

The Aesthetics of Entropy: Material Practice and the Politics of Decline

By

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the aesthetics of entropy as both a conceptual framework and material methodology for engaging with sociopolitical decline in the contemporary United States. Drawing parallels between the instability of the present and the decline of ancient Rome, my work explores the material and symbolic fragmentation that reflects the fragile nature of American identity. I explore how one can understand entropy as simultaneously a decay and a generative force for material transformation, utilizing an interdisciplinary approach consisting of ceramics, fresco painting, and installation, to serve as a visual language for navigating the tensions between order and disorder, authority and chaos.

Central to my research is the recontextualization of ancient myths such as the Titanomachy, the mythological battle between old and new gods, as a metaphor for current ideological conflicts. This myth is reimagined through frescos juxtaposing opposing protest iconography, drawing on events such as the Dobbs decision protests, the Black Lives Matter movement, and conservative demonstrations. These opposing forces are presented as a contemporary chorus, a civic polyphony echoing ancient forms of political theater.

My material approach privileges processes that embrace the unknown and emphasize the political implications of entropic decline. Vessels and columns serve as metaphors for institutional ideals and their gradual decline, while wall works act as fractured murals of public sentiment. The use of classical architectural motifs, including Corinthian columns and Roman frescoes, grounds this visual inquiry in the aesthetics of empire while interrogating their appropriation in American governance.

This thesis frames a site of reflection, protest, and reimagining by embracing entropy as a methodological and metaphoric tool. The resulting work seeks to question inherited myths,

confront systems in collapse, and reassert the artist's role in shaping historical consciousness through material form.

Chapter 1: State of the Union

Chapter 1.1 Setting the Stage

Over the past two years, I have focused my art practice on creating a body of work that captures socio-political anxiety and the fragile balance of social relations, such as the current political polarity and sentiments of disillusionment in the United States (U.S.).

My artworks critique the enduring legacy of the Founding Fathers' ¹appropriation of Roman ideals and purported noble virtues. By examining these foundational narratives, my research aims to open a dialogue about the deep-seated legacy that has shaped the ideals of American society and to shine a light on the patriarchal and religious influences embedded in the foundation of our democracy that molded not only the principles of governance but continue to affect contemporary political dynamics. By acknowledging these historical forces, my artworks aim to reveal how they contribute to the pervasive polarization witnessed today.

Building on this, my inquiry is about the aesthetics of entropy, the affective experience of despair, and a sense of imminent collapse in current American political culture. In this thesis, I will discuss how interdisciplinary artwork speaks to the current problems of ideological polarization in the U.S.

¹ The Founding Fathers were key military leaders, philosophers, politicians, and landowners who played pivotal roles in establishing the United States during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The most prominent figures of this group are George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison.

and outline the underlying connections between Roman imperialism and the formation of the American Republic as constitutive of current societal tensions.

My creative research is drawn from 2023 social media hashtags, revealing that American men can't stop thinking about the Roman Empire.² "My Roman Empire" has entered the American vernacular as a ubiquitous term for something you regularly think about. By September 2023, the hashtag #Romanempire had eight hundred and ninety-three million views.³ The origins of this odd obsession are not merely a leather-clad gladiatorial fantasy of American men. Indeed, the Roman Empire is so deeply embedded in the American psyche that it has become an almost unconscious fact of American life. Its legacy permeates popular culture, shaping everything from Hollywood blockbusters to political rhetoric. Films like *Gladiator* (Scott 2000) (2025) and *Spartacus* (Kubric 1960) have captivated audiences with tales of Roman honor, betrayal, and conquest, while television series such as *Rome* (Wall 2005) and *Barbarians* (Gerdemann 2020) bring the grandeur and brutality of the ancient world into living rooms across the country. Even in literature, best-selling books like *SPQR* by Mary Beard (2015) and *Song of Achilles* by Madeline Miller (2011) continue to fuel public fascination with Rome's politics, warfare, and everyday life.

The U.S. government and military were modeled using the template of Rome⁴. Moreover, Rome's visual legacy is ever present in our public monuments and the architecture of the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., government buildings, and courthouses. I have drawn on this classical architecture as a guide to visually connecting our contemporary Republic with the ancient roots of democracy.

Further, the legacy of Roman imperialism is seen in the continuation of its ideals, such as in the writings of the Founding Fathers, who saw themselves as "Inheritors of this bygone world." These early iterations are mirrored in our current moment, such as in Kamala Harris's acceptance speech as presidential nominee at the 2024 Democratic National Convention (DNC). She echoed this

²Smith, Emily. "Behind the TikTok Trend: How Often Do You Think About the Roman Empire? When Trends Transcend TikTok." Brandwatch. Brandwatch, October 5, 2023. <https://www.brandwatch.com/blog/how-often-think-about-roman-empire/#>.

³ Mendez, Moises II. "According to a New TikTok Trend, Men Think About the Roman Empire All the Time." *Time* (New York, New York), September 15, 2023. <https://time.com/6314544/tiktok-roman-empire-trend/>.

⁴ Kirsch, Adam. "The Empire Strikes Back." *The New Yorker*. The New Yorker Magazine, January 3, 2012. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/01/09/the-empire-strikes-back-adam-kirsch>.

sentiment, stating, "...we are the inheritors of the greatest democracy in the history of the world⁵." Simply put, there is a deeply held American belief that we inherited this great democracy from our revolutionary forefathers, who, in turn, saw themselves as the beneficiaries of great ideological ancestors. These ancient sentiments are echoed in the writing of the Founding Fathers, most notably in The Declaration of Independence⁶; Thomas Jefferson states,

"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

These words directly echo Servius Tullius's words in Lord Lyttleton's *Dialogs of the Dead*⁷: "Is not Liberty an inherent, inalienable right of Mankind?" As Jefferson proceeds to the second sentence of the Declaration, he states, "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." Again, this is a direct echo of Lyttleton, this time in the words of Marcus Aurelius: "Forms of government may and must be changed with the consent of the people." In other words, the very essence of American democracy is seen as profoundly rooted in antiquity.

However, my work starts from a different perspective. That is the comparison between the United States and the Roman Empire as an extension of the current commentary on the social decline in our politics⁸ where authors, such as Tim Elliot, have speculated about the State⁹ teetering on collapse. In his article 'America is Eerily Retracing Rome's Steps to a Fall,' Eliot writes:

"Just as the Romans discovered, the political structures of the U.S. are not as robust as many thought they were... avoiding the fate of the Roman Republic will require

⁵ Harris, Kamala. "Democratic National Convention." Presidential Nominee acceptance speech at United Center, Chicago, Illinois, August 22, 2024.

⁶ Jefferson, Thomas. "The Declaration of Independence: A Transcription." The National Archives. The National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.

⁷ Lyttleton, George, and Elizabeth Montagu. 1889. *Dialogues of the Dead*. London, England: Cassell Company Ltd.

⁸ Elliot, Tim. "America Is Eerily Retracing Rome's Steps to a Fall. Will It Turn Around Before It's Too Late?" Politico. Politico, November 3, 2020. <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2020/11/03/donald-trump-julius-caesar-433956>.

⁹ Tikkanen, Amy. "State-definition, Figures & Facts." The National Archives. Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/state-sovereign-political-entity>.

an enormous shift across society and a frank reappraisal of the weaknesses of an 18th-century pluralistic political system..."¹⁰

This notion of 'teetering' between stability and chaos, or being 'on the edge,' or 'avoiding the fate' of fallen empires, i.e., the aesthetics of entropy, is core to how my work addresses the emotional currents of populist politics. Just as the U.S. is retracing the footsteps of the Roman Republic and mirroring its trend of civil unrest, the people's growing disillusionment is a measure of American entropy. This is precisely what my work focuses on: capturing the aesthetic, affective experience of imminent, radical change. Indeed, the entropic narrative is often repeated within U.S. politics, where the State is seen as transitioning from a functioning democracy to a dystopian autocracy.

Many ordinary citizens are deeply disillusioned with the state of national politics, and according to the Pew Research Center, this disillusionment is profoundly more significant than it has been in decades.¹¹ Public discontent comes as no surprise to anyone watching the news or reading the headlines that portray the United States as a dystopian space. During the 2024 Presidential candidate debate, Donald Trump described a dark portrait of an America overrun by criminals, drugs, and millions of dangerous, undocumented migrants, repeatedly stating, "We are a failing nation" an emotionally charged claim and perhaps predictive of a dire future. "What's going on here... you're going to end up in World War Three."¹² I argue that this is a vision of our dysfunctional contemporary politics akin to that seen in George Orwell's classic book *1984* (1949)¹³ or evocative of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985).¹⁴ Across the political spectrum, an alarm is being sounded. By all accounts, America is an empire in decline. My art practice captures this moment of political entropy; I will discuss this more fully below. However, it is essential first to outline how I use the notion of entropy within my work.

¹⁰ *ibid*

¹¹ "Americans' Dismal Views of the Nation's Politics." Pew Research Center. Pew Research Center, September 19, 2023. <https://www.pewresearch.org/politics/2023/09/19/americans-dismal-views-of-the-nations-politics/>.

¹² Trump, Donald J. "Trump-Harris Presidential Debate." Philadelphia National Constitution Center, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 10, 2024.

¹³ Orwell, George. 1949. *1984*. New York, Ny: Signet Classics.

¹⁴ Atwood, Margaret. 1998. *The Handmaid's Tale*. New York, N.Y: Anchor Books. See also, Lowry, Brian. "'The Handmaid's Tale' Seels the Weight of Its Timeliness." CNN. CNN, June 3, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/2019/06/03/entertainment/the-handmaids-tale-column/index.html>.

1.2 Reframing Entropy: Definitions Beyond Thermodynamics

The Greek word entropia translates as a turning toward."¹⁵ The term 'entropy' was coined by the physicist Rudolf Clausius, referring to a sense of dynamic change, specifically, the measure of disorder in a system.¹⁶ Entropy is fundamental to the second law of thermodynamics and is a complex scientific principle which asserts that organic and inorganic phenomena constantly strive for a state of equilibrium. This broad assertion includes the behavioral tendencies of human beings. The second law simultaneously asserts that physical systems always move towards a state of disorder, resulting in an intricate cosmic balancing act. However, in my research, I focus on entropy and dynamic change. For example, I draw on this sense of increasing disorder within the context of the American political system as not just a matter of scientific or sociological analysis but also a valuable methodology for my work and that of other artists. The following text describes my creative process and touches on other artists who depict psycho-social anxiety within our environment.

In his book *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Disorder and Order*, Rudolph Arnheim theorizes that entropy and order are inextricably connected. As he says,

"The entropy principle defines order simply as an improbable arrangement of elements, regardless of whether the macro-shape of this arrangement is beautifully structured or most arbitrarily deformed, and it calls disorder the dissolution of such an improbable arrangement."¹⁷

Similarly, I use Arnheim's concept of order and disorder as a metaphorical information container in my research. For example, I create work in ceramic because it is a reliable, stable material for sculpture that is also evocative of order and stability. In particular, I add unknown or randomly selected materials that are not commonly used in ceramic elements and processes. To break down the functionality and aesthetic components of a sculpture, I aim to destroy its initial ordering,

¹⁵ *Vocabulary.com Dictionary*, s.v. "entropy," accessed October 31, 2024, <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/entropy>.

¹⁶ "Rudolf Clausius." *Physics Today*. AIP Publishing, January 2, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1063/PT.5.031388>.

¹⁷ Arnheim, Rudolf. 1971. *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Order and Disorder*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press. p.15

dissolve the original improbable arrangement, and replace it with an equally improbable arrangement. My artwork investigates entropy from this broader perspective, allowing for an understanding of how this complex concept can be captured in an artwork. Investigating this broad understanding of entropy in relation to visual and material elements enables me to communicate how ceramic materials and processes can stand as both an entropic method and a metaphor for political decline. As Arnheim writes,

"Now the work of art also represents a state of final equilibrium, of accomplished order and maximum entropy... art is not meant to stop the stream of life [but instead] within a narrow span of duration and space the work of art concentrates a view of the human condition; and sometimes it marks the steps of progression..."¹⁸

1.3 Navigating Chaos: The Societal Impulse Toward Order

Arnheim's observations about entropy in art are also mirrored in one's experience of social media and media. For example, the exponential technological growth of information and disinformation from news outlets, the internet, and social media exacerbates a feeling of dread and can leave one feeling overwhelmed. This psycho-social anxiety leads to the desire for social control and organizing one's environment into neat categories. As Arnheim says,

"Modern science then maintains, on one hand, that nature, both organic and inorganic, strives towards a state of order and that man's actions are governed by the same tendency."¹⁹

In comparison, my practice directly results from this need to structure and understand my surroundings, especially in this political moment of the United States becoming more entropic, chaotic, complex, and nuanced. The advancement of technology and widespread access to information allows the average person to access information about the complex conditions of global life and politics outside of their immediate surroundings. In this context, political, moral,

¹⁸ Arnheim, Rudolf. 1971. *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Order and Disorder*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press. P.56

¹⁹ Arnheim, Rudolf. 1971. *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Order and Disorder*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press. p.8

and cultural concerns and anxieties are becoming increasingly global. This increase in information parallels Arnheim's theory of entropy and my own impression of a country shifting from a state of political order and stability to disorder and unrest.

When confronted with the complexity of being part of an increasingly global political world, where one is acutely aware of interconnected political and economic upheavals, the sensations of fear and anxiety are common. For example, as political and economic turbulence and military conflict increasingly dominate the headlines, America First isolationist sentiments surge in response. These complex entropic narratives leave one with a sense of existential dread. My art practice embraces this emotional experience of anxiety and communicates the seemingly universal degradation of trust in the American government and the lofty ideals on which it was founded.

My work also explores the idea that knowledge itself is inherently unpredictable. Rather than seeing 'knowing' as a fixed or absolute state, I embrace the uncertainty that comes with seeking understanding. In his book *Beyond Chaos: The Underlying Theory Behind Life, the Universe, and Everything*, British Journalist, Mark Ward suggests that our very desire to know is what creates a sense of unpredictability²⁰ because the more we seek answers, the more we become aware of the unknown. This constant tension between certainty and uncertainty fuels curiosity, pushing us to question, investigate, and reconsider what we think we understand. In my practice, I reflect this dynamic by using materials and processes that evolve, break down, or transform over time, mirroring the way knowledge itself is never static but constantly shifting. By embracing unpredictability, I invite viewers to engage with the work not as passive observers but as active participants in the search for meaning. Further, we desire to soothe our uncertainty by finding order and our place in the world²¹

As an American, I am uncomfortably entangled in the web of conflicting political and ideological responses to the entropic narrative as seen in the rise of authoritarianism, conservatism, Christian nationalism, White nationalism, xenophobic anti-immigrant rhetoric, the rise in hate crimes against

²⁰ Ward, Mark. 2002. *Beyond Chaos the Underlying Theory of Life, the Universe, and Everything*. New York, NY Thomas Dunne Books, St Martin Press. P.41

²¹ Ibid pg.40

women, Asians, and LGBTQ+ persons, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and racism, but also the rapid increase in social justice movements, political activism, and climate awareness. My artwork aims to create a dialogue within these entropic narratives, rooted in the romanticization of Roman Imperialism, that is at the heart of American politics. In my practice, I organize and order conflicting narratives as a tangible way to process my sense of anxiety and overwhelming information about the current political State. As Arnheim articulates, "Order is a prerequisite of survival," and I feel this deeply. The need to impose structure is not just aesthetic but evolutionary. My work is also driven by an intense need to understand and order the world around me, which is a survival instinct. My work becomes a space to give form to that instinct to build coherence from disorder, even as the disorder resists resolution.

This need for order creates a tension or a differend as described by Jean-François Lyotard's critique of metanarratives in *The Postmodern Condition*²². He writes that modern societies have lost faith in the grand stories that once gave meaning and direction, yet the desire for those stories lingers. My work sits in that space, skeptical of historical authority and still drawn toward structure. Like Lyotard's concept of the differend, where incompatible systems of meaning fail to translate, the materials and references in my work clash, overlap, and refuse neat closure. They remain unsettled, forming a visual and conceptual record of collapse, coherence, and the persistent need to reconstruct it anyway.

Chapter 2: The Aesthetics of Entropy: Visualizing Disorder

This research began with a growing awareness of how Greco-Roman myths permeate contemporary culture, from bestselling novels and prestige television to viral social media trends. That cultural saturation spurred me to begin tracing the ideological parallels between ancient Rome and the United States, revealing patterns of recurring logic, imperial repetition, and decline. All of which were shaped by cultural memory and political spectacle. Following that thread brought me

²² Gratton, Peter. "Jean Francios Lyotard." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. Stanford University, September 21, 2018. <https://plato.stanford.edu/index.html>.

to the galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where I encountered Roman artifacts not as pristine relics but as fractured vessels and faded frescoes that had endured centuries of upheaval. Later that year, on the island of Naxos, I stood at the Apollo Gate in the early evening as the light hit the whitewashed walls of the Chora, and in that moment, time folded in on itself. The myths and histories I had studied were no longer abstract narratives. They were embedded in place, in ruin, in material. That moment left a permanent impression on me and raised a question that followed me back across the Atlantic: What does it mean to live with the weight of history, not as theory, but in your bones? That question became central to my creative process. This is where the aesthetics of entropy began to take shape



Figure 1. (White, Jimmie, *Apollo Gate*, 2023)

I create, organize, and order tangible narratives through material explorations using clay, glaze, pigments, and photographs, utilizing both traditional and non-traditional materials in an interdisciplinary practice that is heavily weighted toward painting and sculpture. I am drawn to ceramic as the predominant material in my sculptural practice; it is incredibly durable and can be transformed into any shape, texture, or finish. Clay is pliable, has chameleon-like qualities, and offers endless material variations that can be pushed further than most. Currently, my research is guided by two primary inquiries. The first is how can I employ the techniques of ceramics, such as the unstable, precarious, thermodynamic processes of the kiln, to represent the aesthetic experiences of entropic narratives that shape contemporary American political life? I am interested in capturing the anxiety and tenuousness of the present moment and mirroring this in vessels formed on the very edge of failure and ruination without crossing the line into catastrophe. I am confident in my ability to create visually compelling works with diverse material compositions. For example, I create works using various types of clay, glazes, and glaze chemistry, as well as the thermodynamic processes of the kiln, to introduce chaotic elements as part of the structural theme contained within the vessel. Each piece undergoes multiple iterations, firings, and adjustments, where the aesthetics of the vessels' surface textures and form are broken down in a visually compelling manner. The collapsing of ceramic materials pushed to its structural limits is sealed in the sculpture's final form. In this way, the final piece serves as a commentary on social entropy and the fight for equilibrium.

The second Inquiry of my research is: How can I utilize my interdisciplinary multimedia art practice to thoughtfully engage in social commentary and draw on the longstanding tradition of artists using their work to express collective anxiety, dissent, and resistance? By fully leaning into material experimentation and multidisciplinary techniques in painting and sculpture, I aim to capture the emotional and political landscape of this moment, preserving it as a kind of time capsule for future reflection.

2.1 Artistic Positionality in Collective Dialogue

Other visual and literary artists have influenced how I engage in artistic practice and research. In this section, I will discuss how four particular artists have profoundly affected my studio work's conceptual and aesthetic development and situate my processes in dialogue with their narratives and methods.

Natalie Haynes has profoundly impacted how I think about the topics I address in my artwork. I am tempted to call her a modern muse. Still, I shall resist using such a grandiose refrain, given that comparing mortals to these goddesses never ends well for those compared in the classical literature that Haynes draws upon. Nevertheless, Haynes is a lifeline to me in what often feels like an ocean of male perspectives. Her non-fiction works illuminate ancient life with academic rigor and humor, and she draws out insightful commentaries on the parallels between the ancient and modern world.

Haynes lays out how, nearly three thousand years later, the law, politics, and attitudes toward foreigners and women of the Roman Republic still hold sway over modern Western life. In her book, *The Ancient Guide to Modern Life*, Haynes illuminates the Athenian idea of a woman's role in society through the words of Apollodorus. She writes, "For this is what living with a woman means: to have children by her... concubines are for the daily care of the body, but wives to bear us legitimate children and be trustworthy guardians of our households."²³ Here, women are viewed as vessels within a patriarchal society.

²³ Haynes, Natalie. 2012. *The Ancient Guide to Modern Life*. London, U.K: Profile Books Ltd. p.123



Figure 2. (White, Promethea, 2024)

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These themes of patriarchy, and archaic views on women's rights (or lack thereof) and women's roles in society as child bearers and helpmates are continuously at the forefront of conversations in spaces of legislation and governance throughout the centuries in Western civilization as a whole.

²⁴ The Illustration of the story of Prometheus's unending punishment for bringing technology and autonomy to humankind was chosen for its relevance to the current political and legal upheaval in the United States. The symbols on the vessel were selected for their polysemy, or multiple meanings, allowing the interpretation of the image on the vessel to be nuanced and varied depending on the viewer's cultural, educational, and theological perspectives. I created this vessel in response to the U.S. Supreme Court decision in Holt vs. Hobbs. A landmark decision that resulted in the overturning of the Roe decision, stripping millions of women of their right to bodily autonomy, privacy, and the right to medical care and, in many cases, their lives. The scene depicted was intended to illustrate a never-ending story of backlash for progress and moving away from a "Father God."

However, they take center stage in the current political rhetoric in the United States. Most pointedly are the comments of Vice President J.D. Vance and his wholehearted endorsement of misogyny, which, in turn, is a reiteration of the sentiments of the ancient Greeks. As Vance says, "The whole purpose of post-menopausal women is to help raise children,"²⁵ or his comments about the "childless cat women who are unhappy with their choices and have a minimal stake in our society and now want to make the rest of the country miserable too."²⁶ Both of these statements are direct echoes of the imperialism of the ancients, invoked in the present moment to reassert authoritarian imaginaries of the political order.

Haynes's astute observations and her discussion of the deep connections between Western politics and the ancient world have deeply informed the themes and concepts of my work. I cannot think about these contemporary political problems without looking back at their ancient counterparts. In the U.S., the social, cultural, and political fight to keep "order" and the ability to keep progressing as a society is still one that is subject to the whims and machinations of a very wealthy, white, predominately male governing body, which is a direct reflection of a distant and romanticized past. Haynes has influenced my work more than any other author, as she has eloquently given voice to these topics. However, I chose to speak not through writing but with a visual language in the making of my art.

Whereas Natalie Haynes's work has informed my understanding of imperialism and its connection to entropy, late 19th-century ceramist George Ohr has had the most significant impact on the development of the visual elements of my artworks. Ohr's work has informed my own understanding of how ceramic materials and processes can capture entropic moments.

George Ohr was well ahead of his time in his handling of ceramic materials. His twisted, folded, and otherwise deformed Art Pottery stood out among the designs of his contemporaries. While the

²⁵ Weinstein Eric, and J.D Vance. "The Portal: Episode 32." Podcast, <https://Podcasts.Apple.Com/Us/Podcast/32-jd-vance-american-dreams-and-nightmares/Id1469999563?i=1000473090465>, April 20, 2020.

²⁶ Marques Alexandra, and Alec Hernandez. "JD Vance Doubles down on 'childless Cat Ladies' Dig: 'I've Got Nothing against Cats'." *NBC News* <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/2024-election/jd-vance-doubles-childless-cat-ladies-dig-got-nothing-cats-rcna163857>.

Rookwood²⁷ and Wedgwood²⁸ companies produced works that were among the most popular pottery of the day with their Greek revival and Asian-inspired shapes, decorated with idyllic pastoral scenes and glazed in subtle colors (which were all the rage), Ohr's pottery, his "mud babies," stood in stark contrast.



Figure 3. (Ohr, untitled, 1897-1900.)

For example, Ohr's physical manipulation of the vessel and the use of textured and vibrantly hued glazes are sources of inspiration for my work (see Fig. 1). These odd surfaces result from his wheel-throwing process and making the vase wall so thin that they are on the brink of collapsing under their own weight and the centrifugal force of the wheel. Hence, his ceramic forms are frozen

²⁷ Rookwood Pottery was founded in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1880 by Maria Longworth Nichols Storer and is one of the longest-surviving and significant American potteries. Rookwood's popularity is credited to its experimentation with surface design and characteristic matte lines, its painterly use of underglaze, and its unique Vellum glaze. The height of Rookwood's popularity was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and it is still in production in Cincinnati, Ohio, today.

²⁸ The Wedgwood company is a well-renowned English luxury brand founded in 1759. Wedgwood pottery specializes in fine China, porcelain, and decorative objects. Founded by Josiah Wedgwood, the company is known for its Neoclassical designs, refined shapes, and skilled craftsmanship, as well as its use of innovative materials in the pursuit of perfecting each piece of pottery produced. Wedgwood is particularly famous for its Jasperware and Queen's Ware and was most popular in the 18th and 19th centuries, only falling out of popular style after World War II. The iconic company is still in production today.

at the moment, just before imminent disaster. He then turned his attention to the surface finish by formulating glazes with unusual textures, hues, and metallic sheens unlike any other in production at the time. His masterful surfaces have prompted me to test glaze formulations encompassing texture and color variation, and I have begun folding and twisting my pieces. While the intention and aesthetic outcome differ from Ohr's art pottery, his influence on my work remains. Ohr had the vision and the curiosity to experiment with form and surface in a way that gave a new life to established forms. You can see Ohr's aesthetic influence on my works in this oinochoe²⁹ titled State of the Union.



Figure 4. (White, State of the Union, 2024).

The neck of the vessel is slumping backward and has a large crack at its connection to the shoulder. The upper portion of its broken handle hangs limply from the neck of the vessel, and the lower

²⁹ An oinochoe is one of the key forms in ancient Greek pottery. It is a full-bodied pitcher or jug usually with a three-lobed trefoil leaf-shaped pouring spout and a single sinuously curved handle, designed specifically for pouring wine. The word "oinochoe" translates to "wine pourer."

portion reaches away. The entirety of the vessel's body is warped and slumping into divots and bulges. The vessel tilts, and its balance is precarious and frozen in the moment before it topples or the neck shatters completely.

Ohr once said, "I am the apostle of individuality...the brother of the human race, but I must be myself, and I want every vase of mine to be itself."³⁰ However, the motivation for creating my manipulated forms radically differs from Ohr's. For example, I created *State of the Union* (2024) to convey the sentiment that freedom and democracy are under assault worldwide and to capture the sense of precarity felt across the American Union's political spectrum in recognition of collective anxiety rather than as an ode to individuality.

Another artist influencing my approach to ceramics is Alissa Volchkova. Her series, *The Beautiful Imperfect*, solidified my decision to work with recognizable historic vessels, their form, and surface design as a framework for the narrative of entropy.



Figure 5. (Volchkova, *The Beautiful Imperfect*, 20160. Porcelain, stain.)

Volchkova employed a mold of a Wedgwood vase to create a commentary on the concept of entropy. The original antique vase, from which the mold was made, is shaped like a Greco-Roman

³⁰ Watson, Bruce. "The Mad Potter of Biloxi." *Smithsonian*. February 1, 2004.
<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/the-mad-potter-of-biloxi>.

urn, and its surface is decorated with a relief of the classic Jasperware³¹ design of Women and Children on one side and Women and Cherubs on the opposite.

Volchkova uses the technique of slip-casting, a technique where a plaster mold is used to replicate an infinite number of identical vessels. However, instead of faithfully reproducing each replica, she carves away part of the plaster in mold in between each casting (See Fig. 3). Volchkova's deliberate introduction of random, unpredictable changes in the plaster mold serves as a profoundly poetic and existential reflection on the concept of entropy, resonating powerfully in the gradual transformations inflicted upon the Wedgwood mold. Each small "mutation" carved into the mold's surface creates a slight variation in shape, accumulating across iterations, leading the vase further and further from its original, orderly design. The effect is less disintegration of this familiar object but of a swelling growth on its surface, "elegantly describing the cycle of growth and decay."³²

As these mutations amass, the form gives way from the familiar visual order to something completely foreign and uncomfortable in its gestalt, mirroring the universal principle that all organized structures inevitably succumb to the natural progression of change and decay.

What started as a pristine classical form slowly deteriorated into something less recognizable and more chaotic, illustrating how even artistic creations are subject to impermanence. Volchkova's work, therefore, not only highlights the fragility and transience intrinsic to material objects but also underscores a broader existential truth: despite our efforts to maintain control and preserve

³¹ Josiah Wedgwood developed jasperware in the 1770s, after extensive experimentation with clay, barium sulfate, flint, and metal oxides (though the exact formula is proprietary). Named for its similarity in hardness and appearance to the mineral Jasper, Jasperware is a type of unglazed, fine-grained stoneware known for its characteristic matte finish and relief decorations in contrasting colors. Jasperware is produced in various colors, including green, lilac, yellow, black, and white. The most recognizable is the pale blue known as Wedgwood blue. The relief contrasting decoration (typically white) on each piece of Jasperware is in a classical Neoclassical design that includes various motifs and imagery either taken directly from or inspired by antiquity. Jasperware is one of the most recognizable ceramic traditions in pottery (even if the name is not widely known) and is still in production today.

³² Rodgers, Bill. "Alissa Volchkova: Entropy and Growth in "The Beautiful Unperfect"." Cfile.Capsule. August 31, 2016. <https://cfileonline.org/art-alissa-volchkova-the-beautiful-unperfect/>.

order, disorder seeps in, and forms, be they physical or conceptual inevitably mutate, drift, and dissolve under the influence of time and entropy.



Figure 6. firing 1, 3, and 5 (White, I Read the News Today, 2024.)

Volchkova revisits the Wedgwood vessel in *The Beautiful Imperfect* (2016) with the aim "to create a bridge between the past and the future, symbolizing the human and environmental mutations through the process of making."³³ Volchkova and I share a desire to bridge the past and the present. By referencing Greek ceramic traditions, I am reaching back through time to the dawn of civilization and using these familiar forms as an anchor point, following the threads of the narrative, philosophies, and ideals that lead us to the present moment.

I have chosen a more dynamic process to engage in the discussion of entropy; instead of a gradual disorder over a long series of replicated vases, each vessel and column I create undergoes its own entropic process, with every individual piece embodying disorder. I employ a methodology of experimentation and embrace the kiln's thermodynamic processes to enhance my work's aesthetic

³³ <https://www.alissavolchkova.com/wedgwood>

narrative. This active engagement with entropy is not only about inevitable decay but about harnessing transformative heat energy within the kiln to generate unexpected forms and textures.



Figure 7. (Kristen Morgin, *Topolino*, 2003)

In considering the aesthetic and conceptual frameworks of decay within contemporary ceramics, the work of Kirsten Morgin provides a valuable counterpoint to my practice. This comparison is significant as it enables a deeper understanding of the various approaches to mimicking decay in contemporary ceramics. Morgin's large-scale, unfired clay sculptures mimic the look of deteriorating everyday objects such as vehicles, musical instruments, and domestic ephemera. Her work relies on a high degree of trompe l'oeil illusion: the objects appear to be constructed of cardboard, wood, or paper, but are made from raw clay, reinforced with glue and paint, and left deliberately unfired. This decision resists the traditional ceramic emphasis on transformation and durability. Morgin herself has noted that "clay changes chemically when you fire it," and that she prefers its "looked dirty," raw state for its visual and emotional resonance³⁴.)

³⁴ Palmer, Alex. "This Game of Monopoly Is Made Entirely of Clay Kristen Morgin's Playful Illusions Explore Ideas of Abandonment and the American Dream." SMITHSONIAN MAGAZINE. October 4, 2016. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/game-monopoly-made-clay-180960656/#:~:text=At%20their%20essence%2C%20these%20sculptures,%2C%20through%20January%208%2C%202017>

This strategic embrace of fragility is deeply tied to Morgin's conceptual focus on nostalgia, obsolescence, and memory. Her works often resemble artifacts recently excavated from a suburban past: a Monopoly board with curled edges, a crumpled comic book, or the soft collapse of an aging action figure. These items, rendered with uncanny precision, reference both personal and cultural memory, evoking what the Smithsonian American Art Museum describes as a "sense of bygone innocence, loss, and isolation"³⁵ Nevertheless, despite their visual decay, Morgin's pieces were designed to deteriorate over time; literally, they are a snapshot of constructed vulnerability, with Morgin's intentional creation of fragility. As CFile Foundation observed, "Morgin's unfired objects reveal ghostly realms, where nostalgia and fragility co-exist within surfaces that appear to be decaying in real time"³⁶

By contrast, my ceramic work employs historically durable materials such as fired stoneware and porcelain, but I distress them through processes of repeated firing, grinding, fracturing, and layering glazes that encourage surface erosion. Rather than simulate decay, I manufacture it. My forms, including amphorae, columns, and architectural fragments, signal classical permanence while simultaneously undermining it through rupture and collapse. The goal is not to mimic fragility but to delve into the contradictions embedded in durability itself to question what it means for an empire, a belief system, or a material object to survive.

Where Morgin's decay is illusionistic and domestic, mine is structural and monumental. Her sculptures evoke the delicate erosion of memory, whereas mine suggest the catastrophic unraveling of ideological foundations. Morgin evokes the personal through *trompe l'oeil*; I evoke the political through material truth. Our works intersect in their temporal ambiguity; neither is situated squarely in the present, and our practices diverge in tone and scope. Her nostalgia feels recent and tender; my ruins are speculative and brutal, highlighting the stark contrast in our conceptual positions.

³⁵ Meet the Artists of Visions and Revisions: Renwick Invitational 2016." Smithsonian American Art Museum. SAAM, October 4, 2016. <https://americanart.si.edu/exhibitions/invitational-2016/online/kristen-morgin>.

³⁶ Crowee, Justin. "Exhibition | Kristen Morgin's Unfired Objects Reveal Ghostly Realms at Marc Selwyn." Cfile. July 9, 2015. <https://cfileonline.org/exhibition-kristen-morgins-unfired-objects-reveal-ghostly-realms-marc-selwyn/>.

This temporal dislocation is a crucial element of my work. By crafting distressed frescoes, vessels, and columns that seem to have endured for centuries, I deliberately place the viewer in a speculative future. These are not relics of the past, but rather imagined artifacts unearthed from an era yet to come. In this way, I emulate the experience of exploring museum collections, where fractured remnants evoke the ideological frameworks and mythologies of civilizations long since vanished. The frescoes and vessels I create suggest that the sociopolitical narratives depicted within them, such as polarization, protest, and damage, have already played out, and what remains has been preserved in time.

This temporal distancing of the viewer is deliberate. A strategy I deploy to navigate the volatility of the current moment, particularly the cultural and political instability currently present within the U.S., is to place it within a longer arc of decline. Rather than confront the present head-on, I have embedded it within an allegorical framework that mirrors the aesthetic language of collapse. This not only offers perspective but also critiques the idea of permanence itself. The notion that American democracy is impervious to failure contrasts sharply with the empire it was modeled after. By positioning the viewer hundreds of years into the future, my work fosters a contemplative space — a buffer of imagined time that invites reflection, accountability, and an acknowledgment of recurring historical patterns.

As contemporary ceramicists, both Morgin and I resist the medium's traditional focus on function and permanence. But while she does so by camouflaging clay as another material entirely, I choose to amplify its materiality, to expose clay's ability to document collapse, to bear historical weight, and to perform entropy without disguise. Our contrasting approaches reveal that illusion and authenticity can both serve as valid strategies for critiquing the past, the present, and speculating on the future.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Foundations in Material Methodology

Throughout this program, my research has drawn heavily from the ancient and not-so-distant past, seeking guidance and inspiration from artists throughout Western history whose art served the dual purpose of documentation and commentary. Early in my research, I looked at ancient Greek myths, plays, illustrated vessels, and figurative works; I recognized narrative parallels to contemporary struggles in them. This connection deepened through my engagement with the aesthetics of the Greco-Roman frescos, mosaics, and red and black figurative vessels. Their distinct, stylized imagery, vibrant colors, weathered surfaces, partial erosion, and deep cracks caused by time illustrate how history is continually recorded, layered, and reinterpreted. Inspired by these ancient precedents, I chose ceramic sculpture and large-scale, mixed-media fresco as vehicles for this work. The contrast between the material vulnerability and durability of ceramics and fresco paintings is of great interest to me, particularly in how fracture and preservation, decay, and endurance parallel the conceptual concerns of my work: the persistence of erosion and the narrative of being overwhelmed in a polarized national identity. This material sensibility extends into my scientific and experimental approach to ceramics, where material instability becomes both a method and a metaphor. My practice-based research is iterative, centered on pushing my materials to the edge of failure to capture the aesthetic tension between order and disorder. In both fresco and ceramics, there is a negotiation with impermanence. These material processes are inherently entropic, and by embracing unpredictability in my material experimentation, I mirror the precariousness of sociopolitical moments. By linking these ancient and modern strategies, my work situates itself as a contemporary installation that is a fractured yet enduring record of collective anxiety a struggle for equilibrium in the present tumult.



Figure 8. Fresco detail (White, Balance Broken: The Titanomachy of Law and Liberty, 2025)

3.1 Fragmented Fresco

This dialogue with ancient material processes led me to adopt large-scale, mixed-media fresco as a core medium. After experimenting with various materials, I developed a methodology emphasizing construction and decay. I began with a foam insulation board, manually snapping it into irregular sections and reassembling them to mimic fractured walls, much like these artworks are often displayed in museums. To create a textured, responsive surface, I layered Portland cement mixed with paper and wood glue, followed by a second application of a joint compound blended with powdered marble. I then painted the imagery onto the porous surface using thinned acrylics. I sealed the work with matte and satin varnishes tinted with earth pigments, including black and red iron oxide, manganese dioxide, and embedded soil. Finally, I scraped and spot-sanded the surface to mimic erosion, drawing particular inspiration from the frescoes in the Temple of the Cult of Dionysius in Pompeii. The tension between the well-preserved and the damaged is crucial to my vision; it reflects the cyclical nature of history, speaking to resilience and loss, continuity and rupture.



Figure 9. Fresco Process photo



Figure 10. (White, Balance Broken: The Titanomachy of Law and Liberty,2025.)

3.2 The Methodology of the Ceramic Process

My work with fresco and ceramics explores entropic principles: the fragile equilibrium between order and disorder within material processes. In the ceramic vessels and columns, I intentionally push the boundaries of structural integrity through iterative firing and surface treatment, capturing moments where the form teeters on collapse yet holds together. My practice allows the materials to actively participate in the narrative, embodying vulnerability, precariousness, and the constant possibility of fragmentation.

Experimentation and repetition are crucial elements in my studio practice. I am continuously formulating and testing the material components, such as glaze and clay bodies, slips, and firing schedules. Each experiment provides answers and generates more questions for my research. For example, I began with the question, how do I take a material that can last centuries without visible signs of wear and break it down to represent decline, decay, and chaos visually? I referenced ceramics texts on Processes³⁷ and Techniques³⁸, large online material formulation databases, and a network of practicing ceramic artists. By accessing these resources, I have gained a considerable amount of knowledge, not only material knowledge but also how to adjust the heating and cooling cycles of the kiln to alter the outcome. However, I have learned the most about how to manipulate ceramics from years of hands-on work with the materials and, in turn, troubleshooting flaws in glaze and clay body formulations for standard use in a ceramic practice. By learning what not to do and what to change to prevent "flaws," I have also learned how to create flaws in the materials and control the clay's degradation in the heat of the kiln.

This mode of research is achieved through trial and error. Each artwork begins with the formulation or alteration of an existing clay body. I formulate clay bodies and glazes based on existing recipes and then experiment with ingredients to alter an otherwise known outcome. An example of this is my use of a stoneware clay formulation created by Matt Katz of the Ceramics Materials Workshop,

³⁷ Reijnders, Anton. 2021. *The Ceramic Process*. London: Herbert press.

³⁸ Illian, Clary. 2021. *A Potters Workbook*. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press.

and adding in varying portions and combinations of additional fluxes and foreign organic materials such as recycled paper, wood shavings, eggshells, rock salt, gypsum, fine brass and iron shavings, and limestone powder. These materials introduce chaos at the thermal level, producing unpredictable results within the vessels' walls. Large cracks, partial slumping, surface pitting, and spot melting occur.

At the leather-hard stage, I often shape the vessel by pressing gently with the palms of my hands or by wrapping my arms around it and pulling it into my body, simultaneously pressing with my cheek or chin. This "hug" method allows me to feel the vessel's balance and anticipate its tipping point, guiding the subtle adjustments that preserve its stability. This gesture is both practical and symbolic. It reflects the central tension in my work: holding a structure together even as it is pushed toward the edge of collapse, offering care without erasing its fragility. The hug creates a brief suspension between endurance and inevitable change, reflecting a moment in history shaped by cultural and ideological forces that determine what is protected, altered, or lost.

I also carefully document each step in the material formulation process to ensure I can replicate the effects when needed. My work is fired in an oxidation atmosphere in an electric kiln on specific firing and cooling schedules. The results are examined, and any adjustments required are noted. The vessel is then subject to change.



Figure 11. Process photo

Building on and altering the clay body, the surface, or the skin of the object is critical to capturing the overall aesthetic of entropy. This aesthetic is achieved with the development of the layers of glaze in my ceramic work, which is very similar to the layering of paint on canvas. Beginning with the background color of the clay body, I build up color, texture, and washes. The technique is similar to that of painters; the main difference here is that I must bisque fire the clay and then fire again between each layer of glaze separately and must rely on a kiln for each step of the process. That is, each artwork is fired four to six times, each time with the addition of glazes of varying texture, color, and finish. The glaze is sometimes ground off partially or entirely, and the object is then refired with a wholly different or altered glaze formula or sometimes refired with an additional layer of the same glaze formulation following an altered firing schedule or the addition of multiple glazes of varying texture, color, and finish. The vessel is assessed, and a decision must be made on whether to continue adding and pushing the materials beyond their limits. Because the glaze is constantly moving in the kiln at a temperature of 2000°, there comes a point when one can't glaze anymore because all the colors and textures will melt together and become uniform and muddy as it reaches entropic equilibrium. Because there's a reliance on the kiln, there's always a significant element of the unknown, and it comes down to intuition when it is time to halt the cycle of glazing and refiring. Once in the kiln, the extreme heat of the process means you cannot stop or alter the process. The extreme heat also stresses the clay body and can cause it to dunt³⁹, crack, or warp. Each time the artwork is returned to the kiln, the chance of failure increases exponentially.

³⁹ The term dunting is used in ceramics to refer to the cracking or shattering of objects that occurs in the kiln's cooling cycle. It is generally caused by cooling too rapidly or unevenly, so that the expansion and contraction of the quartz crystals in the clay body (a process known as quartz inversion) happen at different times.



Figure 12. Surface detail with bubbling and dunting

Each iteration is subject to any combination of those additional alterations. The process continues until the vessel is aesthetically successful, abandoned as a failure, or meets a catastrophic fate in the kiln, at which point the entire process begins again. This process is a physical manifestation of the definition of entropy as understood in physics as a tendency towards disorder in the breaking down of the orderly into the disorderly.

Scientific material experimentation and documentation are a considerable part of my process as I push the material to find an equilibrium or a gestalt in an ordered disorder. My practice-based research is iterative, allowing me to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the material and methods that drive the conceptual elements of my work to examine entropic principles within the confined boundaries of a vessel. My process is pertinent to navigating the nature of destruction

and, in turn, capturing the aesthetic experience of a material process that is vulnerable and precarious, always on the verge of collapse.



Fig. 13. (White, *A Qualified Candidate*, 2024).

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⁴⁰ In *A Qualified Candidate*, I wanted to capture the sense of dread and disillusionment I felt after watching the Trump-Biden presidential debate. A classical Urn with a bubbling surface rest precariously atop a classical column; its counterpart is shattered into pieces and scattered across the floor. For me, this work reflects the collapse of political ideals and the absurd theater of leadership. With this work I am asking viewers to consider what still stands, what has already fallen apart, and what we continue to prop up despite the cracks.

Chapter 4: The Work

The artworks are grouped into three categories: vessels that reflect entropic transformation, columns that reference architectural authority, and wall works that reinterpret protest imagery through mythological frameworks. Each piece of the installation is designed to evoke feelings of instability and overwhelm within its fragmented surfaces, warped forms, and charged imagery. The large scale of the works serves to amplify this experience, encourage reflection, and confront the viewer with the visual language of disorder and decline.

4.1 Containing Chaos: Vessels as Conceptual Carriers

I have created objects for this thesis by manipulating the ceramic process and adding entropic visual elements. I have sought to utilize the vessels and the columns on which they stand to contain a psycho-social entropic narrative. In other words, the vessels become a container that creates a gestalt to represent the complexity, anxiety, and disorder of social entropy in the American political system.

The term 'vessel' has many definitions and exists in various disciplines; for this discussion, I will use art historian Claudio Brittenham's definition.

"As objects made for human interaction and handling, both containing and bounded by space, vessels can take many forms and be constructed of a wide variety of materials. However, they are all unified in signifying a potential for practical functioning, whether a particular object is in fact used in this way in its particular context."⁴¹

⁴¹ Brittenham, Claudia. "Vessels: The Object as Container." Department of Art History. University of Chicago, <https://arthistory.uchicago.edu/faculty/publications/vessels-object-container>.

I chose the vessel as a means of visual expression and interpretation of increasing entropy and disorder.⁴²

4.2 The Architecture of Authority: Structural Forms and the Language of Power

The vessels sit atop Corinthian columns; each column represents an aspect of the "American Dream,"⁴³ the promise that each generation can achieve a better, freer life that has long been central to U.S. identity.



Figure 14. Detail photo of Corinthian Column, Capitol 6

⁴² Von Baeyer, Hans Christian. "Disorderly Conduct." *The Sciences* 37, no. 3 (1997): 15. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed November 23, 2024). <https://link-gale-com.colorado.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/A53913273/AONE?u=coloboulder&sid=googleScholar&xid=bc852a07>.

⁴³ Adams, James Truslow. (2017) 2017. *The Epic of America*. 1st ed. Taylor and Francis. <https://www.perlego.com/book/1557705/the-epic-of-america-pdf>.

During the 2024 presidential debate, President Donald J. Trump starkly declared that "The American dream is dead... We are a failing nation,"⁴⁴, evoking widespread anxiety about national decline.

My sculptural works capture this existential dread and act as a visual metaphor for this nationwide moment of trepidation. I have also sought to use this architecture to connect our contemporary Republic visually with its roots in classical antiquity and open a dialogue about the fragility of democracy and the consistent effort to maintain equilibrium in a country shifting from a state of political order and stability to disorder and unrest. Specifically, I sculpted the Corinthian columns to act as plinths for the vessels.

The prominent use of Corinthian columns in state, county, and local courthouses, Statehouses, and archives throughout the United States has forged this design into the architecture of authority. In 2020, President Trump's Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture⁴⁵ further reinforced this authority.

Notable Founding Fathers agreed with these assessments and attached great importance to Federal civic architecture. They wanted America's public buildings to inspire the American people and encourage civic virtue. President George Washington and Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson consciously modeled the most important buildings in Washington, D.C., on the classical architecture of ancient Athens and Rome. They sought to use classical architecture to visually connect our contemporary Republic with the antecedents of democracy in classical antiquity, reminding citizens not only of their rights but also their responsibilities in maintaining and perpetuating its institutions".

⁴⁴ Haberman, Maggie. "The End of Our Country: Trump Paints Dark Picture at Debate." *The New York Times*, September 11, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/09/11/us/politics/trump-debate-dark-picture.html>.

⁴⁵ Trump, Donald J. "Executive Order on Promoting Beautiful Federal Civic Architecture." Trump Whitehouse Archives. The National Archive, December 21, 2020. <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-promoting-beautiful-federal-civic-architecture/>.

Drawing from the idea of Corinthian columns symbolizing strength, beauty, and order⁴⁶, I sought not only to evoke their historical significance but also to challenge their permanence. Each column serves as a metaphor for one of the five foundational pillars of the American Dream: Liberty, Virtue, Democracy, Justice, and Exceptionalism. This historical connection is intended to make you, the reader, feel a sense of continuity with the past.

The columns bear the scars of strain and conflict. One appears to melt, slumping under an invisible heat. Another bears the pockmarks of bullet holes. A third seems to have been worn down by the slow but relentless forces of erosion, mirroring the gradual decay of public trust and democratic engagement.

4.3 Protest in Polyphony

In creating this thesis, I found a visual vocabulary in the sculptural works of the columns and vessels that allowed the individual pieces to speak to the narrative of entropic change, decay, and decline. In the installation of this work, I have chosen not only to speak of decline but also to evoke the sensation of collective overwhelmingness. I decided to create this immersive installation to serve as a visual manifestation of the widespread emotional unease and capture the psychological weight of the chaos and instability experienced daily within the rapidly changing rules, conventions, and laws that saturate daily life in the U.S. Through this interdisciplinary installation, I hope to not only reflect the psycho-social anxiety of the current political climate but also offer a space for viewers to confront, process, and even find meaning within the disorder.

⁴⁶ Craven, Jackie. "The History of the Corinthian Column." Thought Co. January 20, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-corinthian-column-177504>.

4.4 A New Titanomachy

As I explored contemporary and historical artworks that grapple with themes of conflict and transformation, I was drawn particularly to the Titanomachy depicted on the Pergamon Altar. The relief carved into the stone pediment surrounding the altar depicts a battle between the old Primordial, traditional gods, and new gods who made mankind in their image, but in my interpretation, it expresses an eerie parallel to the conflicts and tensions in modern politics. I see this ancient cosmic struggle reflected in the opposing protests that have shaped the political and social landscape of the United States. By utilizing images from the U.S. Supreme Court Dobbs abortion decision protests⁴⁷, the Black Lives Matter movement⁴⁸, and the January 6th insurrection⁴⁹, I strive to create a contemporary interpretation of the Titanomachy, reflecting the ideological forces clashing for dominance.

The medium I have chosen for this project is a large-scale mixed-media fresco; I was deeply inspired by Delos's⁵⁰ mosaics and Pompeii's frescoes. These ancient works have guided my artistic process, not only in their aesthetic approach but also in their ability to preserve a narrative that is at once beautifully composed and hauntingly fractured. The stylized imagery, the vibrant yet weathered hues, and how time has preserved and damaged these ancient pieces speak to how history is recorded, layered, contested, and reinterpreted over time.

⁴⁷ On June 24, 2022 following the U.S. Supreme Court decision in the case of Dobbs vs. Jackson which overturned Roe vs. Wade eliminating the constitutional right to abortion in the United States large protest broke out across the U.S. and there were large gatherings both pro and anti-abortion groups that demonstrated outside the U.S. Supreme court building.

⁴⁸ Throughout the year 2020 after the killing of George Floyd, Black Lives Matter protests erupted across the United States and spread Internationally. Millions of people within the U.S. Gathered to protest in demand of police reform and Justice for Black Americans killed during interactions with Police. While these protests were largely peaceful event there were incidents of vandalism and Violence particularly in Portland, Oregon but also in many other large cities across the U.S. where intense police reactions to the protests included the use of tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowd and the press core.

⁴⁹ On January 6th, 2021, a mob of supporters of outgoing president Donald Trump stormed the U. S. Capitol Building in an attempt to disrupt the Certification of Electoral College Votes and overturn the 2020 Presidential election and prevent the confirmation of President Elect President Joe Biden from taking office. The attempt ultimately failed but the result was significant disruption, property damage and 5 deaths and 174 people injured, including police officers.

⁵⁰ Delos is a Greek island and important archaeological site in the Cyclades archipelago of the Aegean Sea. It is the mythological birthplace of Apollo, and it is renowned for its remarkably well-preserved mosaics, which depict intricate scenes from daily life, mythology, and the island's vibrant past.

Central to this piece is the use of opposing protest images positioned across from each other, reminiscent of the Chorus in a Greek play. In Greek tragedies, the Chorus provided commentary on the unfolding action, guiding the audience's understanding of the narrative's emotional and thematic weight. Here, the term “Chorus” is used symbolically to frame the protesters as collective voices that shape and reflect public perception. In my work, the two opposing groups, whether pro- and anti-abortion rights protesters, Black Lives Matter activists, or the January 6th rioters, and immigration and deportation protests, stand in as a modern Chorus, a tableau amplifying the tension and complexity of the moment.

My intention with the scale of this work is to create an immersive experience where the viewer becomes enmeshed in the tension between these opposing forces. The height and width of these pieces fill the gallery walls and prevent the viewer from escaping the imagery. By standing between these opposing protests, the viewer occupies the space of apprehension and conflict, forced to feel the weight of the opposition and disorder and the sensation of being overwhelmed. This sense of social entropy, the anxiety, complexity, and disorder inherent in these protests and social movements, is something I want to evoke through the visual language of painting, borrowing from this ancient style of the Greco-Roman fresco.

The Pergamon Altar uses the power of visual storytelling to depict formidable forces fighting for the right to rule. With this modern Titanomachy, I tell the story of a nation grappling with its identity and divided by opposing ideals. By using the language of ancient art to frame modern conflict, I aim to create an immersive space where the past and present speak to each other, where the viewer is positioned in the crossfire of a chorus of visual voices, immortalizing a critical chapter of our social narrative for future generations.

Final Reflection

After all the research, planning, and preparations, finally presenting this work in a public exhibition confirmed what I already felt about its urgency and weight. Yet, I was moved by how powerfully others responded to it. Knowing that this installation would be shown for the first time outside the United States, I became acutely aware of the in-between space it occupied. In this space, turmoil and degradation are visible but often distanced, abstracted, or obscured. Viewers in the international context recognize the fracture without always having a language for it, and our

conversations revealed how present political anxieties radiate far beyond their source, and even at a distance, they still carry weight. The dialogue generated in these exchanges deepened my awareness of how information is shaped, distorted, and sometimes even suppressed, particularly when events do not make it into international news cycles.

This work exists as a kind of speculative ruin, an imagined archaeological record that does not memorialize a singular catastrophic event but instead traces the slow erosion of systems over time. In this sense, the installation asks what it means to witness something that many may not realize or even believe can happen, even as some insist that it is not happening, while the evidence accumulates in plain sight. This question informed my approach to form, surface, and material instability, allowing the work to exist in the tension between cohesion and disintegration. Cullen Murphy's observation that empires rarely collapse in a single moment but instead unravel in plain sight resonated deeply here. The exhibition became not just a site for viewing but a space for articulating that slow unraveling, geographically and materially, through objects that hum with unease even when the source of that unease is felt at a distance.

The audience's engagement revealed unexpected layers to the work. I anticipated discussion around the ceramic vessels, but I received just as many questions about the frescoes and their construction. Many viewers remarked that they had never seen a modern fresco, which opened conversations about the technique's history and its potential for contemporary narratives. These exchanges often moved from processes of making into larger questions of preservation, endurance, and the relevance of ancient forms to current political realities. The frescoes, in particular, surprised viewers in how they bridged the visual language of antiquity with the urgency of the present, drawing far more attention than I had anticipated.

These unexpected reactions shifted my understanding of how the work operates in public space. I created the frescoes to provide a more direct context for the ceramic works, placing the vessels within a visual and narrative framework that could anchor their political and historical references. Once the installation was complete and the exhibition opened, the viewers' surprise at encountering a fresco in a contemporary setting broadened my understanding of its role, demonstrating how powerfully the medium's historical associations could be harnessed for impactful political

commentary. These responses deepened my awareness of how each element in the installation could stand alone while still contributing to a larger, interconnected narrative.

As for the future, the questions that shaped this body of work remain urgent, and I see potential for deepening its scope through new materials, expanded installation formats, and further historical inquiry.

As this body of work developed, my perspective has been transformed, widening it from an individual to a collective one. From "I" to "we the people." Throughout this entire process, I learned and, most critically, I learned the value of listening to all perspectives, including those in opposition to my own, and to seek a fuller understanding before offering my response. By remaining open, I discovered more common ground than I expected, often in places where divisions seemed insurmountable. This practice of listening to understand has become integral to my approach, shaping how I conceptualize and create work and how I imagine its role: not only as a witness to entropy and fracture, but as a space where complexity, dialogue, and shared humanity can coexist.

These experiences fed directly into the central question at the heart of this thesis: how can we understand a moment in history that is marked by fundamental change and disorder?

Chapter 5: Conclusion

The central question of this body of work is: how can we understand a moment in history that is marked by fundamental change and disorder? By exploring the aesthetics of entropy, I seek to give the socio-political anxieties that characterize contemporary American life a physical form. The fragility of democratic ideals, the enduring legacy of the romanticization of imperialism, and the overwhelming saturation of conflicting politics, information, and disinformation are all mirrored in my studio practice, where ceramic vessels, columns, and frescos stand as metaphors for the erosion of liberty and turbulent political order.

Exploring entropy as a scientific principle and a visual metaphor has allowed me to reflect on the breakdown of order as a process that is not solely destructive but also generative. The entropic state is not simply chaos; it is a reorganization, a reshuffling of elements, a turning point. In this sense, the purpose of my work is to act not only as a commentary on political and ideological decay but also as an inquiry into the transformation and resilience of ideas. The fractured fresco, the weathered column, and the ceramic vessel, frozen at the brink of structural failure, become a powerful symbol of tension: cracked, slumped, and eroded yet still standing, still holding space.

By referencing the influence of Roman imperialism and its lingering impact on American identity, I trace how the romanticized past continues to structure present narratives. The Corinthian columns and the contemporary interpretation of the Titanomachy relief directly engage this dialogue between antiquity and the now. In doing so, I aim to reveal how classical aesthetics are actively invoked in American political life to signal power, legitimacy, and continuity, even as the ideals they represent are questioned, fractured, or betrayed.

Entropy, in this context, is not a final state but an active artistic process; it exists in the tension between the vessel's ability to contain a narrative and its inevitable collapse. It is visible in the clash of protests, in the hyper-saturation of media, and in the shifting narratives of what democracy means. My work does not seek to resolve this tension but to hold space for it, to make the experience of uncertainty visible and material.

My research and practice have also been shaped by the influence of other artists and thinkers: Natalie Haynes, George Ohr, Alyssa Volchkova, and Brian Rochefort. Their work has inspired me to delve deeper into the connections between history, form, and material, and how these elements can be combined to communicate political and emotional truths. In their ways, these artists embrace imperfection, disorder, and unpredictability as creative forces. My practice is rooted in experimentation and embracing failure as part of an ever-evolving methodology. This mentality of embracing the unknown has shaped the technical aspects of my work, from the chemical unpredictability of glaze formulations to the structural limits of clay bodies altered by foreign materials.

Ultimately, this thesis represents a melding of history, political reflection, material experimentation, and emotional expression. It is a chronicle of a nation in flux, told through visual language. The vessels, columns, and frescoes are not just art objects but a time capsule. Like the artworks that inspired them, my work is a material witness to a moment in American life. They are not meant to offer solutions but to open space for contemplation, discomfort, and dialogue.

As I reflect on this work, I am reminded of Arnheim's assertion that art concentrates a view of the human condition⁵¹. In this way, my art becomes a container, not only in form but in function, a vessel to hold a nation's polarization, fears, and hopes in a state of entropic flux. While the structures may be warped and the surfaces worn, bubbling, and cracking, there is still something profoundly human in the desire to understand, order, and create. This desire, however fragile, is a form of resistance, a sliver of hope, and the refusal to accept collapse as the only narrative.

Future Ruins: Exhibition Images

⁵¹ Arnheim, Rudolf. 1971. *Entropy and Art: An Essay on Order and Disorder*. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press pg. 47.



Figure 15. Installation view South Gallery Wall



Figure 16. Installation view East Gallery Wall



Figure 17. Installation View West Gallery Wall



Figure 18. (White, American Exceptionalism,2025)



Figure 19. (White, And Justice for All, 2025)



Figure 20. (White, Civic Virtue, 2025)



Figure 21. (White, Liberty ,2024)



Figure 21. Democracy

Appendix A: Process Documentation

This appendix contains photographic documentation and technical process notes related to the development of ceramic and fresco works in this thesis. It archives material experimentation, glaze layering, surface manipulation, and fresco techniques, revealing the labor-intensive and conceptually driven processes embedded in the work.

Figure A.1. Test Tiles with Oxide Layering



Stoneware with the addition of mixed metal shavings, press-molded test tiles with layered oxides, fired in an oxidation atmosphere. Used to test surface bleed and textural response, the tiles are as follows: 1. Black Iron oxide and Gillespie borate wash. 2.) Black iron oxide and Gillespie borate wash over Elisa's ice cream glaze with the addition of 5% copper carbonate. 3.) Elisa ice-cream over Gillespie borate wash 4.) One-half of the tile is dipped in a manganese dioxide wash, while the opposite half remains bare clay. 5.) Elisa's ice cream over manganese dioxide 6.) Riptide glaze formula

Figure A.2a. Porcelain Vessel (Greenware)



Initial greenware stage of a coiled porcelain vessel with exaggerated anatomical form. Formed intentionally to collapse or warp in the firing.

Figure A.2b. Porcelain Vessel (First Glaze Firing)



After the initial bisque firing, a thick flashing slip was added to the surface using a palette knife. The vessel was then fired a second time before the first layer of glaze was added. First glaze firing with a faux celadon glaze specifically formulated to cause carbon trapping with the addition of silicon carbide and zinc oxide as colorant. The surface is beginning to show pinholing, pooling, and light crackling.

Figure A.2c. Porcelain Vessel (Second Glaze Firing)



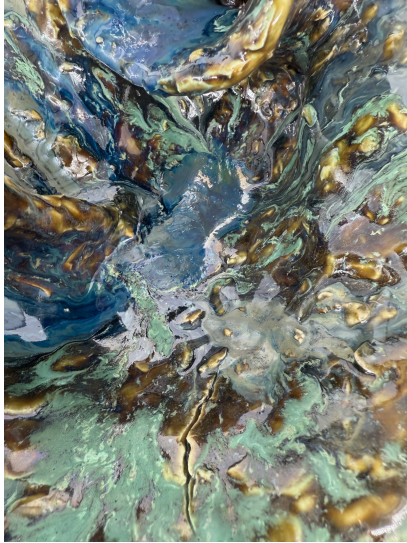
Application of copper carbonate wash and a second glaze layer. Glaze flux begins to create surface ruptures. In some mystery chemical reaction, there are deep blue streaks on the surface without any intentional blue colorants being added to the piece. This was a completely surprising result.

Figure A.2d. Porcelain Vessel (Final Firing)



Final surface after third layer of glaze (Peter Pinell's weathered bronze formula) and the vessel's fifth firing. Surface vitrified with pooling, ruptures, and stratified glaze textures.

Figure A.3. Detail of Glaze Pooling and Thermal Shock Dunting



Detail showing dunting crack and glaze pooling. Multiple firings created tectonic, molten effects.

Figure A.4. Modified Porcelain with Junk Mail and Wood Chips

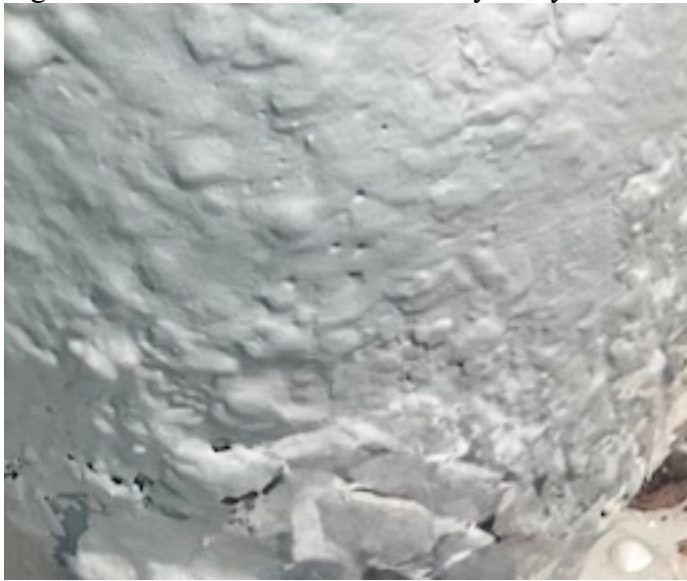


Porcelain clay body wedged with shredded junk mail and wood fibers. The theoretical result will be surface pitting in an irregular manner and possible structural instability in the vessel's walls as the paper and wood burn away. The result was much less dramatic than anticipated

Figure A.4b. Detail of Modified Clay Body After Cone 6 Firing



Figure A. 4.c Detail of Modified Clay Body with Additional Modification



In the second round of testing, the modified porcelain clay body with an additional layer of slip containing 7% kosher salt by weight showed a blistered, pocked surface before bisque firing.

Figure A.4d. Post-Firing Surface of Modified Clay Body



Burnout of wood and paper fibers created a ruptured, flaking surface with sharp contrasts. The layer of salt slip peeled back from the clay body and left a shiny, orange peel texture due to the uneven fluxing in the salt deposits in the slip.

Figure A.4e. Final Surface After Third Firing



Final vitrified texture lava-like, full of pitting and molten gloss. Appears geological.

Figure A. 4f. Studio Notes and Firing Schedule



ClayLab App

i read the news today, oh boy

● Not for sale

- 1 light magma and plaster
Outside
- 2 light and dark magma +plaster
Outside
- 3 Frost slip with 5% kosher salt x1
Outside • Brushed

☁ Modified porcelain with wood shavings and junk mail

👉 Coiled

📖 3 layers of slip:
Layer one porcelain slip with 25 grams of kosher salt
Layer 2 white stoneware slip with 25 grams cherry wood shavings
Layer 3 praline slip

Thin patchy layer of plaster / light magma with 50/50 ratio
Around divets and handles light magma/ plaster with added best black mason stain

Dried at room temp uncovered for a week
Bisque fired to cone 08

Glazed with dark magma light magma and heavy chunks of partially dehydrated amco river rock and ancient iron

After the initial come 6 firing
Vessel was scraped with a metal putty knife to remove the thin crumbly flakes and the scrubbed down in the sink to get rid of loose debris

After drying with the heat gun
Brushed on 2x tenmoku
And 2x dark magma
And heavy drips of Rusty's red around the handles

Firing schedule 1 for slow bisque
50°f/hr-> 180° hold 3 hours
100°f/hr-> 200° hold 3 hours
150°f/hr-> 1000° hold 0
250°f/hr-> 1750° hold 0

Firing schedule 2:
180°f/hr->482° hold 0
450°f/hr->932° hold 0
900°f/hr->2229° hold 0
1798°f/hr->22021° hold 0
180°f/hr-> 1832° hold 0
180°f/hr-> 1922° hold 30 min
100°f/hr-> 1868° hold 30 min
End

✓ Finished on 4/2/24

Fresco Process Series

Figure A.5. Fresco Base Layer Application (Step 1)



Application of the base coat for a large-scale fresco panel using Portland cement, marble dust, and polymer binding agents. The first layer was applied by hand directly onto a vertical foam insulation panel surface to establish a stiff base layer and durable ground. This process, documented in a garage studio space, highlights the bodily labor and scale of the fresco work (Figure A.5a–d).
Surface Damage: Fresco Detail Views

Figure A.5b. Intonaco Surface Prep



Application of the final intonaco (plaster) layer onto the fresco panels. This smooth, light-colored surface is the final working ground onto which pigment will be applied. Traditionally, lime plaster is used in the technique of fresco work. This intonaco layer, however, is made of joint compound blended with PVA glue to help adhesion to the underlying cement layer.

Figure A.5c. Pigment Application on Fresco Surface



Detail of mineral pigment application to fresco panel. Stars hand-painted in blue reference American symbolism. Visible outlines and gestural marks emphasize the immediacy of the application of the thinned paints employed by this technique.

Figure A.5.d Sanding the Surface: Controlled Erosion of Fresco Layer



The surface of the fresco is distressed using an orbital sander to abrade a large fresco panel, and a hammer is used to break the top layer of the painting, revealing the underlying cement. This stage introduces visual decay, surface loss, and symbolic breakdown of painted imagery. Figures referencing recent American political protests, American iconography, and the personifications of the Titans Libertas and Themis are fragmented, reflecting the political entropy of the time.

Figure A.6a–d. Surface Damage: Fresco Detail Views

Close-up documentation of fresco surface damage, including cracks, flaking pigment, and erosion. These marks are embraced as a visual archive of material failure and conceptual breakdown.



Figure A.6b. Surface Damage: Fresco Detail Views

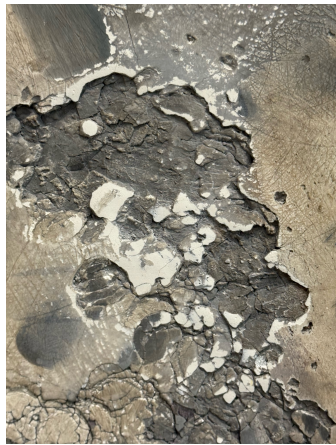


Figure A. 6. c Surface Damage: Fresco Detail Views.



Figure A.6.d. Surface Damage: Fresco Detail Views



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