

THESIS

FORGING ACROSS BOUNDARIES

Submitted by

Gene Anthony Bereza

Art Department

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WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER
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FORGING ACROSS BOUNDARIES BE ACCEPTED AS FULFILLING IN PART
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Committee on Graduate Work



Peter Jacob

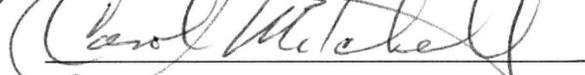


Carl Mitchell



Silda M

Advisor



Department Head Director


Henry Tunoy


Council

THESIS ABSTRACT
FORGING ACROSS BOUNDARIES

In this thesis I employ my art as a medium for personal narrative and my outlook of the world.

I use forged metal in the majority of the works but I also employ other metalsmithing techniques and include non-metal materials to add a sense of wholeness and variety.

The stories recounted in this thesis are about crossing various boundaries that surround us everyday. Some of those include boundaries of personal identity, relationships, global concerns, and conformity. Some boundaries are never crossed and perhaps that is best.

Although when a boundary set by others into uncharted territory is crossed, new *truths* can be discovered.

Gene Anthony Bereza
Art Department
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80526
Summer 2002

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INTRODUCTION

The stories recounted in this thesis are about crossing various boundaries that surround us every day; the boundaries of personal identity, relationships, global concerns.

When oral tradition was more prevalent, the stories told were the important medium of the day to impart wisdom, tell creation stories, and to entertain. To a degree, this is still going on today although in much different terms and technologies. The electronic media delivers an overload of information via television, radio, and the Internet.

We all have a story to tell. The pieces I created are personal narratives for me that I use to help remember events. It is my belief that this work can also be appreciated on its own for its formal qualities, however, being privy to subtle details offers additional opportunities for appreciation of the work.

From my point of view, I have access and responsibility to two worlds, the European roots of my father and the Native North American heritage of my mother. Although my name is entirely of my father's contribution, it is my mother's heritage that I relate to spiritually. My mother is a full-blooded Oneida from the Oneida of the Thames Reserve in Ontario, Canada. By the laws of Canada, I too am Oneida. The inspiration of much of my work comes from that perspective. As an individual, I can only speak for myself but as an artist-metalsmith, I use my art to voice my perspective both for and of Indigenous People's concerns.

My thesis work was created with the spirit and passion of that basic human need to express oneself visually. *How* the work is created is as important to my art as the content. I have an inherent need to develop with the work as it evolves closer to fruition. This growing process isn't always easy on the art or on me, but when the journey is finished it is always worthwhile.

YEAR OF THE KNIFE

“Perhaps the most versatile instrument ever devised has been the knife. When put to use it becomes an extension of the arm and does the bidding of whoever has it in his grasp.” (Grant, Introduction)

When thinking of the knife as a weapon, that’s a chilling quote but one with truth. Blades of various shapes, dimensions, and materials have been most effective in the taking of life, human or otherwise throughout world history to this day. However, a knife for me is first and foremost a tool.

The purpose of the tool can vary considerably. It may be to *cut* or it may be for *ornament*. The US Marine’s saber as part of the regalia is an excellent example of ornament.

I make knives as a vehicle for my various perspectives. Hopefully my knives transcend pure utility and simple ornament. It is my wish for these knives to be able to function when called upon as tools and to be works of art with spirit. Unlike a gun, whose sole design purpose is to discharge metal at a destructive velocity, a knife can be a *constructive* tool.

“Knives combine beauty and utility in a wonderfully human scale. They are a practical example of the harmonizing of many elements into an object of lasting value.” (McCreight 14)

As a metalsmith, I’m more comfortable with this quote. It suggests that knives can be artful objects. A knife can be held in high regard, like jewelry. The knives I make include both traditional and eclectic combinations.

BLADESMITHING PROCESS

There are different ways to make a blade. One way is a grinding method. Essentially, material is ground off from a piece of larger stock steel until the desired shape and dimensions are achieved. On a molecular level this method shears the molecules that make up the fiber of the steel, thereby weakening the material. Another way to make a blade is to forge the material. By forging the steel (spreading it with a hammer) no material is lost, it is only reshaped. This method nurtures a stronger material.

The steel blade is hand forged to the desired profile by heating the steel in a coal burning forge and then hammering the glowing metal on an anvil. In most cases, I laminate the steel together first to create my own pattern-welded steel billets with which to work from. These laminates of steel are made of alternating types of steel that are stacked, like a deck of cards. When the stack is forge welded to form one solid mass it is known as a billet. Forge welding is steel that is fused or welded using only the heat of the forge and hammer struck lightly and rapidly. This gives each blade I forge out its own characteristics. The stratification of the grain pattern in every blade is unique. Like people, no two blades are exactly alike.

To achieve the refined surface appearance of steel, removal of the outermost layer is necessary. The *cleanup* process begins by hand filing the scale off the face of the steel blade. Scale forms on steel whenever oxygen contacts the

surface. I choose to hand-file over using a grinder because I have total control over how much steel grindings end up on the floor. The idea of hand-made allows me to feel truly part of my work. Sometimes the grinder can get too hungry for the steel.

Heat treating and final finishes are performed next. Final finishes like patinas, gun bluing (commercial liquid chemical used to color gun barrels), or high polishing are used in most of my work. Patinas offer an alternative to high polished steel. Not only do they color the metal but also protect it from oxidation. Gun bluing is available commercially as are most patina ingredients.

Finally, the choice of handle material is made. This depends on the intended use of the blade and aesthetic preferences. An art knife will have different considerations than a camp knife. Regardless of the purpose, mechanical and adhesive implements are employed to assure a lifetime bond between the handle materials.

SECTION ONE-PERSONAL IDENTITY

GENE DENSITY

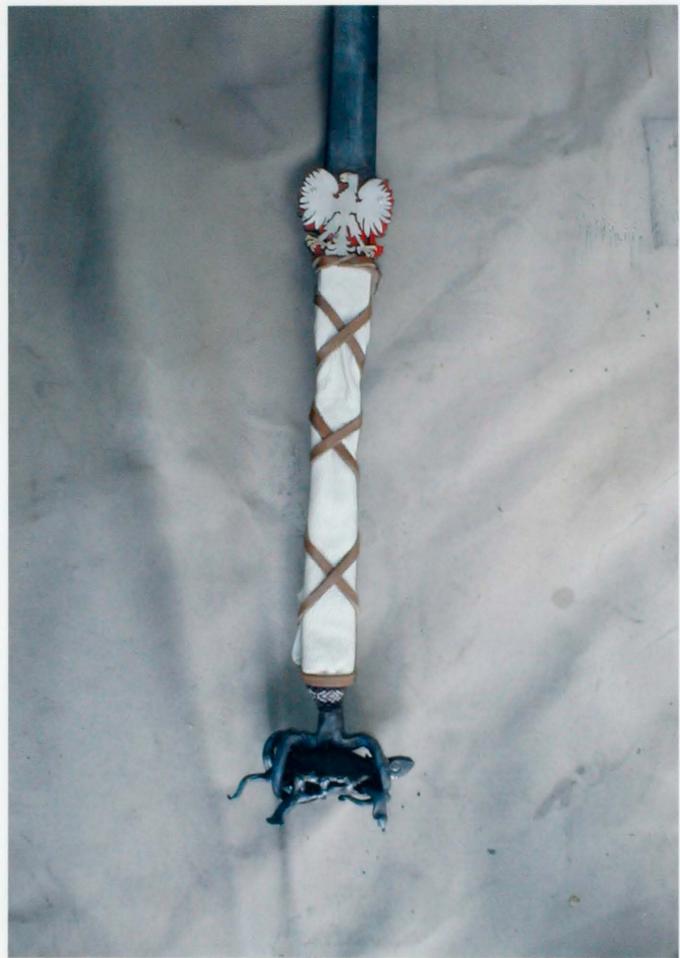
As a kid growing up I enjoyed the adventure and fight scenes of the martial arts film genre. Exotic weapons used by a trained fighter appeared smooth and fluid like a dance. In 2001, came a critically acclaimed martial arts blockbuster. For those that have viewed the film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, there should be a familiarity with the *Green Destiny*, the sword which much of the film centered around. Here, I present the *Gene Density*.

The *Gene Density* is a sword made from ferrous (having iron) and non-ferrous metals. The center core of Damascus steel (different laminated steels) is an element I relate to as my *parent stock*. The Damascus core was forge welded (welded using only the heat of a coal burning forge) between layers of medium-carbon steel that form the edges of the blade.

On the handle there is iconography from two distinct cultures, the cultures of each of my parents, Oneida and Polish. At the pommel position of the handle is a turtle representing the clan of my mother. The turtle is part of the traditional Longhouse belief system along with the bear and wolf clans. This turtle, representative of the turtle clan, supports the rest of the sword much like it supports my spirituality. Longhouse people acknowledge the various ceremonies that are of a cyclical nature. There are ceremonies to initiate planting and harvesting crops. My mother's clan is my clan, as the Oneida are a

matrilineal society. This turtle is stable enough to support the entire sword upright. In certain Native traditions the reference of *Turtle Island* means North America. The Oneida creation story tells of North America being formed on the back of a giant sea turtle.

At the guard position located at the base of the blade and the top of the handle is a Polish eagle representing my father's heritage. Historically, the Polish eagle has sometimes worn a golden crown. Those were days when a monarchy was at the heart of Polish governance. At present, there is no monarchy. Therefore this eagle wears no crown. The eagle at the guard position fortuitously works well with another Oneida story. It is said that when the people of the Longhouse (Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Seneca) formed the confederacy that would make them a superpower of their day, they symbolically buried weapons beneath a great white pine tree. At the top of this tree was perched an eagle. Should approaching danger be spotted, the eagle would let out a scream, thereby warning the people. Likewise, a father is thought of as the security of the family, an eagle is in my family too.



GENE DENSITY - 2002

PERSONAL IDENTITY

COLUMBUS WHO?

When I was growing up in a homogenous suburban city, Columbus Day didn't affect me one way or the other. Public schools didn't make such a big deal of him as they did the Pilgrims and the Mayflower, (that's another story). It wasn't until I grew up to research on my own that I discovered what was really going on and what consequences that lost sailor really had on an entire race of people and the generations to follow.

Columbus Who? is a piece I did in response to the city of Denver's decision to support and affirm genocide by once again celebrating the first transatlantic slave trader with a major parade.

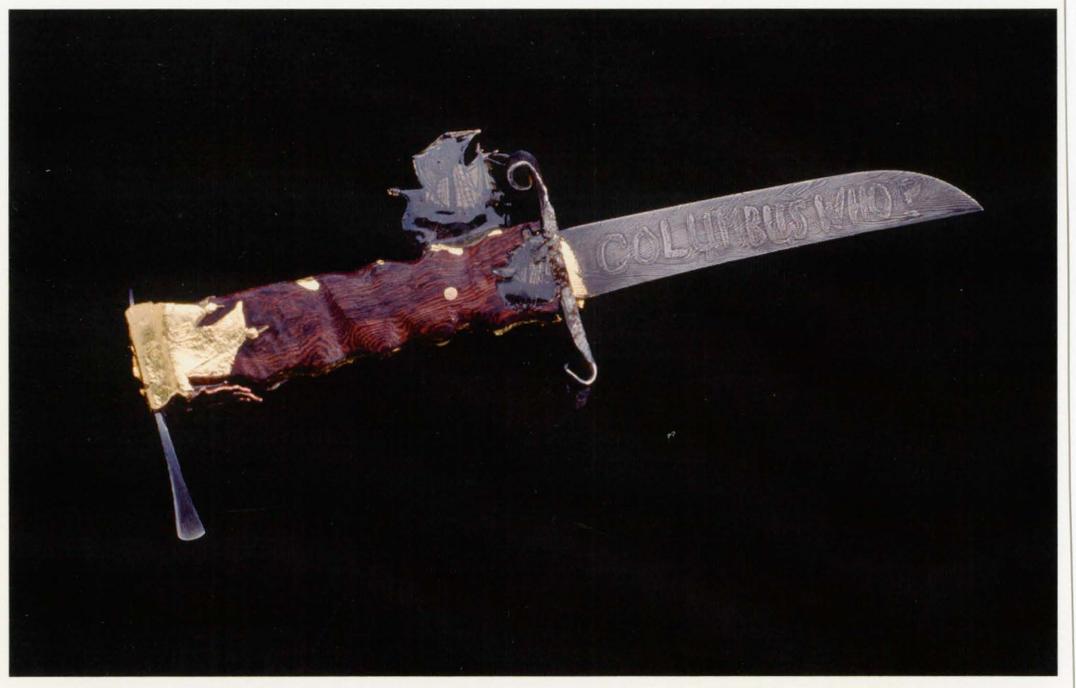
In 1991, the Colorado American Indian Movement protested the Columbus Day parade. They were effective; Denver would cease having Columbus Day parades until 2000. Present and vocal at that protest was longtime leader of the American Indian Movement, Russell Means. In regards to the idea of celebrating Columbus, Means had this to say:

“To indigenous people of this hemisphere, the celebration is the ultimate affirmation that since 1492, Western society has regarded us as expendable. Columbus was a murdering heathen who “discovered” the heaven on earth that was home to my ancestors and immediately set about turning into a living hell for them. Denver is where Columbus Day was first celebrated in 1907. It was also in Denver, that the territorial government decided that fighting Confederates was too dangerous, so the whites murdered red people in their villages and reported

“Indian unrest” to be such a threat that they could spare no troops to fight for the Union. Heading the genocidal Colorado Volunteers was an ordained Methodist minister, Colonel John Chivington, who became famous for his massacre of Cheyenne women and children at Sand Creek in 1864 and for saying afterward, “I believe it is right and honorable to use any means under God’s heaven to kill Indians.” (Means, 518)

Etched into the right side of the blade is the title *Columbus Who?* that loudly declares my perspective. On the left side is etched the sad date that Denver slipped back in time with regards to civil respect for some of its citizens. Also on the left side are profiles of the Nina, the Pinto and the Santa Maria. Stamped on the ships are excerpts of a poem entitled “Columbus Day” by the Cherokee poet-artist, Jimmie Durham. I chose that poem because of the extreme sensitivity that was expressed for such a youthful composition. He penned that gem when he was in grade school.

I use the knife as format here with the spirit of an aggressive weapon to match the offensive intent that Columbus was about. It is my intent that the knife is a vehicle for metaphor and not usually aggressive. Here that is not the case but here it is perfectly appropriate. Written documentation by Columbus’ own party wrote of the savage treatment the defenseless Taino people felt before the swords of Columbus’ men. My intent for this piece is to donate it to the legal fund that was created to offer legal help for those individuals who were arrested during peaceful protests of the Columbus Day celebrations.



COLUMBUS WHO? - 2000

SECTION TWO-GLOBAL RENDITIONS

FLIGHT 93-SACRIFICE AND COURAGE

In the days that followed the terrorist attacks in the eastern United States in September of 2001, many sad stories were told. Among those sad tales were also stories of courage, valor, and sacrifice. Flight 93 was one of those.

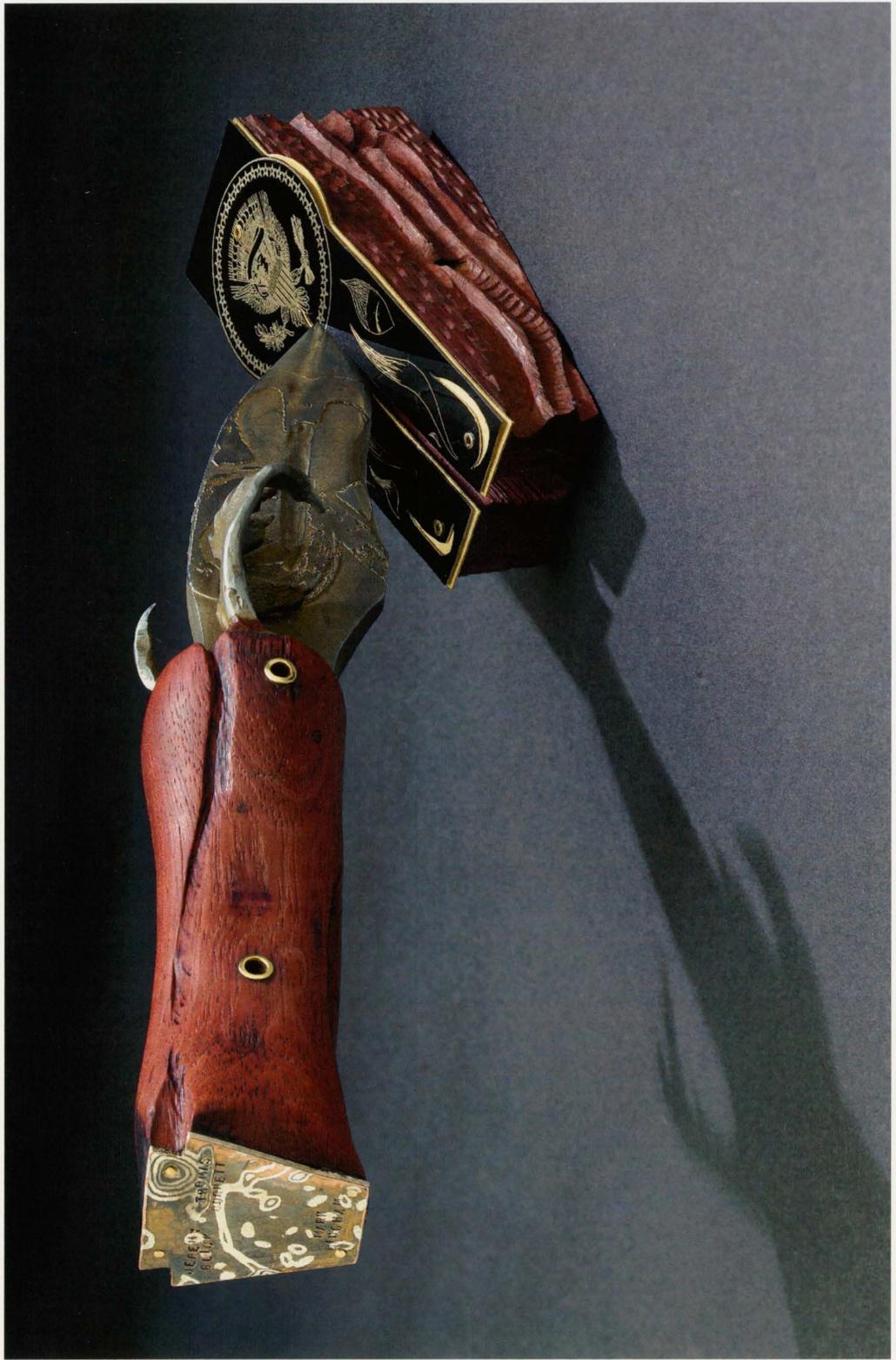
As I read about the events on that fateful flight I was drawn to tears. Via cell phones, the final goodbyes between husbands and wives, mothers and sons, and between friends were made. I tried to empathize what that would have been like, to have been on the plane making the call or at home receiving the call. Once it was clear to the passengers what was going on (World Trade Towers attack), their situation became obvious. Through all the chaos, the valor of a few passengers would come through. It is said that at first three passengers organized and decided to take a stand. Others would agree, and with a shout of "Let's roll!" they charged the cockpit and overtook the hijackers of the plane. The steel talons that reach forward symbolize the resistance of the American passengers.

The final destination of Flight 93 is thought to have been the White House. The base of the knife has the presidential seal partially cut into to symbolize this fact, but the shield and eagle remain intact. Originally on the top of the base was an intact Presidential Seal. Because of the presence of the knife on top, stars have been partially cut by the trial of the blade representing the states involved.

Flight 93 crashed in rural Pennsylvania. The pommel of the handle is capped in the shape of a keystone, a symbol of the "keystone state". As a memorial

honor the keystone has the names of passengers known to have led the charge against the hijackers. There is space for more names to be added as a memorial to their valor.

I was truly moved by the different versions of this incident. It is only when I'm moved like this do I feel my reaction in art has true substance, soul. My intent for this piece is as a donation to a group that can create more exposure for it than I could. I couldn't donate monetarily to the various foundations to help the victims but I could make a knife.



FLIGHT 93 – COURAGE AND SACRIFICE - 2001

GLOBAL RENDITIONS

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Chess is said to be the oldest board game still played today. It occurred to me how the game of chess is a reflection of contemporary society. At the top is the ruling class (king). Beside every king is the *real* power of the monarchy, the queen. The will of the ruling class is executed and supported by the law enforcement/ military (knight). This physical enforcement is further backed up by a religious idea of law (bishop). Mandatory for the society to function is real estate (rook). Finally, a work force is necessary for this society to operate and providing that labor are the numerous but weaker peasantry; common man (pawns). The pawns serve as the frontline of defense in battle. It is from this position that they often become the heroes or simply *collateral damage*. Unfortunately, it seems that the soldier has to become collateral damage before appreciation of a hero is bestowed.

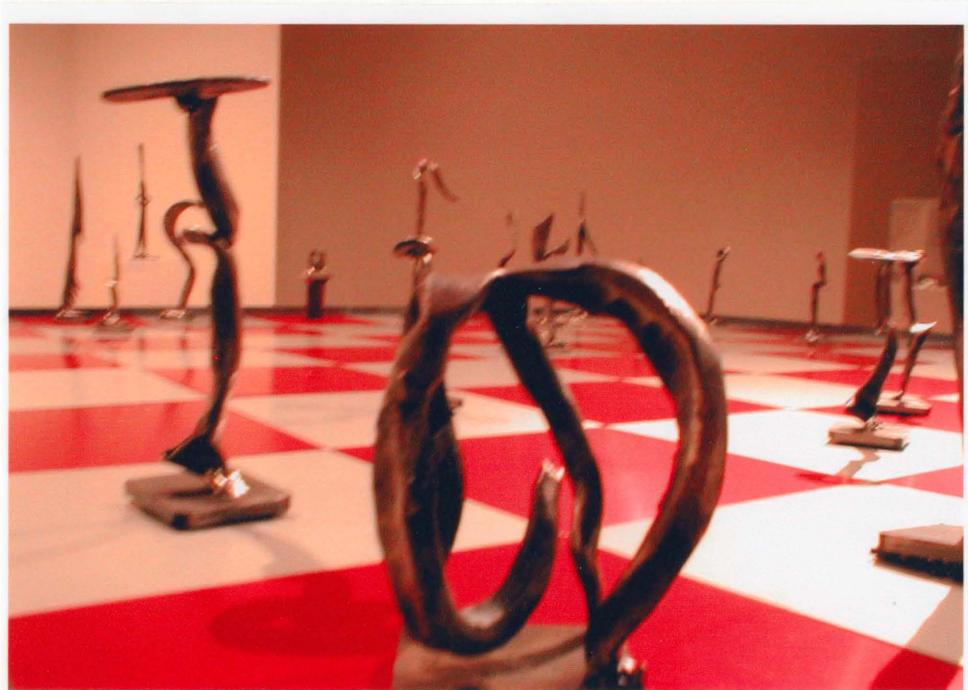
The majority of the pieces were forged from railroad spikes. To further explore the challenge of bladesmithing, many of the individual pieces feature cutting edges (with the exception of the king pieces). To give each piece a more monumental presence a table measuring five feet by five feet was fabricated (welded together) from steel. Each playing square measures eight inches by eight inches and is made of anodized aluminum. The table stands at a height of thirty-one inches.

For this set I deliberately did not surface treat the pieces with color to distinguish the two sides from one another. Most chess games have pieces that

are identical to their counterparts except for the color. My pieces all have been surface treated the same way with a wire wheel and grinder. The hammer marks from forging have been left for uniqueness of each piece. Weld marks make no apology for their crudeness.

It's really the physical orientation of the piece that differs one side from the other. One side has pawns that stand with erect blades. The higher-ranking pieces may all be similar to their counter parts but they all are inverted from one another. The opposing pawns appear upside down so that their blade-heads are tucked-in and curled at the base to be useless as cutting instruments.

To play at this set the players have to be aware of their pieces orientation. Again these pieces have more in common than they do different. I liken this to *ideology* that divides humans. It is one's *orientation* in the world that determines what we will stand or fall for.



COLLATERAL DAMAGE - 2002

SECTION THREE-RELATIONSHIPS

DID YOU SEE THE GAME LAST NIGHT?

This piece represents the Great White North AKA: Canada. Home for me is Detroit, Michigan, an American border town with Canada. Toss some coins in a basket and you can drive south, yes south, over or under a river and be in a *foreign* country.

After moving to the wild, wild, west for graduate school, I found myself following my hometown heroes of the National Hockey League. Expectations abounded, as it seems that most everyone, new friends and old friends, thought that because I had moved to a new state that my team loyalty had moved too. I can honestly say that I was reminded whenever I wore the colors that I had crossed a boundary, into unfriendly territory.

That was the price I paid for remembering where it was that I am from and staying loyal. Isn't that what real loyalty is? Yet, it was a way I could still feel connected to home and that was important to me. From home, I would receive occasional care packages and cards of encouragement, particularly from my dad. These I cherished, like a soldier far from home.

While watching the same game on television, my dad and I could share in the victories and defeats together. Call it classic male bonding across the miles. While my father and I have a stable relationship, I didn't always feel compelled to whine to him about the latest trial and tribulation in my life. He instilled in me a quality to be resilient to life's small details. That was fine, but sometimes it is all

those small details that carry the most piercing sting. After all, it was my decision to set out and attend graduate school so far away. I would eventually get going in the conversation and discuss the latest news but usually the call would begin with one of us asking “Did you see the game last night?”

The shaft of the stick has squared off edges but isn't necessarily straight. This is to suggest all the uncertainties in not only the game of hockey but also the game of life. For the blade of the stick I wrapped it with a ribbon of Damascus steel. To me, this is the suggestion of *mending* after being broken. It seems to me that too many things are discarded and given up on when a little forgiveness and understanding could provide restoration.



DID YOU SEE THE GAME LAST NIGHT? - 2002

RELATIONSHIPS

INTO THE WAVES OF MY HEART

Hasn't Hit Me Yet

You say that you're leaving
Well that comes as no surprise
Still I kinda like this feeling
Of being left behind

Yeah this ain't nothing new to me
Well it's just like goin' home
It's kinda like those sunsets
That leave you feelin'
So stoned

Hey hey I guess it hasn't hit me yet
I fell through this crack
And I kinda lost my head
I stand transfixed before
This fire light
Watching the snow fall on this cold December night

I never thought this could happen
But somehow the feelins' gone
You got sick of the patterns
And I got lost in this song

Hey, hey I guess it hasn't hit me yet

And out in the middle of Lake Ontario
The same snow is falling
On the deep silent water
The great dark wonder
Into the waves of my heart
Of my heart¹

¹ Cuddy, Jim and Greg Keelor. *Hasn't Hit Me Yet* from *Five Days in July*, 1993.

Music is one of the best forms of expression. *Hasn't Hit Me Yet* struck a particular chord with me. It was one of those songs that I could relate to perfectly at the time.

Into the Waves of My Heart was forged with the high-wrought emotion that compels action. While consumed by that emotion, I completed this piece both efficiently and quickly. This piece was an attempt to get some balance back during a chaotic time, to slow down and reassess life.

The piece is minimal in terms of an ornate blade with the exception of a few details. One detail is featured on the end of the handle. This material is a product of my graduate research. I call it *Damagane tm*. It is a laminated metal with the ingredients of *Damascus steel* and *mokume gane*. A trademark is in the works.

On the blade is etched "Big Plans, Big Plans", hopefully relating to the trademark. On the other side of the blade is etched the contradictory, "No Plans, No Plans". The form of the blade is intended to be somewhat straight but not perfect. The length is too long to allow use as a pocketknife, but yet not long enough to be considered a blade of *considerable investment*. The transition from blade to handle is a smooth one. There is no guard on the piece. That might suggest that this is certainly no arguing or fighting knife. On the handle form there is no pommel or butt cap. However, upon close inspection there's an added element on the last inch and a half of the handle. That element has the potential to be a niche for me in the metals world, a prosperous potential future? On this piece it ends abruptly, short and sweet, yet worth some memories.



INTO THE WAVES OF MY HEART-2002

SECTION FOUR-CONFORMITY

GRIEVING FOR AUNTIE

Some Longhouse (traditional Oneida) men cut their hair when there is a loss of a family member or someone close. As a follower of Longhouse beliefs, I felt compelled to cut my hair at the loss of my cherished Aunt Sylvia. I had grown up with her children and she was like a second mother to me. I still recall the first time I spent the night away from home and became “homesick” and how she comforted me. I remember her telling us kids stories at night that added a chill to the air and made us afraid to go out after dark alone. Later in life, I remember sharing tea in her kitchen, just her and I having one of those “nice to see you again” talks. Being around her I felt proud to be who I was, she helped me to become attuned to who I really am. I miss her dearly.

I had grown my hair for over three years. For me, the length of my hair represented my strength and wisdom. By following this spiritual phase of life I had heard many times the advice, “Get a haircut!” Jokingly, I like to think, graduate school peers with shaved heads would offer to perform the service. It was apparent that I had crossed a boundary. My father was part of that get-a-haircut crowd, and I expected that sort of conformity advice from a parent, but not my peers.

Kevin, a man who knows my life through clairvoyant channels and whose words I respect, once told me “Let your hair grow, you’ll have a reason to cut it”. Sadly, in August of 2001, I did.

At that point I was ready to do something significant with my lock of hair. The blade is Damascus steel with the hair braided and attached by a single thong. There's not a lot of extra detail to this piece. I find that the more spiritual I feel towards a piece the less embellishment it needs to weigh it down. In contrast the *Columbus Who?* piece is weighed down by the tragic facts that are associated with it.

The acceptance of long hair on a man created a boundary I had never experienced before. People who knew me only as having long hair, in spite of knowing why I had cut my hair, would make innocent comments like, "I miss your hair". Not knowing quite how to respond all I could reply is 'I miss my *aunt*'. As a Native man living in the contemporary world of North America, sometimes it is not enough to *preserve* traditions. Sometimes I have to *live* them.



GRIEVING FOR AUNTIE - 2001

CONCLUSION

We all have different ways of expressing our concerns. As artists these expressions can manifest themselves directly into our work. I am most expressive when my soul is truly moved. Otherwise, the *process* of art is not art it is just going through the motions.

For me, personal and general concerns for my fellow man have been the driving force for this thesis work. The important thing for me is to feel there is something about the work that is worth expressing.

Boundaries that we decide to cross or not cross define who we are. We may not even be aware of it but we are also capable of establishing boundaries around others close to us.

In some cases you have to leave your boundaries to know where your boundaries are. People can serve as boundaries too. It is when we don't feel the electric fires of the people we love the most that we truly feel cold. May you never be cold.

--Gene Anthony Bereza

2002

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