

C U L L (for Sue)



The artist's studio and son Wesley (2020)

*...carving out another form from the existing one.
I say carving because that's what it felt like.
At times a frustrated version of carving out form in clay.
But persisting. An insistence on the form in the middle.
A head? Vessel? Container? One with a force field around it?
Burying form again....cut it out in a new way...
find a new form and arrive there.
What is it to find form?*

--Sue Havens, 2021

*If you want to make it...like...really good, then you should like...
just try making it do, just, try to wear the paint out.*

--Wesley Ali Havens Domnez (age 7), 2021

When Sue texted me the picture above, I froze—and in a sense, I'm still frozen.

There is so much here to read, so much literal and metaphoric depth of field, in this small garage that Sue employs as a home studio. Only recently did she get a space heater for it. Wesley, pictured above, is in Sue's work, surrounded by it, and perhaps even contributing to it. He is uninhibited and *present* in his mind and energy-coiled body. Sue's work is not about him, but it *is* him, too. I don't want to romanticize everything about Wesley, art-making, and motherhood. There is tension and fury in her work that photos like this will always salve. Truly, when I look at this photo, I see a history painting.

When googling 'history painting' I see a definition that reads '...a genre in painting defined by its subject matter rather than artistic style.' I see *The Death of Socrates*, *The Interview Between Napoleon I and Francis II after the Battle of Austerlitz*, *The Assassination of the Bishop of Liege*, *The Death of Marat*, *Judas Returning Thirty Silver Pieces*, and *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*...it scrolls on and on.

This smartphone photo is one of my favorite history paintings. These are post-Pollock times—drips are no longer avant-garde, they are a thin layer of an evolving getting-it-done-survival-palimpsest (in a repurposed garage space with not enough lighting for the seriousness happening within it). But the light rendered through this smartphone camera spotlights our dutiful cherub that is not chubby, but lean with the times, and we can dote on him as he is lost in the work to be done—he is a mirror and a reflection. I had to listen to Wesley's quote above at least 15 times to transcribe it accurately; even though it is only a short sentence, Wesley excitedly pushes it out in spurts, interrupting himself, folding the words onto themselves. The sentence is not indexical to his racing thoughts but it is an attempt, and in a sense, the sentence is a complicated form much like those found in Sue's work.

There is a lot of waiting in this image, provisional tables, benches, chairs, stools, brushes, cardboard on the ground, a hint of a washing machine in the lower right-hand corner, a cat grooming itself off left, ghosts of other works on the wall and floor, open-top buckets, and a bowl of pink paint awaiting Wesley's next move. Wesley is one of the only viewers of Sue's work at this moment—it is late 2020.

The pandemic paintings on the wall behind Wesley are history paintings unto themselves; they are escape-vessels, relatives, epic novels, psychologists, children, overlords, texts, tweets, friends, a field of ruins, and a growing council that is watching our every move right and wrong—quietly and with effortless violence—taking notes. The paintings are babysitters (they are in control even when we feel like we are, they are humoring us as they are *resolved*; we never are). The works are boxing jabs from Sue, they pound out time, each a moment of searching, and more are coming...

The evolution of Sue's work in the past few years is breathtaking.

In 2016, lured by the undeniable energy of the USF ceramics department (I always walk through the ceramics department on the way to my own classes, it's like a dance club for objects), Sue took up clay.

Newly in a space of 3d object making, Sue's 20 years of practice crack open; one can see what is akin to popcorn—instant combustions of physical form with convoluting architectures that continue to sculpt themselves as you (variously) approach them.

The ceramic figure works appear like trophies for an unnamed contest, sometimes with generous arms that beckon an arm-lock for a walk in the park, or a reassuring handle that you dare not use, but admire nonetheless. They have agency as they balance themselves structurally, although at times leaning with the wisdom of graceful aging. They don't need anyone, but I need them, and Sue and I lead very different lives.

As an ongoing series, the ceramic works are powerfully obstinate; they flirt with and resist categorization--their iterative nature opens up a mission of relentless building and searching. In their finished states, each work, as Sue confided to me, *has been through something*. This makes a lot of sense to me; I am left to become the searcher, while Sue is already off to another moment of world-making.



Sue Havens *ACTUAL FORMS*, a solo exhibition at Coco Hunday, 2017
Image by Jason Lazarus

Not yet content, Sue next embarked on new, experimental collage works up to 10' long that have, as they are made of dozens of small, individual works on paper, a harlequin surface quality. All the labor of these constituent parts makes the work surprisingly heavy and unwieldy when off the wall. On the wall, they are active historical fields that honor sources both low and high without irony—they are full of love (which is a term you are not supposed to use in contemporary art). At times, these large-scale wall collages background Sue's autonomous ceramic works on exhibition-neutral plinths or salvaged idiosyncratic stools. They dialogue with the objects or command a room, they are modular and monolith.

Another turn in the work, in 2018, a 75-foot mural commission from the Knockdown Center (NY). This time, the collage elements are in Sue's mind while she paints directly on the wall. The texture of previous paper collages is now flattened, and the illusionistic space happily radiates dimensional plays. Architecture is coming into play. As viewers we are becoming—small.



Knockdown Center: *MASSIVE*, house paint on wall, 75x13', 2018
photo by Nicholas Locke

When Covid hit, Sue started showing me her new paintings on paper which I was initially dismayed by—not because of the work themselves, but because it forced me to realize Covid was real and everyone had to contain scale and methodology. I resented the very real impact on Sue's evolving sculptural work and large-scale wall tapestries. But the small painting works

started to win me over—Sue was teaching me. The ceramic turn in Sue's work opened up her 2D work anew, again.



Untitled pandemic painting, 22x30\", 2020

Each of her pandemic paintings is an encounter with what might alternatively be called head, vessel, figure, trophy, or container. What I've learned by spending time with these 'encounters' is that you are not staring *at*, but ushered *within* the figures. Rather than cross-sections, they are volumetric x-rays; they are *interiority*.

Covid, like a run-in with the ceramics studio, has acted upon Sue's work as a compressor, a kettle, and a prism—refracting new spectrums of searching for *agency*. I see journalism here, and the decision to keep the works unframed and pinned to the wall in the exhibition was made with great care—to reject the interference and performance of frames that attempt to keep

things clean and at a distance. These are a kind of newsprint; they are bodies; they are vulnerable. Sue's flirting with something symphonic—she's flying.



Cull, installation view, 2021
Photo by Mikayla Whitmore

How do we fly? I think many artists build years of toil, condensation, and electricity, and, lightning unpredictably emerges. Sometimes a context-of-restraint, like Covid, surprisingly feeds into this phenomena, but what is the resistance to these moments?

I fear the significant degree to which artist-mothers are at an unfair disadvantage in achieving focused, investigative, institutional exhibitions of their work. Many types of reparative work are being engaged in by the art world—awkwardly and oftentimes incorrectly—at a pace that never keeps up with the violence of real-world structures and systems. The sophisticated, generative interior lives artists like Sue embody are consistently abandoned by a field built against family and mothers. Where might support come from, and in what new, radical forms? Artist residencies are, as a whole, behind. Where are the mother-focused architectures that have an eye on both child and artist? Who is supporting single mothers? BIPOC mothers? The art world and art histories we draw upon are woefully incomplete. We have to *powerfully read* the works of artist-mothers that do make it out into the world and actively acknowledge and investigate them, while we push for growing visibility and systemic change.

Reading Sue's work of recent years is an opportunity not to name her as an important painter, collagist, sculptor, or ceramicist. More than that, she is an ecosystem, and I think this framework is how we might begin to contextualize her importance as a maker right now.

Circling back to Sue and that photo of her garage, why was I frozen? Because when looking at this history painting and its tableaux of elements, I see backward and forward simultaneously. The figures, objects, and artworks embedded within become infinite surrogates for a deep tradition of churning artists (who in this case happens to be a mother, in the strangest of times) in a continuing, deep quest for agency, ask, *what is it to find form?*



Cull, installation view, 2021
Photo by Mikayla Whitmore

[Jason Lazarus](#)

Artist, Curator of [Cull](#)

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