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Fraktured Homeland

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This thesis entitled: *Fraktured Homeland*  
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This final copy has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet the acceptable presentation of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Preface

About a year ago this time, I was at a loss in my studio. I was making landscape installations of many small composite parts for most of my graduate school career thus far, but they began to feel a little empty. At some point over the summer I got a few books on frakturs from the library. I had them in my studio for a long time, without opening them.

You see, I used to dislike frakturs. When I was growing up in rural eastern Pennsylvania, anything that looked remotely historical or regional was distasteful to me. It was suffocating. This is, in part, because of my parents’ efforts to distance themselves from what they viewed as a restrictive moral code -- that of separation from the world and moral purity, and how this effort manifested itself in the objects and trappings of my childhood home.

I have a running theory that most Mennonite families, the generation following their departure from conservative communities (in which they drive buggies or “black bumper” cars and the women wear head-coverings and distinctive dress,) follow a similar pattern. My mother, for example, doesn’t like to cook. It is her form of rebellion against the gender role she was raised to fulfill. My father’s father (who is in his upper 80s,) on the other hand, still grows enough sweet potatoes to feed the entire extended family for the whole year.

With time, distance, and a bit of critical eye, my parents began to feel a new sense of appreciation for their heritage, and objects that alluded to it began to reappear. The family’s copy of the Martyr’s Mirror, for example, the book of stories of Anabaptist persecution that is in every Mennonite household. And the frakturs came out of the
woodwork -- the lyrics of a hymn wrapped in a garden of geometric and floral ornament -- made by my mother’s aunt. Two large brightly colored distelfinks (a motif of a bird looking over its shoulder) flanked a fraktur that doubled as a guestbook for my grandparents fiftieth wedding anniversary, tenderly drawn by my cousin.

This tension between the “old” way of doing things and the “new” was always at the core of what I made. When I first started making pots, for example, I hated anything that looked remotely like regional “redware” pottery I had grown up around.

Graduate school, as it turns out, was a sort of haven of distance for me. I had lived in places far away from Pennsylvania before, but always for months, not years at a time. This distance, both geographical and temporal, gave me a sense of bandwidth, a critical space between my sense of self and my role as a member of that community. From that space, I am able to balance my identity as an individual with a recognition of and appreciation for my heritage.

This poem by Julia Spicher Kasdorf puts language to the complicated relationship I have with my “homeland;” it is one of deep desire and attachment, but also a sense of subjugation and yoke.
Eve's Curse

To the beautiful student, as her blue eyes glaze
and brighten in their brine, I cannot say,
Yes, it will be as you suspect. This work
will drive you away from us; it will make
you strange in the end. Though you were raised
in Pennsylvania, the state which retains
more of its natives than any other,
the only state that contains all the letters
you need to write “live,” you will leave.
Because these sweet limestone fields sustained
you and all of us before this, your curse
will be to ache as you’ve never imagined:
your limbs will long for the scent of this ridge
as Eve’s curse was to crave for her husband.

Touch, by Janine Antoni in 2002, on the other hand, embodies a lightness of touch
between the artist in the present and childhood home. In this piece, Antoni practiced
walking on a tightrope in her studio, then strung one by the beach in front of her
childhood home. As she walks across the tightrope, her weight tips the rope so that she
just touches the horizon.
Antoni embodies the act of balancing one’s identity in the present with that of the past, something I am seeking in my own work. Through the making of the ceramic sculptures, I can literally “touch” the homeland I left so far behind.

I was no longer a single, individual agent, but was working within a world that was already fully fleshed out and realized -- the world of all of the fraktur artists, most of whom remain anonymous, who had come before me. And I pay homage to them by giving their world a larger, three dimensional presence. It was meaningful to be working within such a rich lineage.
Fraktur

What exactly is a “fraktur”? The term most typically refers to the manuscript folk art of Pennsylvania-German culture, colloquially called the Pennsylvania Dutch (Amsler, 15.) Frakturs were initially used by teachers to instruct students in the art of illuminative handwriting (Amsler, 6.) Rooted in the tradition of the medieval illustrated manuscript, they evolved into an independently flourishing artistic tradition in the generations following the emigration of the “Pennsylvania Dutch” to the rolling hills of the Susquehanna Valley.
As time passed artists in these communities continued to evolve the tradition of illuminated manuscript and handwriting practice into a fully flourishing artistic and decorative tradition with its own rules of classification. *Frakturs* are divided into categories with specific functions: house blessings, birth certificates, and family trees, for example. “Reward of merits” are drawings given from a teacher to a student as a token of a job well done. They are great examples of works created in the lineage of *facture*, a latin term that means “to make or to do,” and which considers the work of art or artifact as “a record of its own having been made” (Summers “Facture,” 74.) This quality of “madeness” is what gives the reward of merit its value.

Reward of Merit (Fig. 3)
Fraktured Homeland

My installation, titled Fraktured Homeland, is a tribute to the fraktur. By translating it into a different material and releasing it from the confines of the two dimensional page, I seek to breathe new life into the space of the fraktur, moving the tradition forward. It becomes a setting that you can encounter in the round while retaining its visual coherence as a tableau. The world created by the original fraktur artists is brought to life.

Many frakturs depict mythological creatures. In some cases, the image of the creature has become the symbol of a certain moral or value. I based the forms in my installation on a number of motifs commonly depicted in frakturs, including the pelican of piety, the peacock, the giraffe, the wonderfish, and the lion (which I have re-envisioned as the domesticated cat.) The pelican of piety (a bird that feeds its children with the blood
from its own pierced chest) is a symbol of sacrifice. In other cases, however, the moral or story associated with the creature is less clear. I did not find a specific story associated with the wonderfish, for example, though it is repeated often in many fraktur drawings and is a close cousin of the mermaid. The same is true of the peacock; it seems to have originally been used symbol of vanity, but was later co-opted as a purely ornamental form in many frakturs.

This layered and ambiguous relationship between the meaning of the symbol and its use as an ornamental or visual strategy in frakturs is part of what is so intriguing to me. The images are symbols of a distant place and time whose meaning has become fractured through their many layers of interpretation. Fraktur artists, for example, were often encouraged to increase their skills by copying other fraktur drawings and manuscripts. The images become more abstract the more degrees of separation between them and the original source. In a world where “originality” and “authorship” are not valued, who gets to say what is the correct story or meaning associated with a motif? What happens when someone copies an image without knowing the story it is supposed to represent?

I also reinterpret the large floral forms on the borders of many frakturs into the plant-like vessels I refer to as “towers” and “stacks.” These forms draw on the abstraction between architecture and ornament found in many fraktur drawings, in which the plants are impossibly large and hold up structures that they would never ordinarily be able to support. This contributes to the fantastical and “other-worldly” quality of the fraktur that I hope to recreate.
The purpose of the imaginary world created in the *fraktur* is to escape the strict rules and boundaries of the culture in which they were created. Creatures and forms that are both human and animal or plant and architecture exist as both at the same time instead of being either one or the other. A creature that is both a fish and a human at the same time makes space for multiplicity. This is, I think, why so many *fraktur* artists put mythological creatures in their work. There are connections made in the imaginary world of the *fraktur* between things that were otherwise deemed separate or disparate, making space for new ways of existing in the world.

The glaze surfaces in *Fraktured Homeland* also reference layering and the passage of time. The metallic glazes are reminiscent of wrought iron or rusting metal, and the silver surface of chrome. The light green glaze is suggestive of both live succulent plants and copper patina. The electric blue glaze looks like it has been accumulating slowly on the surface over decades. The palette is also confined to the pragmatic limits of the glaze I chose for its beautiful mottled surface. Throughout my many tests, the glaze only held delicately balanced amounts of copper, cobalt, and chrome. Anything else turned into the color of mud. The chartreuse and deep blue matte glazes are recipes with different surface qualities, and were added later to invite some warmth and density to the overall composition. The forms and surfaces were carefully calculated to create just the right amount of balance and variation in the installation, drawing your eye back and forth.

My ceramic forms are adorned with small petals of various floral shapes drawn from those found in *fraktur* ornament. These petal-like shapes are appliquéd on the surface of the forms to create a sense of movement and density, like the sensation created in *fraktur* drawings. Ornament in *frakturs* activates the space and draws your eye all around
the page, at times creating an almost overwhelming or claustrophobic sensation for the viewer.

In an earlier graduate school research project, I used the *fraktur* as a case study to show how ornament has become marginalized in art historical discourse through medieval rhetorical strategies. In this research I studied the origin of the term “ornament,” and came across Leonardo’s discussions on drawing, in which he ties the idea of *ornatus* (one of the root words of ornament) or “artificially wrought grace” to the representation of movement (Summers, “Movement I,” 75.) Leonardo disliked the representation of a static figure because it “fails to move its limbs in accordance with the movements of the mind,” (Summers, “Movement I,” 75.) He preferred the artificially wrought grace of a figure that appears like it is moving to the figure frozen in time. This artificial quality depicting the movement of a figures’s limbs in the work of art is the root of our understanding of ornament and artifice.

I would argue that *fraktur* artists are employing ornament for the same reason — to create the impression of movement in the mind’s eye. Ornament is the sum of the characteristics that, as Summers describes in his analogy of ornament to poetry, “restore the life lost in the transformation to words,” and that “makes the subject seem to live,” (“Movement I,” 96.) The role of ornament is essential in my work, because without the surface of many petals, the forms would be dead and lifeless. The role of ornament is to draw your eye from one form to another, creating a sense of movement and life within the work.

The ceramic forms in *Fraktured Homeland* rest atop wooden boxes custom made to fit their dimensions and create visual variety in the composition through height. The boxes
are stand-ins for the “page,” the original framing device or boundary of the *fraktur*. They are integral to the installation because they create the foundation of the composition. The boxes with composite parts that close off one side of the form create the sense of claustrophobia found in some *fraktur* drawings, which are packed to brim and overflowing with abundance. They retain a sense of plainness in their unadultured wooden surface, which lends a warmth and balance to the ceramic forms.

The use of terracotta as the clay body of my work is also potent for me. In the history of ceramics, terracotta is the “clay of the people” or peasant culture. It is associated with the highly decorative and sometimes even as almost disposable because it is less “refined” or “pure” than high temperature clays. I would argue that different types of clay are about class; the higher the temperature and the more “pure” or “whiter” the clay, the more value it has. (Think of porcelain, celadon, and cobalt, for instance.) Terra-cotta clay is important to me for its associations with the working class.

Terracotta is also the clay local to eastern Pennsylvania. This is why there are so many beautiful red brick farmhouses scattered throughout the countryside, as well as the historic streets of Philadelphia. Redware pottery, the regional “folk” pottery of Pennsylvania Dutch culture, is also made from terracotta clay, locally and cheaply sourced in the earth by its makers.

When my parents first bought the hardware store I grew up around, it was in an old one-room schoolhouse made of red brick. When the store burnt to the ground in the middle of the night in the spring of ’94, all that was left was crumbled, charred red brick. My sister and I spent the rest of our younger years carting these bricks around, building forts with them, and grinding them into deep red dust.
This piece, *Houseblessing: For Protection Against the Fire*, (2017) is based on an image of the charred store-front. It draws a direct connection between terra-cotta, fire, and my love for aged, textured surfaces.

**Lineage**

I also see my work in the lineage of Ann Agee and Jeffry Mitchell, who collapse history to make new meanings. Agee does through installations in which she layers images and objects associated with different historical contexts on top of each other. For instance, in “Super Imposition,” installed at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in 2010, Agee made perspective paintings of the wealthy or upper-class interior spaces and applied them as wallpaper to a room in the Philadelphia Museum of Art that represents the space of the working class. The white porcelain vases in the room are ghosts of their historical counterparts -- they act as ambiguous signs of a time in history, in which meaning has been diffused through multiple translations.
Ann Agee, “Super Imposition,” Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2010. (Fig. 4)

Jeffry Mitchell, “Foo Dogs,” 2014 (Fig. 5)
Jeffry Mitchell, on the other hand, reinterprets decorative history as personal history. He uses familiar images and motifs from the religious background of his childhood and recreates them into talismans of personal identity. He borrows from many different decorative traditions and adds layers upon layers of association and meaning in his work, which is both playful and dense. Mitchell uses both human and animal forms disguised by floral ornament to speak to the interplay of cultural symbols with personal identity.

Plain/Fancy

In her essay “We Weren’t Always Plain,” in Strangers At Home, Kasdorf tells the story of coming across two photos of her great aunt. In the first photo, her aunt is standing rigidly in the backyard in a plain cape dress with her hair pulled back tightly in a bonnet. She is frowning slightly. This is the photo of her on Sunday. In the second photo, she is sitting casually on the lawn in a dress with fancy buttons, a collar, and a ruffled skirt. She is grinning. This is her the rest of the week.

Kasdorf goes on to explain how these two photos exemplify the “plain/fancy duality” that defined the lives of many women of Mennonite family and heritage (316.) The photo on Sunday is the “plain” one, in which the aunt adheres to strict rules of dress code, (a visual signal of her separation from the rest of society.) The second photo shows that her aunt did not always follow the rules -- that in fact she found much joy in elements of the “fancy” that made their way into her life.

The “plain/fancy” divide was created to erect a strict boundary between good and evil. Its purpose was to create a narrative of uncomplicated moral purity and dedication.
To be “plain” is a sign that one is separate from the rest of society. The modern trappings of the rest of society are considered “worldly,” frivolous, and impure. The photos of Kasdorf’s great aunt are just one of many examples that prove how women complicated this narrative as they were living it, refusing to be either one or the other.

This is in part why I love frakturs so much, especially the ones that are from Mennonite communities and schools. They are so fancy in embellishment and ornament, and yet they adhere to a strict set of boundaries (the reward of merit, for example.) In many fraktur drawings there are forms created through repeated shapes that blur the boundaries between plant, animal, and architecture.

I too use the “plain/fancy” tension in my work. I have a strict set of “plain” boundaries that serve as the foundation of my work --- they are all built with terra-cotta clay as vessels from the bottom up and inspired by forms from frakturs. They rest on simple wooden boxes cut to fit their specific dimensions. I have a handful of petal shapes borrowed from the ornamental elements of frakturs. The “fancy” is what happens when I push against these boundaries and take them to their limits. How uncanny can I make the bird-tower while still basing it off a fraktur, building it out of a vessel, and using a handful of different petal shapes to piece the surface?

The plain/fancy binary also informs my ties to the vessel in the history of ceramics. I fell in love with ceramics because of its potential to be functional. To be able to make something to use fit perfectly within my understanding of what “good” or “plain” work was. The vessel has inherent connotations with function and use, and therefore sits within the realm of the “plain.” Sculpture, on the other hand, sits within the realm of the “fancy” because its function is purely visual or metaphorical. The forms in my thesis show,
Fraktured Homeland, are both. Some remain obvious vessels with large openings, and others are completely enclosed sculptural forms. There are a few forms in the installation that remain vessels but have openings or “mouths” that are so small or oddly placed that they cannot possible be used. They are “impossible objects” of a sort, complicating the plain/fancy binary -- they retain the “plain” and functional associations of the vessel but render them inert. Their raison d’être is visual, spacial, and metaphorical, placing them in the realm of the “fancy.”

In “Talking Forks: Fiction and the Inner Life of Objects,” Charles Baxter discusses the agency of objects in literature. He argues against the pathetic fallacy, in which anthropomorphization is a narcissistic expansion of the human realm into that of objects -- a form of imperialism (Baxter, 68.) Baxter instead suggests that in a world where objects have a life of their own, humans are no longer the center of the world, and we can begin to see it anew.

This is how I see my own work. The fraktur is a fictional setting I have brought to life in space. The installation holds longing, desire, and fecundity, like many of the fraktur drawings. The forms symbols of impossible place; they are reminiscent of the animal, bird, and architectural forms repeated in many frakturs and yet refuse to be finitely any one of these things.

“In the shape that chance and wind give the clouds, you are already intent on recognizing figures: a sailing ship, a hand, and elephant...” (Calvino, 14.)
As a child my parents were chastised by their peers for being too worldly. When they first decided to open the hardware store on Sunday, for example, they got scathing letters from friends and family. There were many silent judgements and uncanny stares. This is the fractured nature of my “homeland.” It is one that nourished, grew, and informed me, yet I am no longer welcome in its midst -- it is an impossible place that I can no longer return to. *Fraktured Homeland* is an attempt to breathe new life into the space of the *fraktur*, a tradition informed by strict rules and boundaries yet so clearly yearning to be free of them. It is my attempt to carve out a hospitable and welcoming space within the tradition -- to make room for myself through this body of work.
Works Referenced


Images Sources

1. http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/184183
2. https://libwww.freelibrary.org/digital/item/5828
Appendix A: Recipe Compendium

**Youngquist Lithium:**

45 Lithium Carbonate
10 Spodumene
20 Gerstley Borate
25 Zircopax

\[ + 2 \text{ Copper Carbonate} + 6 \text{ Tin Oxide} = \text{“Jade Dream”} \]

\[ + 2.5 \text{ Chrome Oxide} + 2.5 \text{ Copper Carbonate} = \text{“Crunchy Chrome”} \]

\[ + 1 \text{ Cobalt Carbonate} + 6 \text{ Tin Oxide} = \text{“Small Waterfalls”} \]

Other glazes/surface finishes:

**Emily Myers Blue:**

40 Barium Carbontae
19 China Clay
19 Nepheline Syenite
10 Flint/Silica
5 Lithium Carbonate
3 Cobalt Carbonate

**Chartreuse:**

1:1:1 Chartreuse Mason Stain, EPK, and Gerstley Borate
Silver:
Cone 04 Clear glaze under White Gold luster

Metallics (Commercial Glazes)
Spectrum Metallics “Moonlight”
Spectrum Metallics “Wrought Iron”