed busy, yeah but you're young, hey you should come to youth group again soon, oh yes that job is a good job, I understand, heck at least you're not Buddhist." And slap, smile, walk away.

And so for the platter: -The meteorite smashes hard, sending a circular wall of water straight upward as the wave that was frozen in your mind was conceived from the downward force of friction against surface tension for raped penetration and thrusted damnation, a force equal to one hundred and thirty-five nuclear bombs exploding from the same exact point at the exact same time. BOOM. And I'm fuckin trapped in the center. (Please excuse the word. I read the entire dictionary trying to find one that could say what I needed to say any better. -Deal with it.)

The third platter to be discussed is different from the second as it isn't at all functional. It's a thing that hangs on a wall. It's an eclectic mirror that reflects a few
different situations. The first situation is the most important. It happened on some day I
don't really care enough about to remember. Oh wait, it was Sunday.

So there I was, walking up the steps to a gothic cathedral. It was a nice sunny day
again. (It meant a lot to my mom that I went to church with her one last time, so I finally
gave in.) There I was, walking through the door and into the golden-light-orgy-of-
opulence. The yellow stained glass gave it that holy golden feeling that made me want to
break every window in the world. But anyway, when I walked by the holy water in its
little dish, I dipped my hand in. It was just the force of habit I suppose. But anyway, the
water suddenly turned red, and the windows turned black.

The doors to the cathedral slammed shut behind me. I turned around to see my
mother running away and disappearing around some marble pillar. When I looked back
at the aisles of the church, everyone was standing up and staring at me. The pillars
around them held torches with big balls of flame dancing shadows across all their
expressionless faces. Then I looked down at my hand still in the holy water, but instead
of my hand in the water in a brass dish in a marble stand, my hand was inside the bloody
chest of Christ. His eyes stared at me, scared, and his heart was in my hand. I felt it beat
three or four times before a bellowing voice echoed from across the church.

At the altar, holding a torch was the priest in a gold-trimmed green velvet robe.
He wore a gold crown with diamonds in it. “Stop,” he said. I felt the heart go still in my
hand.

It was weird what happened after that. My hand, it wouldn’t let go. As all the
people started chanting in Latin and walking towards me with swords and spears in their
hands, I had to get out of there but I couldn’t let go. I was trapped. But just when a man,
one of my old friend’s dad, was about to swing a sword at my neck, I ripped Christ’s heart from his chest and ran towards the door with my hand dripping blood onto the floor. I erupted from the doors of the church, and I tumbled and bounced down the stairs, rolling into the street. There wasn’t a car in sight. There wasn’t a person in sight. The mob didn’t follow me out. Everything was quiet. It was like the placid ocean you once knew.

I couldn’t take it. The silence rang like a siren in my head, and I ran away with the bloody heart in my hand. I couldn’t let go of it for months. At school, I had to write with my left hand, because the heart was in my right. It never stopped bleeding. Every piece of clothing I had was stained by the blood. My friends started to distance themselves from me. The stench of it decaying was disgusting. My girlfriend’s mother heard about it and wouldn’t let her date me. But she didn’t care, she was afraid of me anyway. I may have grown horns, but I was too afraid to look in the mirror. I simply closed my eyes and meditated on the warmth of the fire that slowly consumed my flesh.

Then one day, you lowered your hand and let the tidal wave go as its destiny required, and it killed millions of people, damaging billions of dollars worth of property, and submerging half of the American continents, Europe, and Africa under hundreds of feet of water. Then one day, the waters started to recede. And the offspring of the bluebird (the one I killed with my “bb gun” in the first piece) landed on my shoulder and started to sing. (And this isn’t a reference to any flood myth. Did you know that just about every religion has one? It’s such a cliché.)
Anyway, this Bluebird seduced me.

Which brings me to the fourth piece. It’s a platter. (About two feet in diameter.) It is all about something that the blue bird taught me one wonderful morning.

So, we were lying in her bed, which was at the top of a giant Jack Pine tree. Her nest was far above all the surrounding tree tops. We had just made love for an hour as the sun rose. She sang in my ear the whole time, and it was truly the most beautiful morning I have ever experienced. I loved her so much. I loved the way light glimmered from her wing feathers. I loved everything about her. I even loved the hardness of her cold beak. She was diamond dust in my blood.

But about what she taught me that morning. You see, I was sitting on the end of the bed, naked and cooling off in the orgasm afterglow. I was starring out at the vast blanket of treetops. And then she did it. She put her beak against my back for a moment. It was our way of hugging sometimes. But before I could turn around and give her a kiss, she pushed me off the edge of the bed, and I fell from her nest screaming and kicking.

Soon enough I noticed that as I fell, the other trees never really got any closer. In fact they almost seemed to be getting further away. I relaxed a bit and just sort of drifted downward. I started to hear her singing. She sang a song about life, and the earth beneath me turned to muddy water and it swirled into a sort of yin-yang shape.

“It’s a difficult thing to imagine; how such a small change in a mathematical equation can alter the laws of physics in order to negate the existence of unhappiness. And it’s just so damn amazing to me, that it actually happens so easily and yet so few
people do it, that I sit here typing these words dumbfounded and numb from the effort to conceptualize it all.”

It was while falling that I closed my eyes to truly see and understand the forces at work in life. The equation became clear, because in fact, nothing had changed. And that made the difference. It changed everything completely. The details of reality shattered into tiny pieces, mere specks of dust, and they became the cyclone, the gyre. And so, the equation is a continual thing. Eternal entropic motion.

The fifth is much simpler than that. It’s larger than the last. As after the water from the tidal wave receded and life began where it was once lost, the meteorite dissolved in the water, and the sun came out to shine a sunny day forever. And this is where I am now. I am a lotus flower floating on a perfectly still ocean of bliss. The platter is my smile that shines despite reality. For now, I am who I am, and everything around me accepts that. Life is bliss. And I truly mean that.

And that, said as plainly and directly as I can possibly explain it, is what my thesis project is all about. I hope you enjoyed it.