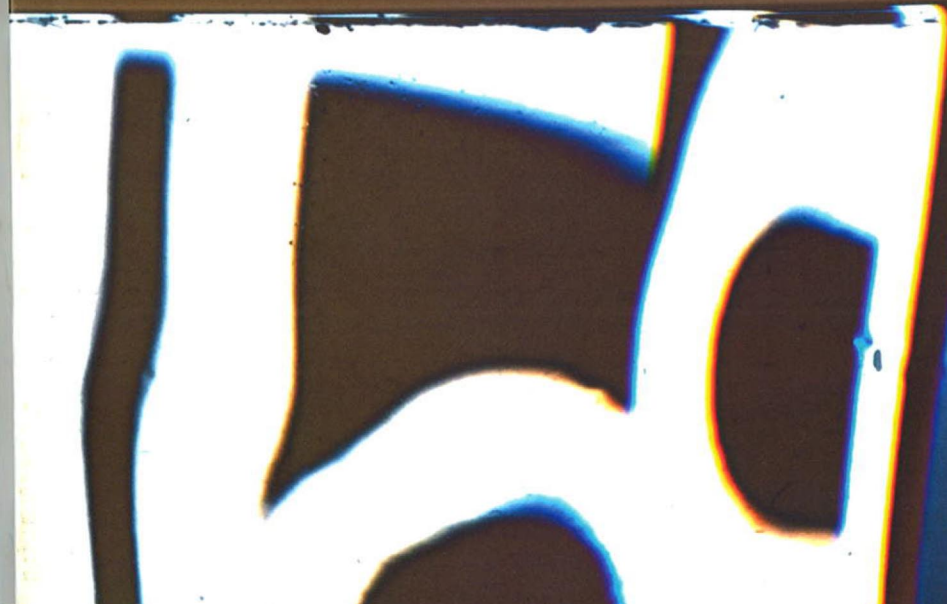
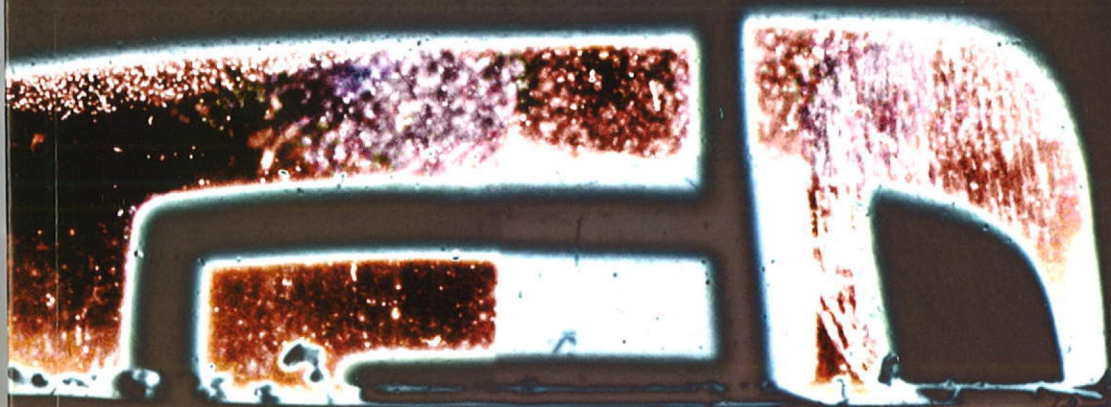


T U D I O

S U M M E R / F A L L 2 0 1 1 V 3 9 N 2



To Boldly Fail Where No Man Has Failed Before!



by Brian Molanphy

And I saw Sisyphus at his endless task raising his prodigious stone with both his hands. With hands and feet he tried to

roll it up to the top of the hill, but always, just before he could roll it over on to the other side, its weight would be too much for him, and the pitiless stone would come thundering down again on to the plain. Then he would begin trying to push it up hill again, and the sweat ran off him and the steam rose after him.'

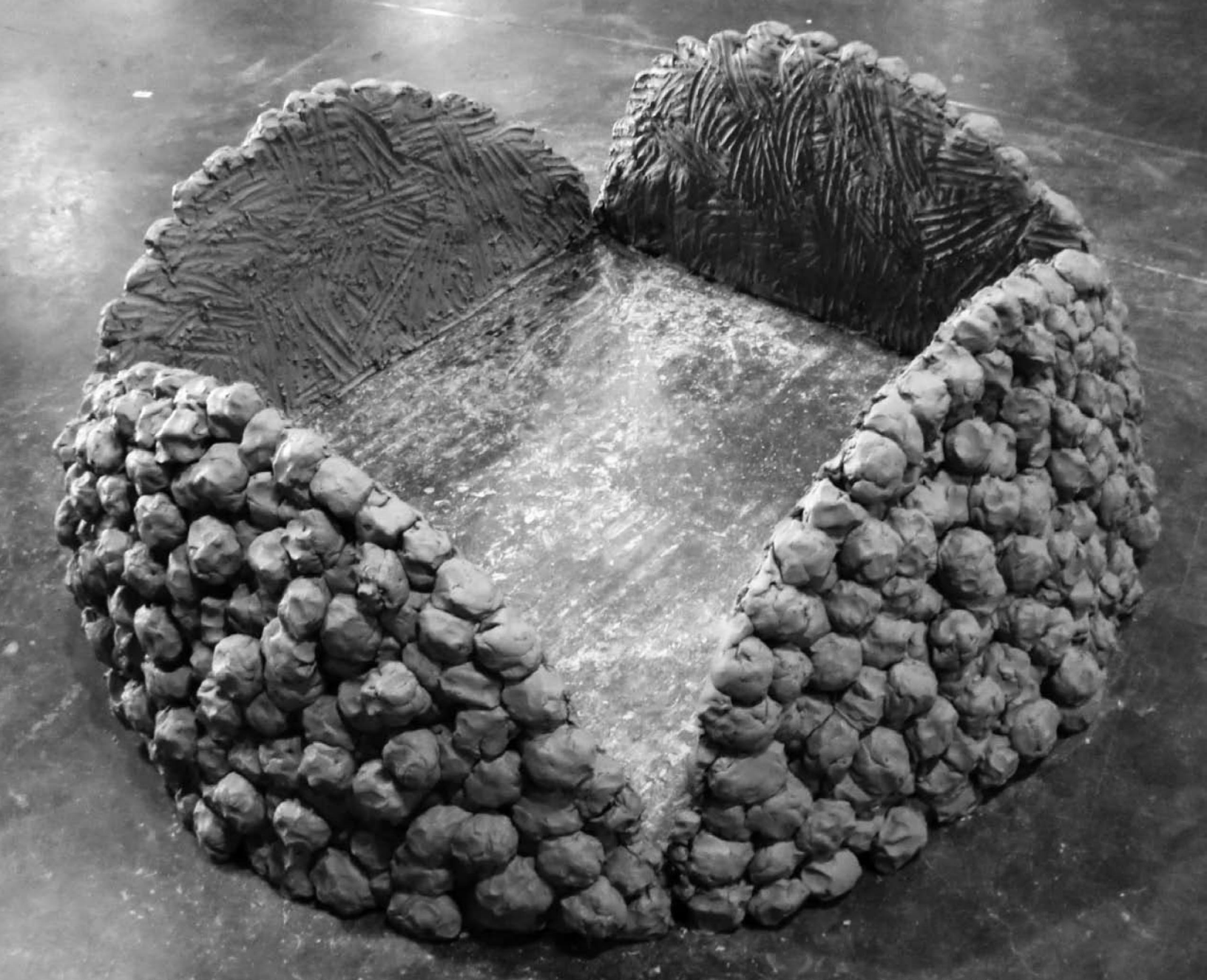
Wordplay on the name of the mythological figure Sisyphus, as well as a humorous take on his absurd task, provides the title for *silly fuss*, the sculpture pictured with this article. Circles and squares each define a sort of perfection that some believed, or still believe, would save the world. A person may delight in the transmutation of lines, planes, and cubes into arcs, curved surfaces, and spheres, and vice versa. Can these shapes, independently perfect, exist together in harmony? I'd like to know how to make a cube and a sphere, or a square and a circle, exist in one shape, which might be called a *squircle*. I couldn't see the reconciliation of these two shapes in my imagination, so I tried to resolve them in the material world. For four days during the Tampa NCECA conference, I shaped a half-ton of clay into a form that was both a square and a circle, seeking ultimately to make

a squircle. To do this I had to keep going back and forth between the two. I chose clay because I could keep moving it around, adding and taking away at the same time. Depending on the time of day, the audience saw the process in action or they saw the temporary result of the most recent part of that process. The beginning and end were arbitrary, determined more by time (the duration of the conference) than by a shape, since I could not discern the shape. Without an imagined beginning or end, the shape was always going from one place, always approaching the next, and never arriving at either.

In her poem "Essay on What I Think About Most," Anne Carson describes the Spartan poet Alkman, who "sidesteps fear, anxiety, shame, remorse/and all the other silly emotions associated with making mistakes/in order to engage/the fact of the matter./The fact of the matter for humans is imperfection."² By embracing failure we may accomplish the difficult task of acknowledging the absurdity of life. Acknowledging absurdity is dangerous. Albert Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, sees that it often leads to suicide. Camus assumes that life is absurd and

By embracing failure we may accomplish the difficult task of acknowledging the absurdity of life.

REPRINTED FROM:
"Studio Potter Magazine"
Summer/Fall 2011
Volume 39, Number 2
pages 89-91.

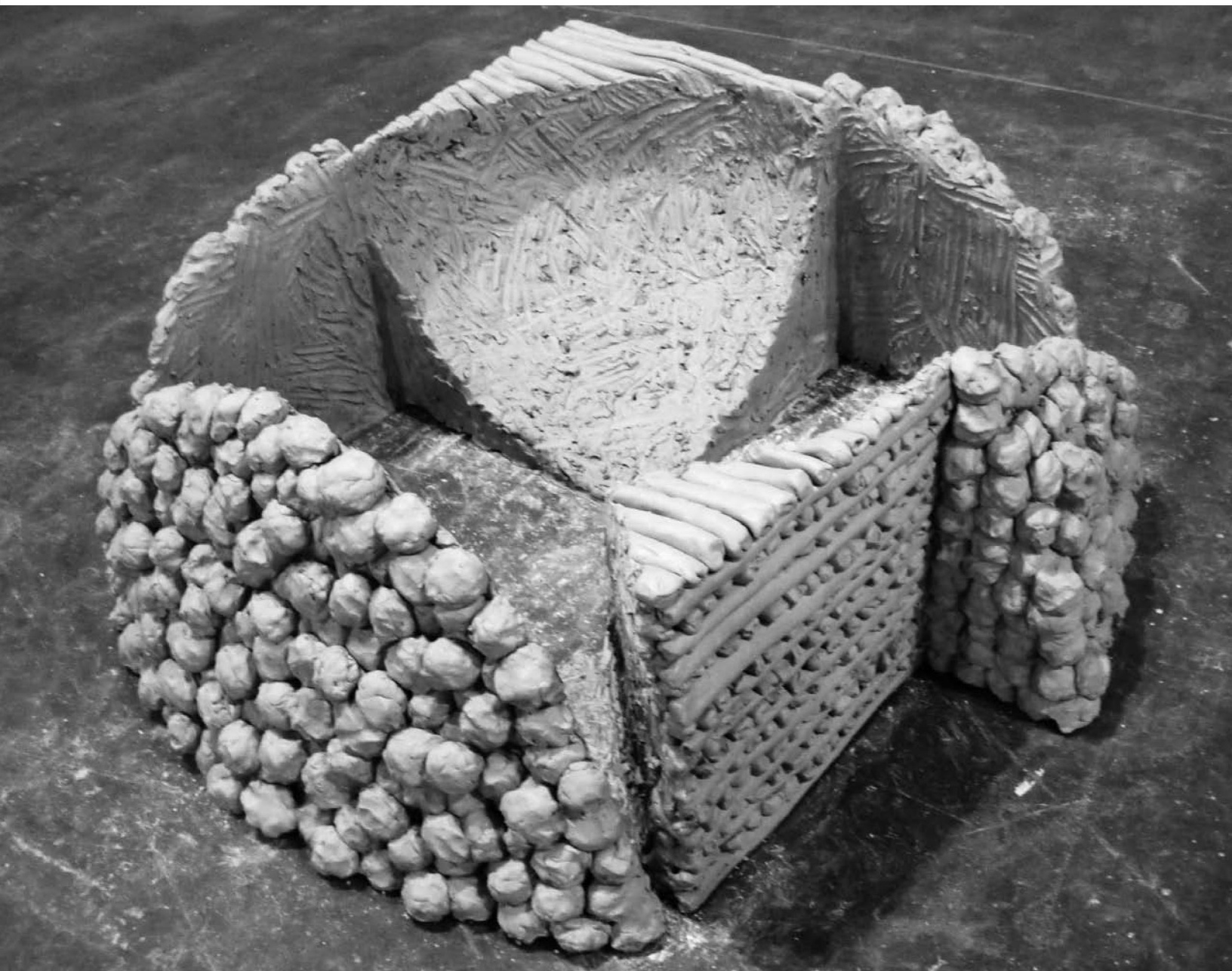


ALL IMAGES: Silly Fuss, 2011. *Clay studies for 2011 NCECA Projects Space. Raw clay. 42 x 42 x 21 in.*

hope is illusory, but he sets out to propose that life is worth living anyway. I admire his verve. Camus's "absurd man" – the one who acknowledges, then rebels, and then keeps fighting – lives joyfully in his creations: "One always finds again one's burden. But Sisyphus teaches a greater reliance that denies the gods and lifts up the rocks... The fight itself toward the summits is enough to

fill a man's heart. We have to imagine Sisyphus happy."³

Happy? I have a hard time imagining it. For in making art we can fail in so many ways! What a wealth of opportunities awaits us at the summit! In order for us to fail really well, Alexander Pope tells us, art is all but required. He wrote, "Many there are that can fall, but few can arrive at the felicity of falling gracefully. Much



more, for a man who is amongst the lowest of the creation at the very bottom of the atmosphere, to descend beneath himself is not so easy a task unless he calls in art to assistance.”⁴ Pope was kidding, making fun of the bad poetry of his day. Still, a sense of humor helps us to be happy, since the tasks of living and creating may not be enough. *Silly fuss* celebrates the particular joy in persistent failure.

FOOTNOTES:

¹Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book XI, Samuel Butler, trans., 1900.

²Anne Carson, “Essay on What I Think About Most,” in *Raritan*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Winter 1999.

³Albert Camus, *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*. (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), p.168, (First published 1942).

⁴Alexander Pope, “The Art of Sinking in Poetry.” London: One World Classics, 2009), p.12, (First published 1727).

Brian Molanphy works in Provence and in the American Southwest.

Meadows School of the Arts
Southern Methodist University
Dallas, TX 75275