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At Odds

by

Robert J Sturgess III

Under the Direction of Christina A. West, MFA

ABSTRACT

At Odds playfully combines biomorphic ceramic sculptures with pieces of domestic furniture to investigate the emotional impact of juxtaposing the everyday with the strange. To create this body of work, I relied upon theories of The Uncanny and The Aesthetic of The Strange to help conceive of ways to communicate a complex range of emotions. *At Odds* utilizes elements within The Aesthetic of The Strange such as The Uncanny, The Unsettling, and The Incomprehensible to provoke feelings of discomfort by creating unusual, awkward relationships between these visually distinct elements. The discomfort in these works echoes difficult moments in my family's history and explores the lingering effects of those moments. By appearing vulnerable, weak, and weird – yet familiar – these works also reveal how I view myself and echo the discomfort which I feel when faced with emotional expression.

INDEX WORDS: Discomfort, Uncanny, Bizarre, Biomorphic, Domestic, Fragments

At Odds

by

Robert J Sturgess III

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2020

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2020

AT ODDS

by

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May 2020

DEDICATION

To my beautiful wife who has endlessly supported me and kept me sane through three years of graduate school. I am so lucky to have you in my life and I could not have asked for a more amazing partner. Thank you so much. Also, to my incredibly supportive family. Without your support and guidance, I do not know where I would be or what I would be doing. Thank you.

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1 INTRODUCTION: GENUINE AWKWARDNESS

An awkward interaction is, by far, the most genuine interaction people can have. Awkwardness is universal and widely relatable; it can be a slight trip while climbing up the stairs, or a nervous, sweaty handshake. Awkwardness is uncomfortable, but it has the adept ability to strip away the façade of most social interactions. With the façade gone, we get a momentary glimpse at another's imperfections and fallibility, cutting straight to the core of human existence: we are all awkward.

Awkwardness stems from uncertainty about how to behave, what to expect, or how to react. Guessing incorrectly in social situations creates an uncomfortable interaction. *At Odds* recreates the uncertainty of difficult family interactions through abstracted, aesthetically awkward, biomorphic forms which lean against, or are fused with, fragmented domestic objects. The organic sculptural forms reflect parts of my personality: awkward, vulnerable, anxious, and in need of support. In some instances, these pieces are co-dependent, relying on manipulated pieces of furniture and other fragmented structures for stability. Decisions about form, surface treatment, color, and space highlight the awkwardness of each piece and, therefore, its ability to question my sense of comfort and, by extension, the viewer's sense of comfort. My mixed-media sculptures trigger awareness of viewers' own level of comfort through the strange, the uncanny, and the bizarre. This space between mild irritation and the experience of the uncanny creates an experience seemingly at odds with itself.

Over the last few years, the work has developed from odd, biomorphic ceramic "organisms," into mixed-media sculptural forms combining ceramics and household objects. Opening the work up to the inclusion of mixed-media objects unchained its versatility. I was able

to quickly and effectively get the domestic references I wanted that are essential to conjuring the uncanny.

2 THE STRANGE AND THE UNCANNY

In *Making Strange*, Herbert Grabes unpacks the nuances of strangeness, explaining that The Strange is something that is new or unfamiliar and encompasses qualities that relate strongly to my work like The Uncanny, The Incomprehensible, and The Unsettling. Grabes describes “the Aesthetic of the Strange” as working on a sliding scale between “The Strikingly Beautiful” and “The Sublime.” The Strikingly Beautiful is “directly a feeling of life’s being furthered” and “presented [...] as the object of a universal liking.”¹ For example, consider a sunset, a symphony of beautiful, vibrant colors, changing right in front of your eyes as the sun gets lower on the horizon. Surely this would be considered a universal liking. Whereas, The Sublime is “a pleasure that arises only indirectly: it is produced by the feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital forces followed immediately by an outpouring of them that is all the stronger.”² Perhaps the best way to convey the sublime is to imagine that you are an ancient Greek laborer. Every day you work the fields or fish on a boat, never being exposed to imagery but hearing stories of the gods that rule your world—hearing tales of their power. Then one day, you and your family travel to a temple to pay homage, and there, in front of you is an enormous stone carving of the most powerful force on earth. The feeling you would have in that moment would be best described as The Sublime. Your senses would fail, you would be left breathless, then there would be a flood of pleasure, having experienced such an all-consuming event. The notable difference between The Strikingly Beautiful and The Sublime is its directness. The Strikingly Beautiful arouses

¹ Herbert Grabes, *Making Strange Beauty, Sublimity, and the (post)modern 'third Aesthetic'*. Postmodern Studies ; 42. (Amsterdam ; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2008) 3.

² Grabes, *Making*, 7-8.

pleasure directly through a feeling that life is wonderful and will last forever, whereas The Sublime arouses pleasure indirectly after eradicating the viewer's imagination.

It is within this middle ground between these two poles that my work exists, not heavily in any one specific category but falling into several different categories. This concept of The Aesthetic of the Strange is best represented as a diagram (Fig. 1) and allows us to see that strangeness becomes a container that holds and organizes sub-concepts. These sub-concepts include The Uncanny, The Incomprehensible, and The Unsettling. In brief, The Uncanny is a feeling brought on by encountering something that accesses an irretrievable memory triggered by fear of something seen, heard, or otherwise sensed, The Incomprehensible is a feeling brought on by something so bizarre that it does not seem to make sense, and The Unsettling is a slight irritation from being confronted with something new. My fascination with these concepts led me to spend time during my graduate work, familiarizing myself with theorists who have written about uncanniness, strangeness, and related ideas. Exploring these concepts in depth has increased my understanding of what I had been intuitively doing in my pre-MFA work and has helped me construct a conceptual framework that I used, in part, to create the pieces in *At Odds*.

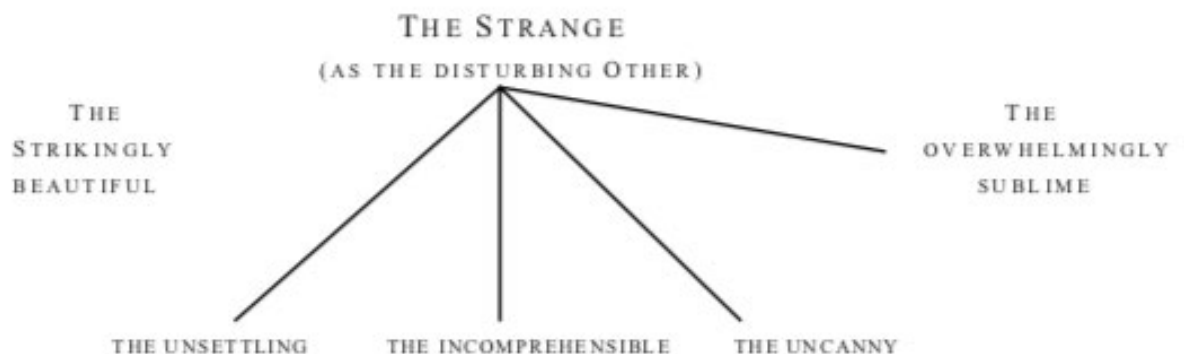


Figure 1. Illustration by Herbert Grabes, *Making Strange: Beauty, Sublimity, and the (Post) Modern Third Aesthetic* (New York, 2008), p. 135.

The ideas of The Aesthetic of The Strange and The Uncanny work hand in hand within the idea of awkwardness because of the uncomfortable responses they often elicit from viewers. As discussed earlier, awkward interactions often create discomfort through the failure of social expectations or social contracts. Similarly, The Uncanny creates discomfort through an inability to retrieve a distant memory. In his essay “Playing with Dead Things,” Mike Kelly references The Uncanny as a sensation that “is closely tied to the act of remembering.”³ Kelly also discusses Freud’s description of The Uncanny, saying that “The Uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it.”⁴ There is a clear link between The Uncanny and distant, irretrievable memories. Freud mentions this link when he describes The Uncanny as “that class of terrifying which leads us back to something long known to us, once familiar.”⁵ Essentially, an irretrievable memory leads to the uncanny when a new experience dislodges part of it.

In *At Odds*, I purposely set out to create discomfort, and more specifically, conjure The Uncanny by incorporating fragmented elements of the home that create a connection to the viewer’s memory. For example, the piece *Don’t Lean Back in Your Chair*, 2019 (Fig. 2) consists of an old wooden dining room chair that has a heavily weathered patina. Its altered rear left leg is causing the seat of the chair to tilt back. A blobby, mucus-like, green ceramic form sits on the slanted chair seat. The backrest and splines have been removed from its base and instead are sporadically emerging from the ceramic form. The uncanny is evoked here by the chair in addition to the title. The viewer can connect to their memories of a chair, but the uncertainty of

³ Mike Kelley, *The Uncanny* Gemeente museum; (Los Angeles: Fred Hoffman, 1993. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1426989486?accountid=11226>) 73.

⁴ Kelly, *The Uncanny*, 73.

⁵ Kelly, *The Uncanny*, 73.

the ceramic form creates a disjuncture when confronting the chair, hindering that connection. Essentially, this piece is putting together two objects that are familiar but playing with how they are seen as a whole. The title, *Don't Lean Back in Your Chair*, uses a common childhood memory to evoke The Uncanny. Perhaps we cannot recall an *exact* moment when a parent warned us not to lean back in a chair, but we believe, on some level, that they did. Didn't they? Through nuanced inclusions of childhood memories like this example, I am slowly resolving the uncomfortable feelings these memories bring about. In the instance of *Don't Lean Back in Your Chair* I use a light-hearted memory as a catalyst for the work, while other times I reference an emotionally fraught experience, in an attempt to make that moment safe again.



Figure 2. RJ Sturgess, Don't Lean Back in Your Chair, 2019, stoneware, enamel, acrylic & found object, 24x24x43 in.

My work exists, within this space, evoking an odd sense of familiar unfamiliarity, something which Freud called *unheimlich*, meaning “un-homely” or “unfamiliar.”⁶ By incorporating fragmented elements of furniture, I reference common memories of home, a space that is perhaps the most familiar for people. Fragmenting furniture evokes discomfort by destruction and manipulation of the viewer’s distant memories. Creating large sculptures at the scale of the human body adds to this sense of the familiar unfamiliar. Some of my early work, like *Laura* (Fig 3), is about the size of a loaf of bread. The viewer experiences a piece of this size as an object sitting on a pedestal to be passively observed, whereas one of my later, larger works, like *Your Father...* (Fig 4), which is about four feet tall, is an obstacle, confronting the viewer. The confrontational aspect of these later works enhances the awkward feeling by forcing viewers to face the piece at eye level and to negotiate the space around the work.

⁶ Kelly, *The Uncanny*, 71.



Figure 3. RJ Sturgess, Laura, 2018, porcelain, underglaze, watercolor, epoxy & monofilament, 5x7x14 in.



Figure 4. RJ Sturgess, Your Father..., 2019, stoneware, enamel, acrylic & fur, 14x14x42 in.

While these concepts are essential to my work, I don't always consciously consider them as I create a sculpture. I create work intuitively, sometimes through a sketching session, other times creating a piece from the parts I have laying around my studio. However, as I create a piece, I consistently take a step back to reflect on it. I consider where specific physical characteristics may have originated from in the subconscious. This recursive process of identification can come in the form of a studio visit, a free-writing journal session, or a good old-fashioned bout of "sit down and stare at it." Sometimes I take a step back after I have finished the form to contemplate what memories the piece may have originated. Other times I will finish a piece entirely and then retroactively resolve what the work is about, occasionally even what memory the piece is harkening to.

While creating the work of *At Odds*, I think about a specific memory or remember a specific incident, then consider the feelings that entangle that memory or incident. This feeling could be something I experienced at the moment, or it could be how I feel looking back. I use these emotions to dictate what I want the outcome of the piece to be: vulnerable, burdening, or playful. Starting with this foundation informs some decision making in general composition, but the rest of the form is dictated intuitively and through problem-solving. Resolving issues that arise through the process of creating is a vital part of my practice. This process allows for possibilities to present themselves, where I would not have thought of them on my own. These opportunities can be in the form of a ceramic piece breaking, seeing how a piece looks while it is stored, or simply spilling some paint on a piece. Through a combination of planning and being open to opportunity, I create work that references my memories but develops into something awkward, uncanny, and at odds with itself.

3 REVEALING INTERIORS

The seeds of *At Odds* began with a piece that I made in 2018 at the end of my second year in the program. In this piece, haphazardly built scrap-wood supports an amorphous, ceramic form. A large orifice in the middle of the ceramic form faces upward, revealing a fur-covered interior. In direct contrast, the exterior surface is coated in a blue, sponge-like textured glaze. The wooden scaffold pieces are made from different cuts and species of wood; some pieces look brand-new, while others appear worn. The title of this piece, *That Time My Mom Told Me If It Weren't For Me She Would Have ...* (Fig. 5) references a family incident that took place during my teen years. I remember the incident very clearly. My parents had very recently gotten divorced, and my mother was removed from the house by the local sheriff's department. During one of my visits, my mother confided in me that if it hadn't been for me, she would have killed herself. The discomfort I felt during the actual event was slight. However, in reflecting on this time, I see the burdensome emotional impact the incident had on me. I wanted to create a piece that conveyed this complex series of emotions: discomfort, vulnerability, and guilt.



Figure 5. RJ Sturgess, That Time My Mom Told Me If It Weren't For Me She Would Have..., 2019, stoneware, glaze, wood & fur, 22x35x28 in.

A piece initially titled *Good Boy* (fig. 6) also served as a foundation for my thesis work. The title of this piece references something my mother would say to me and something one would say to an obedient dog. I played into this double meaning: the ceramic part of the piece is about the size of a medium dog, and it rests on a couch cushion. However, this original iteration was not entirely successful. The bottom of the piece was very flat, which added a sense of weight. The piece was not as dynamic as it should have been. In storing the piece on its side, I noticed that its interior was exposed. Displaying this piece in this way both revealed and highlighted its artifice. The outside is clean, refined, and intentional, while the interior shows the

messiness of a rough crater glaze. Keeping the interior as my new focus, I placed the piece upside down on a series of wooden supports. This new arrangement (Fig. 7) accomplished several things: it resolved the problematic weightiness, while also revealing the unexpected interior to the viewer. With its interior exposed, the piece is vulnerable and precarious. It is, literally, showing its underbelly.



Figure 6. RJ Sturgess, Good Boy, 2019, stoneware, glaze & found object, 28x28x24 in.



Figure 7. RJ Sturgess, Untitled, 2019, stoneware, glaze & wood, 40x30x38 in.

Working through these ideas with *Good Boy* was a breakthrough of sorts. Orienting the piece like a submissive dog helped me formulate vocabulary or methodology for representing vulnerability. One of the most successful aspects of this piece is the complex emotional response it triggers. We feel empathy for a submissive dog, but we also feel embarrassed by its vulnerability, even a little repulsed by the extreme self-humiliation and emotional neediness implied. We want to rub the belly, but we also want to look away and escape the situation's

awkwardness. These ideas about artifice, vulnerability, and fragmented domesticity shaped the works in *At Odds*.

This reveal of an unexpected or unusual inside was a means of recreating feelings I had about myself. I am viewed as a welcoming, easy-going person, while my interior is a twisting knot of anxiety, churning over minutia, and unlikely potential situations. I'm putting on a friendly, outgoing demeanor that only I know is a façade, a façade that is at the crux of what this early work is about. Here lies my interest in awkward interactions: the stripping of facades and illusions to see the imperfections that people like myself are trying their hardest to hide.

For me, art making functions somewhere between therapy and compulsion. It is a subconscious drive to make things. This early work was a means of resolving the emotional weight that certain events from my upbringing placed on me. Today, the work is a means of investigating memories and creating work that echoes my uncomfortable feelings when recalling that memory.

4 GROSS, EMPATHY & BIZARRE

There are three main categories of influences in my work: Gross, Empathy, and Bizarre. Each influence easily correlates to The Uncanny, The Incomprehensible, and The Unsettling. Gross will discuss The Uncanny, Empathy will tie into The Unsettling, and Bizarre will touch on concepts relating to The Incomprehensible.

4.1 Gross/Uncanny

Gross, for me, is something that makes you aware of your surroundings, puts you on alert, alarms your senses in an almost stomach-turning way. From an early age, I was infatuated with things that are considered gross, repulsive, or strange by others. "Frogging" in my backyard as a child became a way in which to explore this grossness. My old winter boots became

makeshift waders, allowing me to climb into the murky water where my slimy amphibious prizes hid. Over time, my collection of frogs would grow so vast that I ran out of containers. To solve this problem, I transformed an old plastic kiddie pool into a sizeable provisional terrarium. A place for me to keep my specimens with all the comforts they were accustomed: sticks, mud, plants, etc. Everything that a ten-year-old would think to include. Except for food. What began as a rather innocent boyhood pursuit of amassing my collection of slimy, odd, long-legged friends, had quickly turned into an accidental mass execution of the local amphibians. This tale of accidental childhood culling brings to light some of the critical elements within what I describe as gross. Frogs in and of themselves would vastly be considered gross, their slimy skin, their spindly legs, their disproportionate ratio of front legs to back legs, their big beady eyes all combine to make a gross creature. Combine these already gross amphibians with death at a mass level, and we are undoubtedly talking about some pretty gross business.

My fascination with grossness continues into adulthood, though nowadays, I look for this quality in other artists' work instead of in murky ponds. Jason Briggs' work fits within my conception of grossness in art; he is one of my earliest artistic influences, first getting exposed to his work in 2009, and his work continues to inform my practice. Briggs is known for his small scale, biomorphic sculptures that reference the human body and upholstery. His works evoke a desire to touch, fondle, or otherwise handle. One piece that stands out is a small porcelain piece titled *Luba* (Fig. 8). In this piece, a small porcelain form rests on a hammock of black spandex slung between two square polished metal rods. The spandex hammock creates an odd tension: it both supports the piece and displays the sculpture's every crevice and fold. The ceramic form is a pale, fleshy color. Coarse hairs coat the surfaces at both ends, evenly spaced and with a slight curl. The hair adds a texture that contrasts the fleshy rolls, which are either smooth or covered in

a goosebump-like texture. One end of the sculpture tapers into a small cylindrical protrusion. At the opposite end, several mounds of varying textures lead the eye to an open orifice. I am captivated by the detail and refinement in *Luba*. Seeing Briggs' work showed me what grossness, in the form of sculpture, could be.



Figure 8. Jason Briggs, Luba, 2012, porcelain, spandex, steel, hair.

Gross can be compared to The Uncanny, though they have nuanced differences. Both are connected to fear. The Uncanny is a connection to a repressed memory that is triggered by fear. However, gross is a sense of revulsion that is either caused by fear, as in the example above about my long-legged friends: you are grossed out by it because you fear it.

4.2 Empathy/Unsettling

Creating empathy in the viewer is essential to me because, as I have said before, I consider these ceramic sculptures to be stand-ins for me. I want people to empathize with me and understand the strange, uncomfortable things I've been through and then tell me that "it's going to be ok." Instead of flagging every stranger down on the streets as a means to talk about my issues, I create odd mixed-media sculptures, placing a ceramic stand-in for myself in precarious, awkward situations in hopes of making someone empathize with it. Ultimately, I want the vulnerable, lethargic, helpless ceramic forms to evoke empathy for these objects caught in awkward moments of precarity.

Beth Cavener's large-scale sculptures evoke empathy for animal figures that find themselves in grim situations. We see ourselves in these animals who are bound by rope or otherwise trapped. Their tension and unease reflect our own struggles.

Trapped (Fig. 9) is a standout example of Cavener's ability to evoke empathy in the viewer, featuring a red fox with its rear leg entangled in a rope snare. Some animals become so anxious when ensnared that they will chew through their leg in order to escape. In the instance of *Trapped*, we see the fox chewing one of its legs, but instead of chewing the ensnared leg, the fox is chewing through her free leg. A closer look at the chewed leg reveals a shiny gold ring on one toe. Instead of setting itself free from the physical trap, the fox is attempting to free herself from the ensnarement of marriage.



Figure 9. Beth Cavener, Trapped, 2015, stoneware, paint, 18 k gold, rope, wood, 21x37x22 in.

Empathy, in some instances, can evoke The Unsettling. Often empathy is brought about by seeing someone or something in a difficult or unsettling situation, such as witnessing a fox chew its leg off. I strive to convey a similar sense of empathy in my work. The unsettling ceramic forms are representations of myself, made vulnerable by their need for support. Built wooden structures or altered furniture pieces provide a precarious support system, delicately balancing the ceramic forms resting on them. This instability creates tension within the work, an essential component in representing my own vulnerability. These vulnerable, helpless forms solicit empathy as they negotiate their precarious existence.

4.3 Bizarre/Incomprehensible

As discussed earlier, The Incomprehensible is a quality that makes something unfathomable or inscrutable. This concept is directly linked to the bizarre because the bizarre often leads to incomprehensibility. Bizarre is a quality of something never seen before and is

therefore strange to the point of causing emotional distance. It creates an inability to recognize or comprehend what is happening. Bizarre can come in the form of something new to the viewer, or by combining objects or images that are already known but are arranged in a way that is surprising. This latter way of achieving the bizarre is one strategy I use in my work, as does the artist Erwin Wurm.

The Red Hot Chili Peppers introduced me to the work of Erwin Wurm. In the band's *Can't Stop* (Fig. 10) music video, band members interact with everyday objects such as 5-gallon buckets, cardboard boxes, and permanent markers. These interactions are so bizarre and incomprehensible that they elicit an odd humor, a puckish sense of mischief. At the end of the video, a sign reads, "Inspired by the 'one-minute sculptures' of Erwin Wurm."⁷ I soon became enthralled with Wurm's bizarre, mischievous work. His works are simple yet so utterly bizarre.

⁷ Erwin Wurm and Stephan. Berg. *Erwin Wurm* (Cologne: DuMont, 2009) 294-295.



Figure 10. Red Hot Chili Peppers, Can't Stop, 2002, Directed by: Mark Romanek.

In Wurm's *One-Minute Sculptures* (Fig. 11), the artist pairs people with everyday objects such as tennis balls, water bottles, pens, pencils, bananas, and buckets. These objects often obscure the person's body, covering the head with a bucket, for example. In the gallery setting, Wurm provided written directions as to how the objects should be interacted with or used and asked participants to document their experiences with an instant camera, also provided by Wurm.



Figure 11. Erwin Wurm, One Minute Sculptures, 1997-1998, Chromogenic Prints; 3/5, 45x30cm.

Wurm blurs the definition of sculpture by merely changing the normal context of these mundane, ordinary objects; in doing so, he shifts our perception of what these objects are and what their purpose is. Wurm highlights dysfunction by manipulating functional things, morphing

them into dysfunctional oddities, *The Incomprehensible*. His combinations of video, photography, performance, and sculpture capture, preserve, and share these moments of absurd reality. Christa Steinle aptly describes these moments of absurdity and dysfunction as opening “doors to new emotional and cognitive experiences.”⁸

Some aspects of Wurm’s work bleeds into mine, though my unique perspective alters these. Where Wurm creates performative sculptures that are suspended in time by photography, video, etc., my sculptures are suspended mid-performance. Where Wurm creates bizarre scenarios out of people interacting in unexpected ways with everyday objects, I create bizarre scenarios by combining familiar pieces of domestic furniture with creepy biomorphic ceramic sculptures.

Each of these artists presents concepts that inspire aspects of my work. One notable similarity among all three is that each artist’s work offers a model for representing the human body, either featuring it directly or inserting a surrogate. Briggs references the body with his uncanny, amorphous, fleshy sculptures, Cavener uses animals as unsettling human avatars, and Wurm uses actual human bodies but obscures them with everyday objects to create the incomprehensible. In my work, biomorphic ceramic sculptures act as my surrogate. Like in Briggs’ work, these abstracted forms seem both human and not-human all at once; the amorphous forms are unrecognizable, but the “fleshiness” and tactility of the surface hints at human origin. Using a stand-in for the figure is another means of creating a façade. Earlier I reference how having a pleasant, easy-going demeanor is a façade that hides my inner anxieties. Similarly, these ceramic forms appear to be a biomorphic strange “other,” but this is a facade shielding their true purpose. They are metaphors for my inner emotions. They are blobby,

⁸ Christa Steinle, Erwin Wurm, and Biennale Di Venezia. *Erwin Wurm : One Minute Sculptures, 1997-2017*. (Berlin : Hatje Cantz, 2017) 10.

structureless forms as a means of recreating my amorphous emotional state, my everchanging level of anxiety, my perpetual reliving of awkward moments.

5 AT ODDS

At Odds takes up the concerns I began exploring in *That Time My Mom Told Me If It Weren't For Me She Would Have...* and *Good Boy* and pushes them further. These works tinker with all the concepts and methods I had been studying and working with, combining them in different ways to elicit a range of emotional responses: awkwardness, alienation, extreme discomfort, and slight unease. The sculptures in *At Odds* all follow a similar compositional formula: 1) a biomorphic ceramic form (my surrogate); 2) an element that references domesticity; 3) contrasting textures between the ceramic and domestic components. This framework is like my chemistry set; as I mix the three elements in each piece and allow for unplanned opportunities, my understanding of how to elicit a certain feeling in the viewer grows.

The piece *Poop Lamp #2*, (Fig. 12) for example, features a shiny brass lamp topped with an amber-beaded lampshade that everyone's grandmother owned sometime in the 1970s or '80s. The lamp's shaft impales a blobby ceramic form coated in a heavily textured brown glaze that resembles fecal matter. Although the lamp remains recognizable, the ceramic excrement obscures it, making it both familiar yet unsettling all at once. The viewer can connect to memories associated with lamps, but the injection of the ceramic excrement overrides and disrupts all other thought processes: Where did the poop come from? That's disgusting! This doesn't belong here! What is it made of? Don't touch it! Who would do such a thing to a lamp?



Figure 12. RJ Sturgess, Poop Lamp #2 2019, stoneware, glaze & found object, 18x18x28 in.

The Chairs at OTB (Fig. 13) references a more personal memory of my father bringing me along on his trips to the local OTB (Off Track Betting) office. I do not remember much from these adventures, but I have a vivid memory of the OTB's plush red velvet upholstered chairs tufted with buttons. In my sculpture, this lurid bit of chair sits atop *OTB*'s ceramic component, a shiny, white-glazed amorphous form made of two spheres conjoined by fleshy rolls and creases. The white glaze effectively body-shames the ceramic component, as light glares on it, highlighting every naked lump, bump, and curve. It both repulses us and triggers self-revulsion, reminding us of our own physical imperfections. This surfeit of flesh, combined with the tacky corporeality of the tufted chair, creates an emotional distance. We know this disgusting body, but we do not want to know it. At the same time, the softness suggested by the tufts and folds in the piece draws us in, almost begging us to hug, touch, or poke its Pillsbury Doughboy-like surfaces. These conflicting reactions, and the awkwardness which results, are at the core of *At Odds*.



Figure 13. RJ Sturgess, The Chairs at OTB, 2020, stoneware, glaze & upholstered wood, 23x12x36 in.

6 CONCLUSION

To create this body of work, I relied upon theories of The Uncanny and The Aesthetic of The Strange to help me conceive of ways to communicate a complex range of emotions. By combining a compositional formula with unforeseen opportunities from the creative process, I explore emotional nuances, subtly altering the impact of each work. The different techniques I use in combining the biomorphic ceramic forms, fractured domestic furniture, and contrasting textures manifest as an awkward interaction. This process mimics the way I endlessly replay in my mind every social misstep I've ever committed.

Each work taps into and plays with these dualities: weird/normal, empathy/disconnect, strength/vulnerability, pride/shame, and disgust/attraction. These forces, at odds with each other, unsettle and confuse us. We aren't quite sure how to react. We feel awkward. Through the lens of my vulnerability, awkwardness, and emotional instability, *At Odds* lends viewers a different perspective of what it means to be human, precariously moving through life. I present viewers with ugliness, weaknesses, and flaws to be seen and experienced, helping to question their own comfort with humanity.

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