

ONE BY ONE

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the  
University of North Texas in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

By

Laura Newby, B.F.A.

Denton, Texas

August, 1996

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS .....	iv
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
Statement of Problem	
Methodology	
2. DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK	4
3. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION	7
ILLUSTRATIONS .....	9

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

<u>Broken</u> , 14" x 10", earthenware	11
<u>Souvenirs</u> , 18" x 14", earthenware	12
<u>Habitat</u> , 6", earthenware	13
<u>Plenty</u> , 7", earthenware	14

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

My work results in part from an interest in the art of prehistoric humans, specifically drawings of animals in the caves of Lascaux, France and Altamira, Spain. Additionally, I have ventured into other avenues of thought inspired by Japanese Haniwa clay animals and by the pottery of the Native American Mimbres. These cultures endowed their animal objects with a life force or spirit. This concept appealed to me because I had never thought of objects in this way. Inspired by these different concepts, it has always been my intent to bring these visions of animals and the environments in which they live in into three dimensions, through the medium of clay.

The slab construction method I use is similar to that of the Japanese Haniwa animals. The Haniwa works were created by using smooth slabs and cylinders of clay. My approach is more expressive and unfinished, creating an appearance reminiscent of ancient ruins and relics. Additionally, there is a certain amount of intentional ambiguity of time and place that exists in my work which allows for many interpretations. It is important to me that each of my pieces comes to be appreciated by many people, and still, each must hold a special meaning for me.

An Important custom of the Mimbres people was to place a hole in their bowls. A strategically placed hole in a vessel destroyed its functionality and allowed the spirit of the object to be freed from service. This idea has special significance for my own work, as I am aware of the openings in my clay animals -- their eyes, ears, and mouths. I believe that creating these openings somehow gives the creatures more depth, both physically and conceptually, by allowing the viewer inside.

The animals seem to be listening or waiting for something to happen. They are usually standing alert. These creatures are about survival in a wild environment. I am very curious about this circumstance and how it relates to the way humans deal with survival in nature.

The manner in which the clay tears or rips can determine the individual expression of a piece. The seemingly insignificant and accidental movements of the clay often create spontaneous approaches to working. I seek to match my spontaneous approach in each piece I construct. I see my work as part of a series, each piece evolving into the next.

#### Statement of Problem

Previously, the subjects of my work had been Northwestern animals, specifically, bears, deer, elk, rabbits, horses, and fish. My representation of them was very basic and somewhat static, depicting a lack of any real knowledge of the animals they represented. They were limited to one or two stances resulting in the pieces becoming rather ordinary when viewed together. Further, the animals' true habitat was not part of the method of display. The source of this problem lay in the absence of any actual experience with the

subjects and their surroundings. To remedy this problem I spent a summer in the Rocky Mountain National Forests of Colorado doing research. First hand experience offered an opportunity to witness the untamed qualities of these animals and the reality of their environments. I used the experience of Colorado to answer the following questions.

1. How did seeing these creatures firsthand affect my treatment of the animal subject matter.
2. How did exploring the habitat of these creatures change the presentation of my work?
3. How did the wilderness experience affect the treatment of the clay?

### Methodology

I have created eleven pieces that reflect my experience with the animals in Colorado. These pieces relate to the questions posed in my Statement of Problem. These works take the form of settings that include animals and their environments. I have chosen what I feel are the most significant of these pieces to write about in answering the questions I have posed.

This work was done in low fire earthenware clays using both red and white clay bodies. I used matt tones for a surface treatment to reflect the colors I was attracted to in my initial source from inspiration of the primitive cave drawings.

## CHAPTER II

### DESCRIPTION OF THE WORK

For my problem, I created eleven pieces depicting animals and their environments. The topic of environment in these pieces is treated in a more conceptual and intuitive manner as opposed to a more literal or narrative approach. Four of these works were significant from the rest of the work I produced in that they more directly address specific issues concerning the condition of a particular creatures habitat.

Each piece includes a set of visual clues which make reference to the state of that animals particular environment, both good and bad. For instance, the piece, Souvenirs, depicts the animals removed from their environment and the only trace of their habitat are the two sticks they carry with them. The title helps to clarify the notion that those sticks may have become all that is left of the natural environment for those animals. During my explorations of Colorado wildlife environments I became familiar with a pond along side Interstate 70 near an area called Officer's Gulch. The beavers had made this small pond their home even though it was only a few hundred yards from the highway where traffic continuously raced by at 70 plus mile per hour. It seemed to me as if their territory had certainly diminished over the years and would, undoubtedly continue to diminish in the future judging from the amount of visitors to the area. Broken is a piece which takes the form of a deer laying on its side. There is some detail in the depiction of the deer's

wounds, but it is handled in a loose, general way that is not overtly gory. Broken deals with environment in a manner that suggests, by demonstrating a circumstance of an animal's death, that there is an element of unnatural disruption in its world. The idea that the deer is "broken" implies that it was not intended to come to its' end just yet.

However, the image of the dead deer also is suggestive of a more holistic idea. The deer could be viewed as a part of the cycle of nature. This animal's death would possibly serve as food for other animals in the ecosystem. While in Colorado I frequently found many animal remains throughout the forests as well as the animals that had met their end under the wheels of automobiles. It seemed that animals that had perished in more secluded areas of the mountains were more effectively consumed by other animals.

When I decided to create an image of an animal that was deceased I chose to finish it in colors that were not realistically graphic. The blue acrylic wash enhanced the idea of coldness without the use of an overstated, gory blood red. More to the point and relevant is the implication conveyed through the use of the blue color, a human shade of death. This transposition of a condition of humans upon an animal was intended as a subtle way to make the deer anthropomorphic.

The third piece that I constructed was entitled, Plenty. In this piece I used more direct and exaggerated elements to depict the concept of an elk and its' shrinking habitat. The habitat that I observed these animals in always seemed to have been invaded by man in one fashion or another. The primary imposition I observed was the unavoidable presence of fences throughout much of the area this animal dwells in. The elk in the piece



is positioned on top of a small mound of earth that it tightly surrounded by a cable wire fence. The amount of room left for the elk is too minuscule and unaccommodating for such a large wild animal. This exaggeration of the territory space of this animal was a method I used to heighten the importance of the message. The finish applied to this piece was fairly natural and consistent with nature. However, a similar piece entitled, Habitat, was perhaps more effective in conveying the coldness and sense of confinement presented in the piece. Habitat's grey, black and white finish was colder and removed from the comfort of reality. This had the same effect as did the finish on the dead deer of Broken. The mountain goat in Habitat, was more in danger and threatened because the concertina wire that surrounded him was far less familiar than the regular wire fence depicted in Plenty.

## CHAPTER III

### SUMMARY

In answering the questions I posed in my Statement of Problem I tried to create works that were both visually and conceptually unified. This was necessary because the idea of habitat was a common theme in all the questions in the proposal.

The answer to my first question concerning my treatment of the animal subject matter was most effectively demonstrated by dealing with a single specific concept in each individual piece. The issue of the small amount terrain the elk has to roam in, for example, was a much narrower point than I would have previously focused on before I visited the actual habitat of my subjects. Further the notion of depicting a dead animal, as in the work, Broken, had not occurred to me until I actually saw that death can be found just as readily in these animal's habitat as life can.

The second question I posed was about the effect of visiting the habitat of these animals first hand, and how it would change my work. The work changed by the addition of the various props, the blindfold over the fox's eyes, the wire fences around the elk and goat, the single stick in the beaver's teeth etc.. These accessories were examples of my solution to the problem of how to depict, in a more readable way, an explanation of the topic of the shrinking habitat of Colorado wildlife.

The final question of how the wilderness experience would affect the treatment of the clay was, perhaps, a culmination of every aspect of my approach to this body of work. I began to treat the clay more deliberately than before. I did not allow the clay to remain as untouched as I would have previously. I had specific requirements in mind when I began each piece. In Plenty, for instance, my decision to place the elk on a small confined area of turf greatly influenced the posture of this animal. Prior to my experience in the animal's habitat, I would have placed this creature standing without any indication of his habitat. Perhaps, this was because I was previously unaware of the large amount of man's fencing off and segregation of the land. After having seen their limited habitable space I was unable to ignore this fact when I constructed these animals clay habitats. Further, I would have not felt compelled to render the body posture of the elk in such a n entrapped fashion if I had not made myself aware of this animal's shrinking habitat.

## CONCLUSION

The work I created, I feel, is more complex in content than most of the animals I had previously constructed in clay. Through these new works, I explored issues of habitat, survival, and daily existence by the addition of a new set of visual clues. The experience of visiting the actual space these animals inhabit broadened my conceptual knowledge and visual catalog from which to create new work. The purpose of the clay animals as objects was clarified for me. The reality of my journey to the world of my

subjects also helped to strengthen my intent. Through this experience, I believe the work now surpassed pure depiction, and encompasses political and social issues as well.

## ILLUSTRATIONS









