Family Tools

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Family Tools

by

Jon Kamrath

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Major: Integrated Visual Art

Program of Study Committee:
Ingrid Lilligren, Major Professor
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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this written component is to document my thesis exhibition Family Tools. From February 14th to March 2nd, eight mixed media ceramic, wood, and metal sculptures were on display in Gallery 181-1 in the College of Design at Iowa State University in Ames, IA. The subject matter for these sculptures is my relationship with each of my immediate family members, my mother, father, brother, sister, and wife. These relationships are personified through various hand tools used to represent meanings specific to each sculpture. Family Tools includes My Father’s Hands exploring my relationship with my father, Teacher for my mother, The Carpenter’s Sons for my brother, Toolbox for my wife, Self Portrait (as a Hammer) for myself, Drop Forged for my sister, and two sets of Sibling Jars relating to siblings in general.

Each sculpture has one or more stories that helped to shape the piece while it was being constructed. In this written component I will tell some of these stories first. I will then thoroughly describe the piece, and explain the artistic process used to make each piece individually. I will conclude with an appendix explaining the technicalities of the various mediums, and reference the different artists who inspired me during these works. Images of the works will also be included in the appendix.
THE STORIES

How to Use a Hammer

I remember when my father first taught me to swing a hammer. We were putting a deck on the back of our house, and my brother and I were lucky enough to be selected to hammer on the boards for the railing. So we sat in the sun repeatedly bending and breaking skinny split-less nail after skinny split-less nail with my father’s giant, oversized framing hammer.

“No not like that.” He says. “Use your wrist more…no, not like that either. It looks like your masturbating. Don’t you know how to use a hammer?” Apparently not I think to myself, confused by his earlier comment. I guess that counted as the sex talk too.

Later that evening, as it is beginning to get dark, a chipmunk dashes over our woodpile and into a gutter lying on the ground. “Quick” my father yells, “go bang on that end with your hammer!” as he waits eagerly on the other end, hammer in hand.

Excited that my brother and I may soon have a pet chipmunk, I rush to do as I am told. As soon as the rodent pokes his head out to see what all the commotion is about, my father demonstrates in one quick motion just exactly how to use a hammer.

How to Use a Glass Cutter

I remember when my father first taught me to use a glass cutter. I don’t remember what we were making, probably one of my countless projects that he would always drop everything to work on with me. I had spent forever figuring it out perfectly, and we had spent the better half of the morning getting everything set up just right for the
cut. Dad marked it out with a sharpie and showed me where the cut would be made. He scored the glass, talking me through the entire process and then put a wooden dowel under the mark. We both held our breath as he pressed and the glass snapped, sheering cleanly into two pieces.

I remember that event well because as I stood there staring at these two pieces, my brain reeled in disbelief. It was almost as if the line my father had had made were merely a suggestion the glass had chosen not to take. The break followed for an inch or two and then veered sharply to the side, right through the piece we needed to keep. I stared at the glass for a long time, and at my father, back at the glass, and back at him. Delicate as the glass itself, that is when my image of him shattered. That was the first time I ever realized my father could make a mistake.

*How to Use a Hairbrush*

I have only seen my mother cry twice. Ever. She didn’t cry at my wedding. She didn’t cry at my brother’s wedding. I’m not even sure she cried when they got my little sister. Mom blames the Zoloft for decreasing her ability to fully feel emotions. Maybe. Or maybe she is just tough. Maybe she doesn’t waste tears. All I know is that I’ve only see it twice since I have been old enough to make memories. One of those two times she was unhappy. I try not to think of this one. The other time however is one of my favorite memories of all times.

Sophomores year in college I came home for spring break. I had been letting my hair grow out and it was about chin length, thick and straight. Somehow I got the crazy idea that I wanted to perm my hair and my mother was going to help me out with this.
She wanted to do a practice run where we put my hair all up in rollers to see what it would end up like. So together we spent about an hour getting it all just right. When I took them out my hair fell into loose wavy curls, spiraling down the side of my face. Even a photograph could not describe how absolutely ridiculous I looked. Here I was, a 19-year-old boy, with an 80-year-old woman’s hairstyle.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, my mother saw it and immediately burst out laughing. It was the hardest I have ever seen her laugh. Her laughter spurred mine, and mine fuelled hers. Together we laughed until we both ended up crying. Although not great in number, her tears ran down and left a permanent mark on me that I will never forget. It is a great memory, and one I fondly recall periodically from time to time.

I on the other hand get emotional much quicker. Six months ago my wife and I went to my parents house to visit, and I saw my mother brushing my two-year-old sister’s hair. It was easy to feel the love flow threw the brush with each caring stroke. One could clearly see the connection mother and daughter shared during that intimate moment, and it was a little hard for me not to get just the tiniest bit choked up. It wasn’t until a few minutes later, when Lily wanted to brush my hair that it really hit me.

My mom hadn’t passed on how to brush hair, she passed on how to love and be loved. Through her simple brushing of Lily’s hair, and perming of mine, she showed us both a sample of her unconditional love for us. She taught a love that I learned to share with my now wife, and a love that Lily is only just beginning to understand.

And this made me cry.
This is Your Brother

It’s hard to pick out a memory of me and my brother. Not because he wasn’t around, but because he wasn’t ever not around. Pretty much all of my memories from growing up have him in there somewhere. Remembering growing up is synonymous with remembering my brother. The two cannot be separated. I have happy memories, sad memories, funny, scary and playful memories. I still have the scar on my forehead from his stick, and his nose is still crooked from my fist.

I can’t remember just how old we were, but I think it might be my earliest memory of my brother. Of course it starts out with us fighting. Most likely over a major issue like who has the red cup, and after it escalates my parents quickly rescue my crying brother out of the situation. Next they come to me, and both kneel down to my level. As I prepare for the worst, I begin to realize something is different this time. Nobody yells, no one is angry. With painful earnestness my parents point to Matt and begin to speak slowly and deliberately.

“This is your brother. Look at him. He is the most important person in your life. When all of your other friends have come and gone, he will still be there for you. So love him. And treat him well, because he is your brother, and always will be no matter what.

It has been a few years since that day. Now he is taller and bigger than me, and pretty much better at anything I am good at. But he is still my little brother. I can see us running through the woods, making forts and shooting at each other with fake guns. I can see us on the stairs to the basement, immersed in our imaginary world of space travel, mutant animals, and super heroes. I can see us at work, up on the roof talking. I don’t
have a clue what we are saying, and it doesn’t matter. It is our time together. It’s the
shared knowledge that we are permanent fixtures in each other’s lives.

Now our time together is a little different. We are both married. Both starting our
own lives and families in far off cities. But it is still there. The same bond. The feeling
we have when we are together, like it has always been. The comfort of knowing that he
has always been there, and he always will. No matter what. Because he is my brother.

_Nursing school?_

“Practicing to be a wife?” my roommate asks as I set the clean plate on the drying
rack. He pretends to phrase it as a joke, but his attempt to hide his condescension is
weak, and his comment is laced with a seriousness that keeps either of us from smiling.
It somehow bothers him that my fiancé will be a doctor. It somehow bothers him that I
would be willing to share any household chores with her. This shouldn’t surprise me,
because it is his girlfriend who does ninety percent of the household work around our
apartment. Heaven forbid _he_ would do a woman’s job. Apparently if she makes more
money than I do, that makes me less of a man. Or maybe if she makes more money than
he does, it makes him less of a man. I’m not really sure how that works.

I shrug it off. Even if I had some kind of cleverly phrased response it wouldn’t
matter. I am still just a slacker artist, taking the easy way out and marrying a doctor. I
file his comment away with the rest of them and move on to the next dish.

It’s four years later. We’re married, pregnant, and she only has one more year left
of school. It’s amazing how we still hear the same comments over and over. “Medical
“Is she going to be a nurse?” The classic remark, with the usual hint of surprise. “Is she going to be a nurse?” Obviously, this is the only logical explanation.

“No, nurses go to nursing school. Medical school is for doctors. She is going to be a doctor.”

“Oh,” Short awkward pause. “Of course. Well good for her” as if it was some amazing rarity that a woman would become a doctor. Never mind the fact that over half of Heidi’s classmates are also women. Never mind the fact that she’s at the top of her class. Never mind the fact she might be the smartest person I have ever met. I smile and nod and we quickly move on to the next subject. Hopefully it doesn’t involve something as awkward as an intelligent woman, or a man taking care of children.

_Ester_

He called her Ester. That was his pet name for her. They have been through a lot together, my dad and his hammer. He started using that hammer before I was born. Now, her face worn smooth and the handle cracked and aged, she is still beautiful. Few hammers have ever been worked so hard as that 22 ounce Estwing straight-claw hammer, but she never seemed to mind. Every once and a while she might speak up in protest to smash a finger, remove some shin bone even break a nose, but arguments like these are bound to happen in any relationship after such a period of time.

My father has passed a lot of things down to me. Maybe sixty percent of my tools are his old tools. When one gets too old for him to use for precision work, he has to buy a new one. When the old one still works fine, it ends up in my possession. This is how Ester came to be mine. The last summer before I left for college he gave her to me to
wield as my own. As he gave me his framing hammer of 23 years, I thanked him for all that he was passing down to me and promised to use it well.

I am 10. My brother must be about 7 and we are playing in the bedroom we share. We begin to fight, as brothers do, and soon our cries can be heard by my father in the other room. As he storms in he is obviously upset, and once confronted by his anger, we immediately forget why we are fighting. Words are said and eventually his anger explodes into a kick aimed at the dresser, resulting in two broken pewter handles. Luckily for me the bottom two drawers were Matt’s, but I share this dresser too, and those two free-swinging broken handles serve as a constant reminder for the next 10 years or so, until I move out.

It is about fifteen years later. My new wife and I are in the process of moving from our little apartment in northern Minnesota down to Iowa. Her dresser will not fit in the moving van and I begin to become frustrated. Finally this frustration ends in a creative explosion of anger as I solve the problem by kicking and breaking off the handles of the two bottom drawers, resulting in a perfect fit. My wife is obviously less pleased with my solution and I explain I will fix it once we get to Iowa. Today, three years later, both handles still swing freely, unattached, operating better as a reminder of the incident and my broken promise than a drawer pull.

Now sometimes I hold Ester, and I smile to think how little I understood just what my father was really passing on to me that day he put her in my hands. Along with his temper, he gave me his creativity and attention to detail, his respect for women and desire to help others. I share his deep loyalty to friends and family and his great love for life. I use these tools daily. With his old hammer I frame a house. With his old sawzall I tear
one down. Although two dressers sit broken hundreds of miles apart, it’s the smile that my wife gives me as she steps through the open car door that shows me just how much my father really passed on to me. I kiss her gently before closing the door and silently thank him as I walk around to my side of the car, just like him.

*Population and Family Planning Law of the People's Republic of China*

“Invisible red threads connect the spirit of a newborn child to those who will be important in her life. As the child grows, the threads shorten, drawing closer those who are destined to be together forever”

-Ancient Chinese belief

Currently, in The Peoples Republic of China, strict family planning laws govern over the population, allowing only those who obtain a pre-approved birth permit to have children. If a permit is not obtained prior to the birth, the child cannot be born in a hospital, cannot be registered as a person, cannot receive health care and cannot receive education. In order to attain this permit, the couple needs to be married, of legal age to have children, and fit within the allotted quotas of children for their geographical location that year. Only rural couples may have a second child, and only if the first one happens to be a girl, or if the couple is a minority. The breaking of these rules, if discovered results in severe punishment and may include forced intrauterine devices, forced abortion during any stage of the pregnancy, infanticide, surgical sterilization, and financial penalties. Doctors or family members found to be aiding a pregnant woman not compliant with the family planning laws are jailed. Those who do not give out the
whereabouts of an illegal mother and child may face jail, destruction of property, or heavy fines. Oftentimes a mother will go into hiding until the child is born. She may then have someone take the child away for her, or care for her child until she is healthy enough to drop the child off somewhere herself.

Drastically disproportionate, the orphanages are filled with many more girls than boys. As in America, the reasons for not being able to keep a child may be many and diverse, however additional factors often add to these in China that make keeping a girl even more difficult. Traditionally, when a girl gets married, she moves in with her husband’s family. The couple is then expected to take care of his parents in their old age, both physically and financially. Because of this, a couple who does not have a boy may not have the means to continue living in their old age. If a couple cannot receive a permit, or cannot afford the fine and private health care and education the child will require as he or she grows, they may be forced to give it up.

This dilemma puts parents in a difficult situation because there are no programs for parents to put their children up for adoption. This results in many parents being forced to abandon their daughters in areas where they will be found quickly and brought to an orphanage. However, because it is illegal to abandon a child, parents risk the possibility of being caught and punished. Rarely is identifying information included with an abandoned child. Although dropping a child off in a busy location like a market or an orphanage may be dangerous for the parent, it increases the likelihood the child will receive immediate attention and care.

My little sister was found at the gate of YiYing Children’s Welfare Institute on March 25, 2005. A small bag of rice, a bottle and a few clothes were found next to her.
Her hair was thin and yellowish and her face was sunflower seed-shaped. She was wrapped in a blue cotton blanket. According to her physical development, the orphanage estimated her birthday to be March 17, and they gave her the name of "Yi Ai Juan". "Yi" was her family name, which was taken after the city Yiyang. "Ai" means love or lovely, and "Juan" means cuckoo-the cuckoo bird.

Although the papers my parents received from the orphanage refers to the act as "abandoning", I try to imagine the difficulty Lily’s parent must have had making the decision to leave her. I try to imagine Lily’s mother, and the love she had for her child as she chose to carry the pregnancy to full term, and kept her for several days after she was born. I can only imagine the pain that would be involved in walking away from ones own child, and am so thankful that her mother made the difficult choices she did. As a fully immersed member of our family, I cannot even remember what life was like without her.
ARTIST STATEMENT

The intent of *Family Tools* is to explore and describe through artwork my relationships with my family members. In creating the various pieces for this exhibition I was forced to closely examine my thoughts and feelings about each member of my family. I thought hard about how I saw each person, and how to best to share this view with the audience. I hoped viewers of the exhibition would see each family member through the same lens that I see them.

Tools are fascinating because they are defined by their function. A tool’s power lies in its ability to perform its designated function, and without this function, a tool becomes merely an object. Changing the function changes the meaning, design, use and appearance of the tool. A tool has great power because the end product is directly dependant on the tool used to create it. I learned this at a young age working with my father, first as simply a tag-along and eventually becoming a carpenter. This experience has had a great influence on the rest of my life as a maker. My father’s library of tools and knowledge of building is incredibly extensive, which allows him to do an amazing amount of versatile and different jobs as a general contractor. As an artist I grew up always having projects I wanted to build in dad’s shop, and no matter what it was I was creating, he always had “the tool” for the job. This introduced me to the interesting relationship between tools, and those who use them.

In the same way the end product is partially defined by the tool, I believe that a person who uses tools can be at least partially defined by the array of tools he or she uses. To get a full understanding of a person, one would need to see *all* of the tools he or she uses. In this exhibition I wanted to show specific sides of the people close to me. I see
each tool as a window showing part of each person. In the same way a photograph crops the image to only allow what the photographer wishes the viewer to see, I chose the tools that showed the specific view I found most interesting.

The other aspect of tools that I love is their expressive qualities; their figurative tendencies, interactive traits, and sense of character. When examining a tool, one can discover its age, determine if it has had an easy or rough life, learn its primary function, its’ past uses and much more. I love the stories tools can tell, and the way they interact with their users, their task at hand, and other tools. I tried to treat the tools I used with the dignity I feel each deserve.
GENERAL ARTISTIC PROCESS

Usually once I get an idea I try to immediately write it down in my “broad ideas” journal. There an idea can sit for years untouched or be used immediately. Once I am ready to develop the idea further, I do lots of drawing and writing about it. This stage can take from days to month, and often includes research on other artists who have explored ideas similar to my own. The extent to which I fully develop the idea in my sketchbook is dependant on the medium I will be using. Because ceramic pieces often undergo extensive changes during their creation, I try to keep these sketches rough and open to interpretation. For wooden furniture I prefer to make very detailed, and often to-scale drawings to fully develop my ideas and minimize wasteful mistakes. If I eventually reach a conclusion I am satisfied with I begin construction, otherwise the idea remains suspended in this stage for an indefinite amount of time.
THE PIECES

*My Father’s Hands* (see fig. 1) is composed of two 24’ x 24’ drawings of hands, hanging above an 8’ shelf holding 19 drawings of various hand tools. Each tool drawing is drawn to the exact size of the individual tool depicted. Each tool drawing is done from life and represents a unique and specific tool. The uniqueness of each tool is expressed by showing the dents, scratches and other wear and tear the tool has sustained throughout its existence. These drawings are done on pieces of Gesso covered wood that is cut to the three exact dimensions of the tool they represent. The surface is fairly rough, with many hills and valleys up to an eighth of an inch. Fourteen of the tools are left as graphite on stark white Gesso, while five are painted with a thin oil wash giving them a subtle hint of their actual color on a warm ochre background.

The shelf these tools sit on is made of Old-Growth Maple, milled in River Falls, WI in the late 19th century. The board is full of old nail holes and burn marks from its previous use as a joist in a building before being converted to a shelf. The two drawings of hands above the shelf and tools are on boards with similar texture to the tool drawings. They are larger than life and depict the rough and warn hands of my father. They too are drawn from life, and their increased size captures each detail of scars, cuts, scrapes, and past injuries. They are shown at rest, sitting on a table.

This idea for this piece is what inspired the theme for my entire thesis. This sculpture was created to be a portrait of my father. My goal was to show who my father is, without necessarily showing what he looks like. As I began to think about who my father was, I realized he really was defined by what he did on a regular basis, which is to
create things through physical labor. As a general contractor he has expertise in a wide
range of different construction techniques. Because he does many different kinds of
construction, he has the tools and equipment for all of them. Working with him
throughout the years I have learned the importance of the different tools he uses, and how
he relies on them to do his job and provide for his family.

Many of the tools in his shop are older than I am, and have a long history of use.
He has developed a relationship with some of these tools, learning their quirks, how they
work, what they are good for, and what they do not work well for. Because of the heavy
use most of these tools have received, many of them have severe wear and tear. In my
drawings, I was hoping to show the individual personalities of these tools. By showing
the many different types of tools, I attempted to show a few of the many different sides of
my father. For example, the 2 pound maul (see fig. 2) shows the extreme physical
brutality he uses when demolishing parts of a building, while the glass cutter and nail set
demonstrate a much more reserved side with calm, careful, and delicate actions.

*Teacher* (see fig. 3) is a stainless steel wire sculpture that shows a woman
brushing the hair of a little girl. One eighth inch stainless rod arcs around the sculpture
creating visual lines that make the contours of the figures. Inside each figure is
suspended a small and proportional wooden brush made from the same material as the
base. The sculpture sits on top of a 1-inch slab of granite on top of a 2-inch wooden
frame.

Figuring out what tools to use for my mothers sculpture was initially slightly
more difficult because she does not use the stereotypical wood working tools that I
originally associated with hand tools. However I decided I wanted to show the strength
my mother demonstrates daily as a stay at home mother, taking care of my little sister as
she grows up. Simply observing my mother for even a very short amount of time showed
that she uses a wide array of hand tools in providing for Lily. Although many people
take for granted tools used by a mother to care for her children I wanted to celebrate these
tools. A hairbrush worked well for this because my mother taught Lily to use a hairbrush
in the exact same way my father taught me to swing a hammer.

I wanted to celebrate the strength that my mother demonstrates in her profession
as a stay at home mom. I chose to use stainless steel because it is a medium that has
traditionally been associated with strength. As a sculptural medium, it has primarily been
a male dominated field. David Smith propelled this stereotype when he became the most
influential person to use stainless steel as a medium for sculpture. In addition to the
tradition of overly macho men using the medium, the metal itself is incredibly hard and
durable giving it a reputation for being tough. Resistant to rust, it also is stronger than
mild steel, harder to bend, drill, cut, or manipulate the surface. Because of this, it is often
used in an industrial setting when a long lasting, durable piece is needed.

I wanted to take this tradition of the medium, the strength associated with the
metal, and use that to demonstrate the strength my mother demonstrates as a stay at home
mom. In showing a woman brushing the hair of a child, I wanted to capture the intimate
moment that is shared between mother and daughter. I did not necessarily intend the
piece to specifically represent my mother and sister, but more just a mother and daughter
in general.

*The Carpenter’s Sons* (see fig. 4) is a 7 foot by 10 foot painting of two brothers
setting trusses on a framed house. It is shown from a somewhat elevated point of view,
making the viewer feel as if he or she were on top of the roof with the men. The sun is setting, showing the two brothers are working late into the summer night. They are both wielding pneumatic nail guns. The hose from the gun of the figure on the right drapes over the trusses creating a line that parallels the gaze of the figures as they look at each other while pausing for a moment to talk.

The two figures in this painting loosely resemble my brother and myself. The figure on the right is me, and the one on the left my brother. I did not intend to actually paint a portrait of each of us, but more to keep it somewhat broad so it could be viewed simply as two brothers sharing a moment. Although I chose a specific setting from my own personal history with my brother, I believe this moment of bonding during shared labor is something that many people have experienced and can relate to with their own siblings.

I chose to exaggerate the hands of the figures (see fig. 5) because I saw these two people as men of action, who use their hands to influence what is going on in the world around them. As carpenters they use their hands to make a living. It is their hands that interact with the world around them to make and create. I also exaggerated the nail gun because that is the tool that each figure is using at the moment to create. A pneumatic nail gun is an incredibly powerful and useful tool, and I wanted to show the power these men have when wielding such a tool.

I chose to make the figure on the right slightly higher than the figure on the left, so that when their gazes meet it is like my brother looking up at me. Although I do not expect most people to ever realize this, it is a part of my own personal history with my
brother I wanted to be in the painting for myself, as I believe it is an important part of our relationship.

*Toolbox* (see fig. 6) is composed of eight individual cast bronze pieces. A doctors bag sits open in the corner, with its contents spilled out all around it. A stethoscope, reflex hammer, scalpel, curved forceps, chapstick, eyeliner, and compact appear to be scattered about in random order, as if taken out and placed on a table while digging threw the bag. The patination of the bronze ranges from a dark reddish brown to deep black, to a blue green, with the polished golden bronze showing threw in various areas. These eight pieces sit atop a two-inch thick, 18 by 32 inch slab of mahogany with a clear oil finish subtly displaying the rich grain and complimenting the reds of the bronze pieces.

My primary goal of this sculpture was to show the strength and intelligence Heidi possesses. While most can easily associate intelligence and femininity, many still see strength as a trait more associated with masculinity. Although this has been changing for quite some time, the role of doctor is still traditionally stereotyped as one filled by men. Many people seem to have trouble comprehending that Heidi would be studying to become a doctor even though she is a woman. In *Toolbox* I wish to combine the strength and intelligence of being a doctor with Heidi’s other more traditionally feminine characteristics.

I chose bronze because of the long history bronze has had in sculpture. It has a tradition of being used for strength, from early Greek and Roman sculptures of gods, to bronze weapons, to the bronze sculptures by Rodin. Because Heidi has experienced discrimination for being female in her chosen profession, (which is ironic because over 50% of her classmates are female), I wanted to make a piece that celebrated her strength
as a woman. While many of the tools usually represented in art are phallic, as supposedly a phalice is a symbol of strength, I instead chose to use a medium traditionally associated with strength and make it vaginal (see fig. 7). My intent with this is to associate being feminine with power and strength. The majority of the tools shown surrounding the bag are traditional doctors tools that Heidi and other doctors use every day. I also included a few small makeup items cast in bronze as well. These make sure the viewer knows the bag belongs to a woman. By showing these tools next to doctor’s tools and made from the same medium, it also shows another side of Heidi, and states that these are legitimate tools that she uses as well.

*Self Portrait (As a Hammer)* (see fig. 8) is a freestanding 7-foot ceramic hammer. It is composed of three large parts: the handle, the shaft, and the head, which blends into the shaft. The handle is green with tints of yellow and blue, while the head and shaft are deep reddish brown with dark brown and black areas. Set inside the head is a small white oak cabinet 3 inches tall by 5 inches wide by 3 inches deep. Inside this cabinet are two different broken drawer pulls. Both the handle, and the shaft and head are very rough in texture. The coloration of the surface treatment exaggerates this texture, as it is lighter in the raised areas, then much darker in the recesses. The sculpture sits on a scarred white oak pedestal 3 inches off the ground. The pedestal is also rough and compliments the texture of the sculpture.

The primary focus of this sculpture is to show the way that my father passed many of his traits, both good and bad, onto me. I chose the symbol of a 22 ounce Estwing framing hammer, because it referenced a specific hammer that my father used for framing for 23 years, then passed on to me to use. Of all of my father’s tools, his
hammer was the one he shared the most intimate bond with, as he used it nearly daily for many years. This tool worked well as a symbol for two reasons. The more practical reason is it transferred well to a figurative sculpture. The handle easily became legs fused together, the metal shaft became my torso, and the head obviously served as the head of the figure. The other reason is because I had always viewed the passing of the hammer to me as somewhat of a symbol of my father passing on something that was important, and definitive of who he was to me. Therefore I decided to take the symbol of passing on and think about what other things he had passed on.

To make the sculpture a self-portrait I chose a few different elements to represent myself. The most obvious is the size and gesture. I attempted to give it a pose of looking slightly up, leaning forward to walk, which is where I feel I am in my life right now: looking off while thinking, and about to step forward into the next phase of my life. When I began the sculpture it was the beginning of my graduate schooling, and now I feel the same way as I am finishing my schooling and stepping forward into my professional career. The size came from taking measurements of myself, and adjusting the proportions of the hammer to fit my own.

The inscription on the handle replaces the normal “Estwing” insignia with a quote from *Old Man* by Neil Young: “old man look at my life i'm a lot like you”. This quote explains the point of this sculpture as it tells the viewer that I am like my father. I chose to put it in an inconspicuous place on the sculpture because I did not want the meaning to be that blatantly obvious and because I felt the aesthetic quality of the stamps in the clay served best in that particular area. I also included a cast of my own chest in the torso of the piece to give it an added connection to myself.
The cabinet in the head of the sculpture holds two broken drawer handles from two different dressers (see fig. 9). The top one from a dresser my father had kicked and broken, and the lower one from a dresser I had kicked and broken nearly 15 years later. These broken handles represent the trait of anger that my father passed on to me through genetics and modeling. The doors to the cabinet are closed, hiding the handles in the same way both my father and I keep our anger hidden to the majority of the world. Just as I would expect most people will not actually open up the doors to see inside the cabinet, most people never actually see that side of my father or I.

*Drop Forged* (see fig. 10) is composed of three major parts. A 36”x20x20 ceramic vase sits on a 12x72x22” table next to a 12x24x24” ceramic bowl. Both bowl and vase are glazed with celadon and blue, while the table is made of maple and lyptus. The vase is decorated with a register through the center containing four scenes executed in shallow relief. One scene shows a pipe wrench leaning over and dropping a smaller partial pipe wrench into a bowl very similar in shape to that of the bowl on the table. The next scene is a framing hammer and a ball pean hammer kissing. The next scene is these two hammers leaning over looking into the bowl. The fourth scene is the two hammers standing next to each other with the partial wrench standing between them.

The portion of the table the vase sits on has two thin bands of lyptus running through the top, that run near parallel, bend and cross the entire length of the table. The large bowl also sits on these two lines on the other end of the table. The bowl is also celadon and has a band of blue running around the outside, about 2 inches from the rim. Carved through this blue band is a Chinese proverb (see fig. 11) in a stylized writing that reads: “Invisible red threads connect the spirit of a newborn child with those that will be
important in her life. As the child grows, the threads shorten, drawing closer together those that are destined to be together forever.” Inside the bowl are handprints. In the center is my little sister. Surrounding this on the sides of the bowl are my handprint, my brother’s, mother’s, father’s, wife’s and sister in law’s. Filling the bowl and spilling out onto the table are hundreds of cast, altered partial ceramic pipe wrenches. These partial wrenches are the same part as that which was shown being dropped off into the bowl in the scene on the vase.

This is by far my most symbolic piece in the show. The goal of this project is to tell the story of the adoption of my little sister. My parents adopted Lily close to 2 years ago from China. Because of the current social and political situation in China, many families are forced to give up their daughters in hopes for a future son, or because they already have a child. Mothers are often in a very difficult situation. Although some provinces or cities allow more than one child, in the majority of China if a family has a second child, they receive a sever fine, cannot get health insurance or medical care for their child, and are not allowed to send the child to school. Because of this, only the very rich can afford to pay the fine, pay extra for health care, and pay for private schooling.

The title Drop Forged refers to the act of dropping off or abandoning my sister. This act is represented in the first scene on the vase, which shows a larger wrench dropping off a baby wrench in the bowl. The large wrench has the word China in the lower part of the handle, referring both to Lily being made in China, and to China being the country that is abandoning her. The next scene represents my parents making the decision to adopt, which was a very thoughtful process that took great consideration. The next scene is them “looking into adoption”. The adoption process took close to two years
from the time they decided, and was full of long waits, difficult decisions, and scary
times of uncertainty. Finally they were able travel to China for two weeks to pick up
Lily. The final scene is the two hammers standing with the baby wrench between them,
which represents the final integration of Lily into the family. The baby wrench has
stamped on it “DROP FORGED” which I see as a representative of the way Lily’s
background serves to help create who she will become in the future.

The bowl is then filled and spilling over with other ceramic baby wrenches, which
symbolize the over abundance of children still up for adoption in China. Although
adoption regulations have recently become even stricter the amount of children needing
homes has not diminished. The bowl represents the orphanages that do their best to
provide for as many children as they can, while the hundreds of wrenches represent
thousands of children. The proverb on the side of the bowl speaks of hope of children
being connected to those who will be important in their lives such as their family, and the
handprints show that Lily has become close to each member of my family. The thin red
strips in the top of the table represent both the connection between Lily and myself, and
the connection between any newborn child and their family.

Two Sibling Jars (see fig. 12) consists of two wheel-thrown, lidded stoneware jars
with cast bronze monkey wrenches for handles. The two jars match each other in their
orange glaze and overall bulbous form, while there sizes range from 26 to 30 inches tall.
Both jars have faceplates with tool impressions, and partial tool impressions all around
the form. The faceplate of the larger jar has impressions of three different monkey
wrenches displayed vertically, while the faceplate of the smaller jar has the impression of
one monkey wrench displayed horizontally. The handle of the shorter jar is proportionally shorter. It arches back, looking up with its jaws slightly opened. The handle of the taller jar leans forward, looking down with its jaws open wide. The two bronze pieces feature black and green patination and look directly at each other.

*Three Sibling Jars* (see fig. 13) consists of three wheel-thrown lidded stoneware jars with wooden lids and cast bronze crescent wrenches for handles. These three jars match in green glaze, and display similar forms with variations of a stamped pattern in the rims. They vary in size from 17 to 26 to 32 inches tall including the handles. The maple lids are burned, gouged and scarred to match the worn, aged look of the crescent wrench handles. The shortest handle leans forward and looks up, pointing at the middle sized handle which arches in and looks up to the tallest one. The tallest handle leans back, looking up to the sky with its jaws wide open. All three bronze handles have green and black patination with golden highlights showing through.

Both sets of sibling jars are intended to make the viewer reflect on his or her own relationship with their siblings. *Two Sibling Jars* is loosely based on my brother and I, then *Three Sibling Jars* on us three kids after Lily joined our family. These two sets of sibling jars are not meant to exclusively represent my siblings and me, but instead make broader statements about siblings in general. I used my relationships with my own brother and sister as a reference point by which to understand siblings. *Two Sibling Jars* can be interpreted as two siblings talking, laughing or even fighting. Likewise, *Three Sibling Jars* can be seen as siblings looking up to one another, or looking away from one
another. I enjoy the many different interpretations made possible by the positioning of the handles, as sibling relationships can be complex and profoundly different.
CONCLUSION

Family relationships are complex and personal. In *Family Tools* I gave the viewer a glimpse into my relationships with my own family members. Each one of the eight mixed media sculptures related to a specific relationship with one or more of my family members. I selected seven short stories to accompany the sculptures, which give the viewer added insight into the development and meaning of the sculptures. Although *Family Tools* specifically relates to my own family, I hope that the pieces and stories will trigger memories and emotions related to the viewer’s personal relationships, and inspire reflection of ones own family.
APPENDIX A

Artistic Influences
These specific works are examples of the many works that I looked at by the following artists.

Cézanne, Paul. *Mont Sainte-Victoire seen from the Bibemus Quarry* 1897.


Rivera, Diego. *The Making of a Fresco Showing the Building of a City (Making a Fresco)* 1931.


Unknown Chinese Artist, Late Northern Sung Dynasty, China. *Ceremonial Jar* 11th Century

Unknown Chinese artist. *Qiao tou ji shi an (Altar Table)* Early 16th Century.

Material recipes

White Sculpture Mix Clay:
40# Tile Clay
30# H.C. Spinx Ball Clay
30# 20m Grog
16# 35m Grog
10# Stoneware
6# Custer Feldspar
2/3 oz Granular Manganese

Dark Sculpture Mix Clay:
50# Fireclay
15# Redart Earthenware
15# Silica Sand
15# 35m Grog
12# 20m Grog
10# Custer Feldspar
10# OM4 Ball Clay
3 oz Black Iron Oxide
1 oz Granular Manganese

Textured Green Matte Glaze:
4800gm EPK
3720gm Whiting
2160gm Silica
840gm Dolomite
480gm Custer Feldspar
300gm Copper Carbonate

Winoker Orange:
2280gm EPK
2040gm Dolomite
1620gm Zircopax
480gm Bentonite
480gm Custer Feldspar
444gm Whiting
336gm Tin Oxide
127gm Red Iron Oxide
Chouinard Celadon:
5640gm Silica
4680gm Soda Feldspar
3420gm Kaolin
3420gm Black Iron Oxide
3360gm Whiting

Bronze:
87% Copper
7% Tin
3% Zinc
3% Lead

Green Patina:
200gm Cupric Nitrate
1L Water

Red/Brown Patina:
10gm Ferric Chloride
1L Water
APPENDIX B

Images

Fig. 1

My Father’s Hands
graphite on wood
2006

Fig. 2

Detail of 2lb maul from My Father’s Hands
Teacher
stainless steel, cherry
2007
Fig. 4

*The Carpenter’s Sons*

oil on canvas

2007

Fig. 5

Detail of *The Carpenter’s Sons*
Toolbox
bronze, mahogany
2008

Detail of Toolbox
Fig. 8

*Self Portrait (As a Hammer)*
stoneware, white oak
2007

Fig. 9

Detail of *Self Portrait (As a Hammer)*
*Fig. 10*

*Drop Forged*
stoneware, maple lyptus
2007

*Fig. 11*

Detail of *Drop Forged*
Fig. 12

Two Sibling Jars
bronze, stoneware
2008

Fig. 13

Three Sibling Jars
bronze, maple, stoneware
2008