

Reflections of the Unknown:
By Marcos Salazar

A Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts
William Paterson University of New Jersey
MAY 2025

Thesis Committee: Elieen Foti. Claudia Goldstein.
James Blasi.

Copyright © 2025 by *Marcos Salazar*.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	iv
Abstract	v
Love as Form, Movement, and Meaning	8
Philosophy of Art	12
Creating Space for Reflection	13
The Influence of Kim Eng	13
"Your Clay Yogi"	14
Interdisciplinary Method	16
The Bridge Between Practices	18
Peter Voulkos: A Bold Influence	19
The Unknown, Embraced	20
Endnotes	23
Bibliography	24

List of Illustrations

1. **Echoes of the Vine, 2024.**
Ceramic with watercolor Finish
17 x 34 x 14 inches
2. **We Will Always Find Our Way Back Home, 2024.**
22 x 31 x 25 in
Ceramic Sculpture
Tribute to my brother, Jose Ramos
(10-09-1990 – 05-12-2024)
3. **Held by Something Older Than Us, 2025**
Ceramic with glaze finish
37 x 28 x 22 inches

Abstract

Dare to drift into the unknown? My art invites you into a cloud of curiosity, a place where getting lost is part of the journey. Because in time, we always find ourselves, perhaps changed, perhaps the same, but always found. My work dances through pain, love, fear, and hope. It asks you to look in the mirror of your own journey and wonder: who do we trust in a world where we play our roles under watchful eyes?

In *Mirror Artist*, I moved through this exploration alone, the creative process, a pulse that beats through me. Guided by rhythms of jazz, and experimental soundscapes, I translate energy into colors and movement, crafting experiences that echo deep within. I carry the shadow of loss, the weight of my brother's battle with mental illness. His struggle reshaped my world, but his journey whispers through my art, reminding us that even in the darkest corners, there's always a light waiting to guide us back.

My art invites viewers into a "cloud of curiosity," a space where getting lost is an essential part of the journey. This journey uncovers pieces of myself, sometimes changed, sometimes the same, but always found. Art, for me, is not something to be deciphered; it's an experience that resonates beyond words. Through my work, I aim to create both a mirror and a window, a reflection of inner worlds while offering glimpses into hidden spaces. Guided by rhythms of jazz and experimental beats, I translate energy into lines, textures, and colors that come to life. My work moves through pain, fear, love, and hope, and it encourages viewers to confront their own emotional landscapes. It's about looking into a mirror and asking: who do we trust when we all play our roles under watchful eyes?

This journey is deeply personal. The shadow of my brother's struggle with mental illness has shaped my understanding of connection, resilience, and hope. His journey echoes through my art, and it reminds us that even in darkness, there is always a light to guide us. For me, creating art is a therapeutic act, and it serves as a call for others to connect with their own feelings. It is an invitation to find something meaningful in the textures and forms I offer. By blending vulnerability and reflection, my art creates spaces where others can confront, release, and feel.

Pain appears often in my art, both in how I make it and in what it represents. You can see it in chaotic strokes and heavy marks in my sculptures. When I am working with clay, I grab the paddle to release what I am feeling, and I allow the clay to absorb the impact with precision. In my practice, I draw from the raw elements: earth, fire, water,

and air. I use material found in nature, including rocks, seashells, and wooden paddles. I also use my body as a tool, punching and pressing my knees into my vessels. Each piece I create holds cycles of letting go and renewal. My work lives at the intersection of the subjective and the objective, the resilient and the unknown. Creating becomes my way of transforming raw emotions into something tangible, emotions that I can see and touch. Every strike on the clay mirrors my own healing process, and it turns an emotion into something physical and real. It is more than just striking the surface; it is me confronting the emotions I have carried, especially after witnessing my brother's struggles with mental illness. Each mark, whether I am carving, pounding, or cutting, symbolizes that release.



That emotional release comes through in my sculpture, *We Will Always Find Our Way Back Home* (2024), a ceramic memorial tribute to my brother, Jose Ramos. I began this piece during winter break in brutal cold, with the school heater broken and no clay available. I learned to recycle clay myself, even dealing with challenges like

extreme mold. Starting it as a vase felt right, like a vessel, holding the weight of everything it represents. The sculpture, measuring 22 by 31 by 25 inches, is intentionally large because so much of it involves using my body. I press my knees into the clay to create deep indentations that symbolize strength and control over the material. The weight of this piece matters to me. I wanted it to feel solid and unbreakable, so I used a coiling method to build a structure that could withstand pressure. Coil pots are prominent in African, Native American, and ancient Mediterranean ceramics. They traditionally focused on the natural buildup of form through layering. I feel drawn to coil-building because it allows me to connect more deeply with the clay's malleability. The process feels comforting and grounding.

The repetitive nature of coil-building mirrors a therapeutic process. It helps establish control and stability in the face of vulnerability. Just like in life, strength is built through the daily grind, layer upon layer of experience. Coiling creates that foundation. When the sculpture fell during the process, I didn't stop. Each time I lifted it back up, it felt like I was restoring something within myself. This kind of resilience exists in nature too. Plants grow through cracks in concrete, and waves always find their way back to the shore. This sculpture became my version of that force. A presence that keeps rebuilding, no matter how many times it falls. The red inside the sculpture represents a rebirth, like a phoenix rising from the ashes. Red symbolizes the power of transformation. It reflects resilience and the strength to rise stronger after challenge.

Glazing this piece became another way of connecting with it. I worked in front of a live audience of teachers and peers at William Paterson University, surrounded by the intense heat of the flames. Working in front of others changed how I create. There is a

vulnerability in letting people witness the process unfold. Every movement, every decision, becomes a conversation, not just with the clay but with those watching. It is both intimidating and empowering. It pushes me to dig deeper into my work, knowing others are seeing it take shape in real time. Their presence draws out raw emotion. It allows me to tap into a side of my creativity that does not always surface when I'm alone. Feedback, whether spoken or silent, often sparks ideas I would never have thought of on my own. The entire process becomes a dialogue between me, the material, and the audience. That conversation changes everything.

The colors I chose for the glazes were inspired by my desire to conduct the pit fire at night. Although I couldn't make that happen, I still honored the vision. I chose royal blue to represent the night sky and green, inspired by the presence of nature. The heat became so intense it melted my brush, but I pushed through. In those moments, it felt like a dance as if I was becoming one with the sculpture. At one point, I took a drink of water and poured it over the piece, almost like a ritual. In that instant, the sculpture and I became one.



Music infuses my process with layers of emotion and rhythm. It shapes my art as deeply as clay itself. Artists like Ricky Hill, NF, and The Weeknd channel raw emotions that I draw on. Their music helps me confront vulnerability and express my inner struggles through my work. Ricky Hill's sound pulls me into a darker, introspective world. His music feels private, like a confession. Listening to him is a solitary experience that mirrors the intense focus I pour into sculpting. It is his authenticity that resonates with me. It challenges me to confront my own rawness and let it flow into my creations. The rhythm in music is reflected in the motion of coil-building. Tempo and flow guide my hands. The repetitive act of layering coils channels emotional energy. It turns the process into a physical response to sound. Just as music moves from tension to calm,

each layer and texture I add reflects shifts in emotion. These forms resonate with the same intensity as the music that inspires them.

Ceramic vessels amplify sound and emotion, much like musical instruments. Each piece I create holds more than space. It holds a story shaped by rhythm, tension, and release. The hollow spaces within the vessels act as sound chambers, a metaphor for the way emotions echo within us. A jagged edge might capture the dissonance in a song, while smoother areas reflect moments of calm. I see these forms as translations of sound into touch, with each vessel becoming a silent echo of music's impact on my soul. The Weeknd's atmospheric beats and melancholic lyrics bring complexity to my understanding of duality, such as pleasure and pain, light and darkness. His music resonates with me. It reflects the contrasting emotions of healing and destruction that I try to capture in my work. Like his songs, my art creates a space where emotional conflicts coexist. It invites viewers to explore their own reflections.

Pain shows up in the fragmented memories that often surface in my work. When we search for a moment from the past, it blurs. Painful memories fade or distort over time. In my sculptures and paintings, these fragments represent loss, brokenness, or things left unfinished. My work becomes a way to piece together those fragments, just as I seek healing from personal trauma. Negative space plays a powerful role in this exploration of pain. Hollowed areas and gaps in my sculptures emphasize the emptiness trauma creates. These aren't just physical spaces. They reflect the emotional voids left by painful experiences. Working with negative space allows me to mirror the gaps within myself, seeking healing and finding ways to fill those empty spaces. In my

sculptures, fragmentation appears in scattered or broken elements that evoke emotional confusion.

These works remind me, and hopefully viewers, that pain, whether physical or emotional, resonates through the structure and composition of the artwork. It's something viewers can feel, not just see. Just as music evokes deep emotional responses, my art functions as an outlet to express the complexities of pain and healing. Whether through the aggression of a paddle strike or the layers of color and form, each piece reflects my personal journey. Pain doesn't have to be hidden. It can be celebrated, confronted, and transformed into something meaningful.

Love as Form, Movement, and Meaning

Love, like pain, is a central theme in my sculptures. It is a layered emotion that shifts from affection to longing and passion. In my work, love appears through soft, curving lines that feel warm and gentle. These forms invite connection. *Echoes of the Vine* (2024), a ceramic piece measuring 17 by 34 by 14 inches, reflects these flowing forms. They mirror the natural curves of the body and create a sense of intimacy and softness. The way the lines twist and reach toward one another speaks to unity and how people, though different, find ways to come together. Connection is essential in my practice. I often create sculptures where parts seem to lean into or balance with each other. These visual relationships suggest emotional closeness. They create quiet moments of balance that invite love to exist. The absence of sharp edges adds comfort. It encourages the viewer to feel a sense of tenderness without the need for explanation.

Echoes of the Vine was created in front of a live audience of strangers and close friends during a streaming session. It began as a tall vessel built quickly using coil-building. I carefully controlled the drying process, knowing that the walls would eventually collapse. Rather than prevent it, I allowed the piece to remain open to change. As the vessel softened, I pressed gently into the form. The walls gave way, and in that moment of surrender, a new shape emerged. I followed my instincts and let my hands guide the transformation. The process felt like a dance. Each movement balanced intention and release.



The sculpture feels alive. It appears as if it is caught mid-motion or floating in space. Its curves reflect the rhythm of breath and the natural movement of the body. The surface texture reminds me of water ripples, delicate yet full of energy. I embedded seashells into the form to ground it in nature. At the same time, the flowing lines suggest that the sculpture could begin moving at any moment. For the surface, I chose watercolor to give the piece a fragile and transparent finish. This choice reflects love in its gentlest form. Watercolor allowed me to build layers slowly and let them shift over

time, just as love reveals itself gradually. The palette was inspired by the Venus flytrap. This plant, with its vivid color and form, draws people in through attraction and curiosity. I wanted the viewer to feel similarly pulled into the walls of the sculpture. The green, red, and yellow tones reflect the beauty and vulnerability of love. They suggest that love requires care and attention in order to grow.



Music continues to shape how I interpret love through art. One artist who has had a lasting influence on me is José Luis Perales. His poetic lyrics reflect how love deepens through forgiveness, time, and shared experience. He does not portray love as something easy. He presents it as something we must continue to return to and grow with. Listening to his music helps me reflect on how I experience love and how I bring that energy into my sculptures. The softness, the struggle, the quiet moments. All of these elements are part of what I try to create.

Each form, each mark, and each gesture is a response to these feelings. My sculptures are not about perfection. They are about trust. They reflect how love, pain,

and hope coexist. I believe art should be a space where we allow ourselves to feel, even when we do not have the words to explain what we are feeling. My process is not just about creating objects. It is about honoring the complexity of what it means to be human. Through sculpture, I hope to invite others into that space.

Philosophy of Art

For me, art is a space for feeling rather than knowing. It is more about the journey than finding a solution. The hardest part of creating anything, whether in art or in life, is taking that first step and making the first mark. A blank canvas can feel intimidating, but for me, that canvas is not limited to paper or a wall. I see my sculptures as blank canvases as well. The clay holds space for layers of thought, memory, and movement, just as a painting would. When I sculpt, I am also painting by adding texture, rhythm, and emotion through form. The uncertainty of where to begin can feel overwhelming, but I believe in trusting the process, even when the direction is unclear. Just like in life, you do not need to have all the answers from the beginning. It is okay to feel lost, to start again, or to shift course. The beauty is in how things unfold. Every pause, every challenge, and every step forward creates space for something true to emerge. That is where creativity lives.

Creating Space for Reflection

In my work, I aim to create spaces where viewers can confront their own truths without feeling the pressure to solve or explain anything. In a world that often prioritizes categorization and definition, I want my art to offer something different. I want it to be a refuge, a place where feeling is more important than understanding. I imagine it as a quiet space within the noise, or a moment of stillness in the middle of chaos. My hope is that each piece invites viewers to pause, reflect, and discover personal meaning that is entirely their own. These responses may be subtle or unexpected, but that is the beauty of open interpretation. My goal is to hold space for silence, uncertainty, and discovery. Every piece I create is intended to offer a moment of self-reflection and exploration. I want people to feel something within themselves when they stand before my work, whether they can name it or not.

The Influence of Kim Eng

The teachings of Kim Eng, a spiritual teacher and the creator of Presence Through Movement (PTM), have had a meaningful impact on the way I approach art. Presence Through Movement encourages mindfulness through body awareness, helping people connect with the present moment. I often listen to her teachings while working in the studio. One of her videos, titled *People Love at Their Level of Consciousness*, explores the importance of self-awareness and compassion. These ideas help me stay emotionally grounded while I create, which allows the work to remain honest and rich with feeling.

Her perspective on consciousness and presence also shapes how I think about the viewer's experience. She speaks of different levels of awareness, and that has led me to create work that is open to both subjective and objective interpretation. I no longer feel the need to control how my work is received. Instead, I focus on making pieces that offer space for each person to feel something personal. Even her teachings on body awareness have changed how I interact with materials, especially in sculpture. I try to approach clay with presence and intention. Each touch and movement becomes part of the piece's emotional language. Through Kim Eng's influence, I have learned to trust the physical and emotional process of creating. My goal is not to explain, but to offer. I want viewers to experience each sculpture or form with their own sensitivity, perspective, and inner awareness.

"Your Clay Yogi"

Watching DeBorah Goletz work was one of the first times I truly understood how peaceful and magical ceramics could be. I had the honor of learning from her directly as my teacher. From the very beginning, she brought a calm and grounded energy into the studio. She taught me about coil building in particular, helping me understand the rhythm, patience, and intention behind each layer. She made the process feel like a meditative practice, not just a technical skill. Seeing her hands move through the clay with confidence and care left a deep impression on me. It was not just about her technical skill; it was about her presence. Her work flowed with grace, and it was clear that she had explored many different approaches to ceramics. Whether she was

shaping a form or guiding a student, there was always a softness in her process, grounded in decades of experience.

Professor DeBorah introduced me to the idea that ceramics is not only about form or function; it is also about feeling. She created a space where it was okay to feel deeply. In her class, it was safe to cry and allow emotions to rise without judgment. The clay held those emotions, and she held the space. That emotional safety allowed real growth to happen, not only in terms of artistic development but on a personal level as well.

She often refers to herself as “Your Clay Yogi,” and that title fits her perfectly. She approaches working with clay with the same mindfulness and intention found in yoga. Her background as a muralist, potter, and educator with over 30 years of teaching experience is reflected in everything she does. Her ceramic murals are installed in the New York City subway, and she has taught thousands of students through her pottery school, For Love of Mud, in New Jersey. Despite all of her accomplishments, she teaches with humility and warmth. Professor DeBorah reminded me that clay itself can be a teacher, one that listens, responds, and reflects. Learning from her taught me to slow down, breathe, and pay attention. I will always carry her lessons with me, especially the ones that cannot be measured, like how to move with the clay, not just shape it.

Interdisciplinary Method

Throughout my graduate program at William Paterson University, Professor Eileen Foti has been more than just an instructor. She has been a mentor, a role model, and one of the most grounding figures in my artistic journey. As the Master Printmaker at WPU, she brings an incredible depth of knowledge not only in printmaking but across disciplines. Her fluency in materials has shaped how I view my own process, especially as I explore the intersection of printmaking and ceramics. What made our connection special was the unspoken understanding we shared about process. Printmaking and ceramics are both rooted in rhythm, repetition, pressure, and intention. Working with her allowed those conversations to flow naturally. Discussing glaze surfaces often felt like an extension of the print studio. Her insights helped bridge the gap between these two practices, reminding me that everything in art is connected.

Professor Foti also taught me the importance of safety. She was the first person to show me the risks involved in working with glazes and introduced me to wearing a respirator when mixing materials. These lessons were simple but powerful, and they continue to affect how I work in the studio and care for my health. She encouraged me to move beyond what I thought I knew. She did not just teach me how to make art, she helped me see myself as a builder of ideas. Her feedback was never dismissive or discouraging. Instead, she guided me to shift my thinking, to reimagine, and to explore new possibilities. I learned through her that uncertainty is not a limitation. It is a doorway into something greater.

Her presence in the studio brought both discipline and warmth. She knew how to challenge students in ways that propelled them forward without overwhelming them. She offered support without overstepping boundaries. Through her example, I came to understand that an artist can embody both strength and vulnerability. She helped me trust that I belonged, even during moments of self-doubt. That sense of belonging is something I will carry with me long after this program ends. To honor her influence on my work, I have dedicated a sculpture title, *Held by Something Older Than Us* (2025). This piece is crafted from ceramic with a glaze finish and measures 37 x 28 x 22 inches in her honor.

This piece is finished in a bronze glaze and reflects her strength, wisdom, and resilience. The glaze holds a quiet glow, symbolic of transformation and timelessness. Just like metal shaped by fire, Professor Foti helped me grow through pressure and uncertainty. The sculpture stands grounded and luminous, capturing the essence of her presence. It is a reflection of her steady guidance and care. This piece is not only a tribute to her mastery in printmaking but also a celebration of the powerful impact she has had on me and many others through her teaching.



The Bridge Between Practices

Much of my artistic expression is rooted in deeply personal experiences, particularly my relationship with my brother and his struggles with mental health. Witnessing his battle profoundly shaped my perspective and inspired me to use art as a way to process and communicate these challenging emotions. Art became a tool for transforming pain, confusion, and helplessness into something tangible, something others could connect with. Through my brother's journey, I've learned about resilience, empathy, and the importance of holding space for emotions that are often overlooked or misunderstood. This experience has also shown me how art can serve as a therapeutic tool, not only for me but also for those who engage with my work. With each piece, I

strive to create a space where viewers can explore their own emotional landscapes and find comfort or connection, knowing they are not alone in their struggles.

Peter Voulkos: A Bold Influence

Peter Voulkos is a name that carries weight in the world of ceramics. When I first learned about his work, I was struck by how he reimagined what clay could become. He did not follow the traditional rules of pottery. Instead, he treated clay as a sculptural material that could be raw, expressive, and full of movement. The pieces I saw felt alive with energy and tension. They looked like they had been built through struggle, gesture, and force. There was something powerful in the way his surfaces carried marks and breaks, as if the process was just as important as the outcome. I did not grow up studying his work, but when I finally saw it, something inside me opened. I realized that art did not have to be clean or carefully planned. It could be messy, emotional, and uncertain. What stood out to me was not just how he worked, but the presence his pieces seemed to hold. They felt honest. That realization helped me let go of the idea that a sculpture needs to look a certain way. I began following the form and trusting what emerged.

His influence showed up in my practice before I even realized it. I started making larger pieces because I felt ready to take up more space. I stopped worrying about whether I was pushing the clay too far. I began moving with it, letting my body guide the form. At times, I used my shoulder or feet. My process began to feel less like building and more like dancing. That rhythm, that physical energy, is something I now recognize

as part of my voice. Even though my sculptures do not resemble his, I feel a deep connection to the way he approached clay. He showed me that emotion can live inside a form without being named. He reminded me that breaking the rules is sometimes necessary to find your own path. For me, sculpting is not about trying to impress. It is about being honest in the moment. Voulkos shifted something in me. He helped me understand that ceramics can hold feeling, that clay can be a mirror, and that art can be a space to release what words cannot carry. I carry that lesson with me each time I return to the studio.

The Unknown, Embraced

This body of work is a reflection of the unknown. It represents a space where I witnessed the audience not only observe but also move with the art. They danced, mirrored the shapes, and embraced the complexity without feeling the need to define every part. There was no pressure to decode the pieces. Instead, they allowed themselves to feel and connect with the work. That openness created a silent dialogue between the art and those who stood in front of it.

Creating this series taught me how to trust myself. Night after night, I questioned everything. But through that process of letting go, I discovered something greater: it is okay to feel lost. With time, we always find ourselves again. We may be changed, we may be the same, but we are always found. Today, I feel found, and stronger than I have ever been.

Artistically, I have become more open and willing to explore, to break apart, and to rebuild. Just like clay, we are shaped and reshaped through pressure, through fire, and sometimes through breaking. Health, both mental and physical, became a constant reminder of how fragile and temporary life is, but also how much strength there is in simply continuing.

I carry the voices of those who helped shape me. From Peter Voulkos, I learned to break rules and trust gesture. From Professor Eileen Foti, I learned to think across disciplines and honor safety and care. From Professor DeBorah Goletz, I learned that clay is not just a material, but a teacher. And from Kim Eng, I learned to move with presence, to stay grounded in feeling, and to return to stillness.

This journey also taught me that an artist is never truly alone. Especially in a place like William Paterson, where we face challenges in funding and faculty, we still find ways to move forward. We function like a beehive, with each person being important and every contribution becoming part of a larger, living ecosystem. That is what this community means to me. The unknown is at the core of my practice. I believe that art does not need to be explained. It speaks in its own language, one that goes beyond words. The marks, the rhythms, and the silences between forms begin conversations without ever needing answers. It took time for me to understand that, but the audience already felt it.

More than anything, this work taught me to have faith, in myself, in the process, and in life. It reminded me of my core belief: we will always find ourselves again. This art helped me question who I am, and it also helped me listen to my heart. Anything is possible. And when we fall, we rise again.

Even in the dark, we create light.

For those who are still trying to find themselves, you are not alone.

For my brother.



Endnotes

Eng, Kim. "People Love at Their Level of Consciousness." *YouTube*, 15 Apr. 2018, youtu.be/3D5BorKyFfY?si=qsG3j87g17WII714.

"Peter Voulkos, A Brief History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7E_qAMZGk0&t=1s.

Bibliography

Eng, Kim. "People Love at Their Level of Consciousness." *YouTube*, 15 Apr. 2018,

youtu.be/3D5BorKyFfY?si=qsG3j87g17WII714.

"Peter Voulkos, A Brief History." *YouTube*, YouTube, 2024,

www.youtube.com/watch?v=c7E_qAMZGk0&t=1s.